Like You, Like Me

by Anonymous

Summary

After spending five years away from Arcadia Bay, a single phone call sends Max Caulfield back to try to pick up the pieces of a relationship she didn't know she had.

Notes

This is my first fanfic in a VERY long time, I hope you guys like it! It's probably going to end up being about ten chapters. The first chapter is mostly background and the story, all around, starts off a little slow, but I PROMISE it'll lift off soon! Tell me what you think!
Ghosts

And Max Caulfield...don't you forget about me...

Max Caulfield awoke in her bed, sunlight pouring in from the nearby window. She looked over at her cellphone, which was charging on her nightstand. She glanced up at her barely working clock and started thinking about Chloe, as she had done every morning for the past week. Her time in Arcadia Bay had been difficult for her, especially since she didn’t have many who she could talk to about it. Max loved her last week with Chloe; the entire thing was like something out of a dream. Chloe had rescued her from rich boy Nathan Prescott, then they went on to solve a murder-mystery. And after that, Max killed her.

Nathan Prescott got most of the blame, but Max knew her hands weren't clean. Max thought about the decision to kill her best friend every once in a while, but when it came up, it was “up” for weeks. Did she do the right thing? I did, didn't I? she thought. She'd tell herself that over and over until she finally felt like it was the truth. She couldn't bear to let Kate die a second time that week, not after spending so much time saving her. So Max did what she thought was the right thing. But it never felt like it was the right thing.

Sighing, Max sat up in her bed, running her fingers through very messy brown hair. It had been a rough night and she had no idea what time she ended up falling asleep. Her clock had long since broken, and she didn't want to check her cell, not with the high volume of calls she'd been receiving lately. Max sat on her bed, bathed in sunlight, holding her knees to her chest. This was her thinking position; it seemed like all her best ideas came to her when she was sitting this way, but today, her mind was totally blank. Sighing again, she rested her head on her knees, wondering what to do.

"Max?" she suddenly heard, followed by a knock on her bedroom door. Immediately she reached for her phone, hoping she wasn't late for work again. She looked for the time and saw that it was six fifty-nine, one minute before the alarm she'd set the night before was supposed to go off. She shut off her alarm, and before she could get up to get presentable and open her door, a second knock came.

"Max? Daniel and I wanted to know if you wanted to eat with us," Brooke said. "You awake?"

"Yeah, I'm up," Max said. "I'll be out in a minute." Max crawled out of bed, slipped on the shorts she'd kicked off at some point in the middle of the night, and greeted Brooke at her bedroom door. "Morning," Max said, scooting out of the room and closing the door behind her.

Brooke rolled her eyes. They'd been living together for almost two years now, Max didn't need to hide how messy her room was anymore. "I told Daniel that you're not much of a breakfast eater, but he INSISTED that you try his Abuela's famous tamale recipe. I also told him that you don't like spicy food, either, but he wouldn't budge. Do me a favor, take a bite or two?"

Max smiled and nodded. She liked Daniel's cooking for the most part, but rarely could she handle any of the recipes that started with "My Abuela's Famous." She knew she'd be glued to the toilet for days.

Brooke gave Max a look of relief, then she turned around and hung a left into their small kitchen, where Daniel was cooking and shaking his hips to a song on the radio. Brooke sneaked around Daniel's backside and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek, while Max sat in one of the barstools on the other side of the counter.

It was still a little weird to see them like this, even though Brook and Daniel had been together for
almost four years.

After Nathan had been arrested all those years ago, his "Vortex Club" party was repurposed into just some pool party. The school couldn't just cancel it, seeing as everything had already been paid for and was non-refundable. The week had been its own hell--though Max's was very, very different than everybody else's--and Brooke was considering not attending the party. The hot new teacher ended up a fucking whack job, and an unhinged rich boy had been arrested for killing two people--one on campus! Max had been pretty soured by the choices she had to make and the relationships she'd lost during the alternate timeline, so one day in the science room, Max ended chatting Brooke up while waiting for Warren to finish up some assignment. Talking to her was much easier now, because now she knew what subjects to stay away from and how to not come off sounding like a total loser. Eventually, Max convinced Brooke to go to the party--so she'd at least have someone to talk to there other than Dana--and the two totally hit it off. Brooke often joked that if she hadn't gone to that party, she, Daniel, and Max would all be homeless.

"How's work been going?" Brooke asked, after Max and Daniel had greeted each other.

Max rolled her eyes and reached for a piece of toast. She slathered some butter and jam onto the bread and took a satisfying bite. One of the few recipes that Max could stomach from Daniel's Abuela was her amazing peach jam--and she knew better than to ask for the recipe so she could have it all the time. Swallowing hard, Max set her toast onto a plate. "Work has been HELL, but that's kinda my fault. Victoria has been riding my ass because she thinks her wedding pictures are a while MONTH late now."

Max didn't want to make Brooke think she was considering moving or anything, but she wasn't happy at her job. Like, at all. After graduating from Blackwell and spending those few years afterward in the absolute spotlight, she never thought she'd end up as a wedding photographer. She'd been popular for her photos for a very long time, and for a while, she was a much sought-after photographer--not that she wasn't now. But being asked to shoot for the cover of Vogue was very different that being yelled at for not getting a bride's good side. Max put her popular career behind her, because of a single photo.

Back at Chloe’s funeral, during the height of all around depression in her life, Max took a photo. People at the funeral laughed when they saw Max reach for her little yellow camera, and bend down to try to get that perfect shot. The picture was the last piece of Chloe she had; a final piece of her before she was taken into the cold, hard earth. A luminescent Blue Morpho butterfly had been fluttering around the funeral—it was Chloe’s blue. The butterfly landed on Chloe’s casket, where it rested as the casket was lowered into the ground. Max crossed the cemetery to the other side of the casket and took the perfect photo. There was Chloe’s perfect blue butterfly, lying her body to rest, while Joyce and David looked on solemnly. It was, Max felt, the best photo she’d ever taken.

And she shared it with nobody.

This was HER photo; HER Chloe touching back on her own body in an attempt to let Max know that she had accepted the decision to sacrifice her for the good of Arcadia Bay. From then on, Max developed a pattern in her work. She took photo after photo, but she always held something back. There were pictures in her portfolio that almost seemed a bit macabre because of the bizarre points where Max cut the photos off. There was a picture of Brooke in her portfolio, jumping into the air, a wide smile on her normally spiritless face. In Max’s Polaroid, her hands weren’t shown in the photo. Nobody but Max knew that she was holding up her report card, decorated with straight A’s—no, that moment belonged to Brooke and Max alone.

Max went on taking pictures like this for a year, filling up her portfolio. There were pictures of
groups of teenagers that stopped at the neck; a picture of a young mother looking down and smiling at a baby that the viewer couldn’t see. Max’s pictures were plastered around San Diego when Max went on to be chosen for the “Everyday Heroes” contest three years in a row. Her popularity sparked. She was on talk shows, publishing portfolio after portfolio until suddenly, everything changed. Max had was about to move in with Daniel and Brooke when she started going through her old boxes of photos, judging which photos could be added to another portfolio that showcased her early work and which photos could be shipped off to mom and dad to be forgotten under a blanket of dust in the attic.

As she reviewed her photos, she relived them. There was the time she and Brooke made Warren laugh so hard, his Two Whales milkshake came out of his nose. There was the time Victoria had gotten a new puppy that chewed on her brand new sweater. “Pokey” had one end while Victoria pulled the other, tears in her eyes. Max had taken the picture with Taylor’s instruction, before giggling along with Taylor as they saved her precious cashmere. Then there was the time, after the funeral, where everyone gathered at the Two Whales Diner, sharing stories of their various and sometimes not-so-pleasant encounters with Chloe Price.

Then, there was that last photo—that beautiful Morpho on Chloe’s black coffin.

And Max began to hate all of her work.

There was no SUBSTANCE to these new photos. All it showed was how selfish she had become; keeping all of these memories to herself, as if Chloe was her private friend, as if they were her private experiences. She wanted to remember Chloe the way she’d had her in her memories of that fateful week. So, aside from telling Warren about Chloe and her random powers, Max eventually shared her secret with Brooke as well.

Brooke took a long time to convince after the fact. Warren, just like he’d done in Max’s other timeline, believed her immediately. Someone HAD to be the grounded skeptic, though. Luckily for Max, throughout all of the confusion about her different timelines, she did have a few pieces of proof to back up her story.

Throughout her journeys through alternate timelines, aside from her staying the same, so did her journal and old cellphone. It had every word she wrote, every picture she took, and every moment she shared with Chloe in the other timeline. And Max cherished that old journal. She didn’t know how she was able to keep that or her old cellphone; maybe it was a parting gift from the universe. Maybe with the way it happened, there were just some things she was meant to keep. And Brooke and Warren saw almost all of it.

So only a few people knew about her other timeline, and the more Max looked at her journal photos, the more she hated her current work. She ended up taking the first job she’d been offered after opting to get out of the spotlight, and that’s how she ended up a wedding photographer. She still had plenty of money from what her career was making, as well as enough to travel when she was requested to take photos in her old or her new style. But for now, she was stuck here in Seattle, with photos she wasn’t proud of and a job she barely liked.

“Victoria’s being a real hardass,” Max continued, taking another bite of toast. “She knew I had to fly to New York right after I took her photos. I need some slack here!”

Brooke laughed and bit into her tamale, only to let it fall back onto her plate. Daniel glared at her, and she glared back. “Too hot,” she said.

"Oh please, I've seen how generous you get with Sriracha,” Daniel laughed.
"The temperature, Danny Boy," Brooke laughed. "I gotta let it cool off." She turned back to Max. “You and Victoria have gotten pretty close.”

“Mostly because she’s paying quite a bit for perfect photos,” Max joked. Max was surprised about her relationship with Victoria, too. They’d spend half of the year hating each other back at Blackwell until Max went through that awful week. At the repurposed “Vortex Party,” Max and Victoria also got to talking. They’d already had an oddly pleasant time at The Diner after Chloe’s funeral. Once Max moved to Seattle, the two of them had kept in touch, and Victoria eventually moved there as well. And once Victoria found out Max moved on to wedding photos, she was stuck on Max like glue.

“I never thought you two would be friends,” Brooke went on, now enjoying her cooled off tamale. “But then again, I thought you’d marry Warren and I’d be a bitter asshole forever.”

Max laughed. She was glad she and Brooke were friends—and even more glad that her very brief relationship with Warren didn’t work out. She was conflicted for the entire relationship, not to mention the distance her job put between them was hard for Warren. Warren was a family man; he was talking moving in together, getting married, having kids—but Max had things she wanted to DO before any of that. And she wasn’t even sure if she WANTED kids. That was a deal-breaker for Warren, so the two of them ended their relationship amicably, and kept in touch as well. It was funny; the people Max had met during her time at Blackwell all stayed with her. She barely remembered the people she’d met in Seattle when she first moved there—and she’d spent five years there. Max laughed again, this time to herself. Last she’d heard from Warren, he and Stella had just moved in together.

The three friends continued eating in silence for a moment until Brooke perked up as if she remembered something. “Max, what’re you gonna do about that…uh…phone call you got?”

Max cringed and roughly swallowed one of her promised bites of tamale. She put her fork onto her plate and pushed it away. “I don’t know,” Max said softly.

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A week before, when her Chloe dreams started up again, things got weird for Max in the real world. She had been sitting in her office at work, going through her old journal for the umpteenth time. The journal was hard to get away from, not that Max was trying. She read through the whole thing every few months, laughing at her unnecessary cursing and her crude drawings of her friends and enemies. She ran her fingers over a picture she’d drawn of herself hugging Chloe, and she smiled, trying to hold back tears. It was right after the alternate timeline, the one where she saved William and ended up killing Chloe. That moment, that memory was always hard to come back to. That time when she killed Chloe, it was a request. Chloe had been in pain and she wanted to die, and Max had had no doubt that killing her was the right thing to do. She was still conflicted about killing her a second time, even after all these years. Living with her decision was very difficult sometimes, and not being able to make new memories with Chloe was even worse. She loved Chloe, and wished she was one of the people she called every now and then in Arcadia Bay.

Before Max could drift too far into her sadness, a sudden phone call had startled her. Max rolled her eyes, let it ring, and continued reading through her journal. It was probably Victoria again, calling to ask about her wedding photos. Max had TWO weddings to work on, and Victoria’s wasn’t even the first—she was only working fast because Victoria was her friend. Once Max was finished with “Yasmin Morales’” photos, she could get back to Victoria’s one hundred percent and get Victoria off of her back. Max’s phone rang two more times, and finally, after a fourth incoming call, Max sighed and looked at her phone. Victoria only EVER called twice, and Max’s other less
personal clients knew to reach her through Annie, her assistant, who handled the bulk of her work-related calls. The worry that maybe her parents were calling got the better of her, so she finally checked her cell. Max giggled as she saw two missed calls from Victoria, as well as two calls from a number she didn’t recognize.

She was annoyed, now. Max rarely gave out her personal cell number—she had already regretted giving it to Victoria, and sometimes, having Annie and Brooke with access to it made her nuts. They’d gang up on her, or give her number to seemingly nice strangers that they wanted to set her up with. Max was perfectly capable of getting her own dates, and she was completely uninterested in dating right now. Her last date, which was set up by Brooke, ended with Max consoling a grown man while he drunkenly cried over his ex. The date before that, Annie had set her up with a woman who kept all of her scabs in a jar. Max was done dating for a while.

Max rolled her eyes and shut off her cellphone, so she could not-work in peace. She had two or three more pictures to finish for Yasmin, so she was sure she could get to it after her lunch. She focused back on her journal.

“Ms. Caulfield?”

Max reached for the phone on her desk and pressed the red intercom button. “Annie, it’s just us. Max is fine. What do you need?”

“You have an incoming call, Max.”

“Is it from Victoria or Yasmin?”

“No, it’s from the Arcadia Bay Correctional Facility. They said they’ve been trying to reach you.”

Max’s stomach dropped. That was where Nathan and Mr. Jefferson were…staying. They’d been there since the trial and Max hadn’t seen them since. She thought about them—often. Every time Max looked in her journal or saw one of her old selfies, all she could remember was the cold floor of the dark room, the feeling of Mr. Jefferson’s hot breath in her ear, telling her how she was the perfect subject. Max hadn’t taken many selfies since that day. The thought of a camera pointed at her sometimes made her sick, and she didn’t want to revisit that horrible place. She had been free for so long, there was no sense in ruining it now.

“What do they want?” Max asked after a much needed pause.

“I’ve asked but they won’t tell me,” Annie replied. “They said it needed to be discussed with you personally.”

“Put the call through. Cancel and reschedule all of today’s appointments. If Victoria calls, tell her I had a family emergency. I’ll be unplugging my phone as well. Thank you, Annie.”

“Will do. You’re welcome, Max.”

Looking at the red blinking light on her office phone, Max took a deep breath. Exhaling, she answered. “This is Maxine Caulfield of Burke-Caulfield Wedding Photography. May I have the reason for your call?”

Max heard a soft, stifled giggle on the other line. “Good morning, Miss Caulfield, this is Dr. Hill of the Arcadia Bay Correctional Facility. Please forgive the persistence of our calls; an inmate…patient here has issued a request of visitation. Nathan Prescott would like to see you. The reason our calls were so persistent is because Mr. Prescott has begun to get belligerent with the staff, and we fear for their well-being, as well as his mental health. We decided to submit a formal request in order to
sway him from causing any other incidents.”

Max set the phone down and breathed a sigh of relief. At least it wasn’t Mr. Jefferson. “I’ll consider it. You’ll have my answer soon.” Max hung up before Dr. Hill could say another word to her.

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Max considered taking another bite of tamale, but she looked at Brooke apologetically, knowing that another bite would make her feel sicker than she already did. “The whole thing is so bizarre. I haven’t been in Arcadia Bay in years. But I am relieved that the request wasn’t from Mark Jefferson.”

“He’d be insane to want to try to see you after taking all those creepy fucking pictures you told us about,” Brooke blurted. “Sorry. But a request from Nathan is weird, too. He was a fucking mess and, not sorry, a complete asshole. Letting him rot in that place was the best thing for him, you, and everyone else.”

Max couldn’t help but to disagree. Brooke only saw the angry side of Nathan; the side buzzed on a cocktail of one part medication, one part vodka. Brooke had no idea what Nathan really went through with Mr. Jefferson. Sure, Max had shared her journal, her photos, her experience, but the only thing she didn’t share with anyone who knew about the alternate timeline was her old cellphone. It was the only thing other than her journal that held memories of her old timeline. There were her old messages and an utterly embarrassing number of failed selfies, but most importantly, there was Nathan’s voicemail. He had TRIED to save her—he only had a single chance for redemption, and even though it came too late, he took it. It may have been because he had nothing to lose, but that didn’t make it any less genuine. Nathan didn’t call Victoria, he didn’t call his sister, he didn’t deliver his father a swift “fuck you,” no, he called Max, the girl who busted him, the girl whose selfie he stole from her room. Max was comforted by the thought that Nathan, deep down, wanted to do the right thing. And she couldn’t get over the guilt of knowing she had held his hand and walked him right into his cell at the facility.

Max glared at her plate of half-eaten toast. “I think I’ve lost my appetite. I told Dr. Hill I’d get back to her. I can’t think about it now. I have to get ready for work.”

“Skip breakfast and you’ll lose those your boobs and butt,” Brooke laughed.

Max chuckled and climbed down from her barstool. “Hey. You and Victoria called me ‘Max-two-backs’ for a YEAR before puberty finally decided to be kind to me. I’ll cry if it leaves me now.”

As Brooke laughed and Daniel switched on the living room TV, Max made her way to her bedroom. She turned to the right once she was inside, standing in between her closets. One closet had her work shoes and clothes, while the other had her classic look: t-shirts and skinny jeans. She had a few of Chloe’s old shirts that Joyce insisted she keep, but she couldn’t bring herself to wear them, not yet. Max turned and opened the professional side of her closet, wondering what she should wear. She decided on a dark grey, mid-thigh sundress, with a pair of stylish black boots. She looked at her jewelry that hung inside the closet, and pulled out Chloe’s bullet necklace. She hadn’t worn it in a long time.

Max didn’t have to be at work until eleven, but she had a very important hair appointment that she’d been putting off for way too long. Max stripped and got into her shower, thinking about Chloe and oddly, Nathan Prescott.
She hoped Chloe didn’t hate her for what she’d done.

She hoped Nathan wasn’t so unhinged that he’d asked for a visit just to try to hurt her.

She hoped that at the end of the day, the choices she’d make would be the right ones.

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“You sure you don’t want to dye more than that little patch?” Octavia Short, Max’s most trusted hairstylist, asked.

“You know I’m not that brave, Tavi,” Max said sternly. “Just that patch.”

“Then the old up-do?”

Max smiled and gave Tavi a loving look. “You know me so well.”

Even after all these years, Max didn’t trust herself with hair-dye. The last time she’d tried to dye her hair, she ended up with a blue neck and blue fingers, and a few single strands of blue hair. Max liked the way her hair looked brown, and she truly believed she couldn’t pull off a full head of blue hair. So instead, every six or so weeks, Max had Octavia dye a small, square inch section of her hair that beautiful, Morpho, Chloe blue. It was her small tribute to Chloe, her secret memorial right until she put her hair up so that everyone could see it. Octavia had a talent for dying hair, and every time she met with Max, she’d push going full blue. But every time, Max protested, resigning that the little blue she had was just enough. She knew if Chloe saw it, she’d pat Max on the head and laugh, and Max would laugh with her.

Max rolled into work, for minutes after eleven, thanking a passerby for a compliment on her hair before entering the building. “Good morning, Annie,” Max said.

“Good morning, Max,” Annie replied cheerfully. “You have a client in your office.”

Instantly, Max was anxious. She had barely finished Yasmin's pictures and sent them to her. Was she not happy with them? She seemed totally delighted with them when she came to pick them up yesterday. Nervous, Max reached for the door handle to her office shakily. Opening the door, she was washed with relief.

“Well if it isn’t Max Caulfield, the selfie ho of Blackwell.”

Max rolled her eyes and closed the door behind her. “Would it kill you to greet me with a simple ‘hello’?”

“I’m greeting you with Chipotle and patience. And that’s me being generous.”

“Chipotle? No four-hundred dollar cheese plate?”

Victoria Chase-Tobler laughed and grabbed her burrito. “I thought you’d appreciate this more.” She was in a floppy hat and a long spaghetti-strap dress that would have reached the floor, covering her probably-expensive sandals.

Max joined Victoria at her small coffee table and reached for the bag of food, suddenly thankful that she didn’t eat much breakfast that morning. “You’re right,” she laughed. Max and Victoria ate in silence for a while, and when her burrito was nearly finished, Max giggled.
“What?” Victoria asked, catching a bit of spilled rice in her hand.

“Nothing,” Max said.

If they were still at Blackwell, Max would never have imagined that she’d one day be in her office having lunch with the owner of The Chase Space. She also never thought her photos would be displayed there, still being tweeted at her and photographed and mentioned almost every day. After Nathan’s arrest, everyone saw a different side of Victoria. Of course, in Max’s alternate memories Victoria managed to be an ass (though slightly more tolerable) right up until the bitter end, but in this reality, Victoria wasn’t so bad. She was still stubborn and pushy, but always for good reason, and at the end of the day, the poor girl was horribly insecure.

All Victoria ever wanted was attention, and she went through some pretty shitty loops to get it. When they all gathered at the Two Whales after Chloe’s funeral, Victoria revealed herself to be jealous of Chloe because, even though she was a bad student, she was widely popular. Victoria needed that attention, because at home, her parents only neglected her. They gave her money in place of love, and it had completely tainted her. Victoria was in utter shock when Chloe was killed, and seeing that tragedy could strike again at any moment, Victoria turned herself in to the office for sharing Kate’s horrible video from a previous Vortex Club party. She wrote Kate a long, long letter of apology, presented it to her, and gladly accepted two weeks of in-house suspension. In those two weeks, Victoria made a complete turnaround, ended up graduating as Salutatorian alongside Valedictorian Warren, and went on to take full ownership of the Chase Space after convincing her parents to retire.

And after a year in charge, Victoria Chase met the love of her life.

Josh Tobler was a nobody, a college student with a passion for photography. He liked to take pictures of buildings, of animals, but mostly, of still life. He worked on campus in the financial aid office, and used the money he’d saved to buy a decent camera to hopefully start his portfolio. He went to the Chase Space twice a week for six months, trying to market his photos, but the stubborn new owner told him she didn’t want to include the photos of an amateur. The real reason Victoria wouldn’t take Josh’s photos was because Max’s were still so ridiculously popular and his photos wouldn’t get the recognition she believed they deserved. Josh took Victoria’s refusals as a challenge, and went to better his photos, still bringing them in twice a week. At that point, it’d become a fun routine for him. He’d drop off a few pictures, flirt with the cute owner for an hour, then leave, knowing he’d be able to do it all again in just a few days.

Victoria was already keen on what he was doing, and she found herself unbelievably bored on the days that Josh wasn’t seeing her. In order to fill her time, she began to work on a project. She’d keep all of Josh’s pictures as he brought them, and at some point, Josh had asked for them back. He told her that he found a studio that was willing to take his work, and Victoria was upset. She grudgingly brought out her little project, a book filled with Josh's pictures, along with a cover page and a brief description of his photos. From there, Victoria confessed the reason as to why she wasn’t displaying his photos, and why she insisted on keeping them and not giving them back. They couldn’t give him the recognition he deserved right now, but the thought that he wanted to go elsewhere hurt her feelings. Was there another cute girl to flirt with at the other studio?

“What is this?” Josh had asked.

“A portfolio, obviously” Victoria sneered. “You can’t just hand people pictures, Josh. You need a proper portfolio so that people will take you, your work, and your interest seriously.”
Josh was dumbfounded. There wasn’t another studio, no, he wanted the pictures back so he’d have an excuse to linger, touching her hand, in hopes that he’d finally gather the courage to ask her out on a real date instead of loitering every day and learning what he could about her in sixty minutes. But this? Snide Victoria spending money on nice black paper and losing time making something he should have started a long time ago made his heart swell. And suddenly, without thinking, Josh leaned over the counter and kissed her. And with his new portfolio, Nobody Josh Tobler became a Somebody, and that somebody married Victoria Chase.

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“Josh is really excited to see the photos,” Victoria said, taking a loud gulping swig of her horchata. She offered it to Max, who held up her hand in decline.

“I do have a few prints ready,” Max caved. “I have all the ones from the ceremony finished, and I can send you those tonight. The candids from the reception still need to be stabilized and smoothed out but I PROMISE you, I am almost done,” Max smiled. She couldn’t be too annoyed with Victoria. She was paying her a LOT of money to finish this and she was being incredibly patient about it.

“Ah! That’s all I needed,” Victoria squealed. She followed Max over to her desk. Mask pulled a chair over for Victoria to sit in and then pulled up Victoria's files. Before Max could log in to her computer, she closed her eyes in frustration when she heard that her phone was ringing.

Nosy as ever, Victoria looked at Max’s phone, and to Max’s surprise, she smiled sympathetically. “They’ve been calling you, haven’t they?”

“Hmm?” Max said, trying to focus on her computer. “Who?” She pulled up Victoria's pictures and turned her computer monitor to the bride.

Smiling, Victoria shifted through the photos, admiring them for a moment, before continuing with answering Max. “Arcadia,” Victoria said. “I went back just before the wedding. I went to see Joyce…Kate, especially. Then I went to visit Nathan.”

“He sent me a visitation request,” Max confessed. “I got the call a week ago, totally out of nowhere. It’s so weird.”

“Eh, it’s not that weird, seeing as he kinda had a thing for you.”

“What?”

“Well, like, it wasn’t a serious thing. He just used to mention—often—how he thought you were cute but your Polaroids were annoying and stupid. He used to say one day he was just gonna buy you a nice camera so he didn’t have to hear the loud click of that yellow disaster you used to carry. God, if he saw your stuff at the Chase Space, he’d lose his damn mind, especially since mom and dad rejected his morbid stuff. Well, except that one picture he took of me. It was a cute one, so they insisted it be in the gallery.”

Max knew the picture she was talking about. It was one of Victoria and him at the beach, though not much of him was in the picture. Her head was in Nathan's palm, her lips kissing a long crease in his hand, and you could see little sparkles of ocean water on her eyelashes. Nathan was so touched, he took a picture to capture it. It was one of the only pictures he ever took in color. The sunset was beautiful as it painted a soft orange onto Victoria's shoulders and made the sand in Victoria's hair sparkle like diamonds. It was a very special picture.
Max noticed the small gleam of sadness in Victoria's eyes. “You guys were close, huh?”

Victoria sniffled and pointed toward the tissue box on Max’s desk, and Max passed her a few. Victoria closed her eyes, trying to stop her tears, but it was no use. A forced laugh escaped her mouth as Max nodded knowingly and passed her the full box of tissues. Victoria dabbed her eyes, careful not to smear her mascara, and leaned her head on Max, who put her arm around her. Victoria was the same stuck-up brat she’d always been, but Max hadn’t seen her cry since Nathan Prescott was sentenced to fifteen years with a chance at parole after seven. He’d been there for five years, now. He was lucky that his lawyer was able to convince the jury that Jefferson had made him kill Rachel, in order to have something on him in case he wanted to stop funding Jefferson’s insanity. Everyone knew of Nathan’s mental illness, so his story of killing Chloe on accident was just about believable, right up until he was questioned for the reason as to why he’d brought a gun to school. He confessed that it was for Jefferson, to try to intimidate him into confessing, so at least one attempt at murder was premeditated. Still, his sentence was light, but losing Nathan was hard for Victoria.

“Nathan was my best friend,” Victoria started. “He was my best friend and I loved him. And I kept loving him even when Rachel reared her ugly head—sorry—and got in the way. Probably why I hated her so damn much.”

“Did you two…?”

“No, no, Nathan was like a brother to me,” Victoria said, wiping her nose. “We’ve known each other since preschool. When Rachel came along, Nathan totally forgot about everyone. She had a funny way of making you feel like…I don’t know, like she took your place.”

_Tell me about it_, Max thought. Rachel was already dead in her alternate reality, but when Chloe talked about her, the way she came up always stung.

“I blame myself sometimes,” Victoria said. “For him killing her. I know that Mr. Jefferson had that crazy control over him and Nathan has his own issues, but right after she was gone, I was his number one again. What if he thought that getting rid of her was the only way to make me feel better? But then again, Nathan would talk about her so much, so I tried to use Mr. Jefferson to make Nathan jealous that I was with someone he hated and to make him feel as lonely as I had. Probably the biggest regret of my life,” she laughed. Victoria stood and walked a few paces. “As much as I’d love to stay and cry about this, Josh is probably worried about me. How much trouble could I possibly get into?”

Max grabbed Victoria’s purse and rested it on her own shoulder. “Hey, it’s appropriate when you're in haling burritos for TWO.”

“Oh please, Rebecca Cassidy’s still got _four months_ before she can cause any trouble.”

“It’s a girl?” Max asked excitedly, walking with Victoria out of the door to her office. “And THAT’S what you’re going to name her?”

“Don’t get too attached,” Victoria warned kindly. “Josh is STUCK on that ugly name. I’m hoping it’s a boy. Then…Nathan Jonathan.”

Max smiled warmly. “It’s a good name.”

“It is,” Victoria said. “But let’s hope I get my wedding pictures before the baby is here.”

Max laughed and walked with Victoria to her car. Once Victoria was in, Max placed her bag in her lap, and Victoria slid it over to the front seat.
“Are you gonna visit him?” Victoria asked. “I could come with you, if you like. I haven’t seen him in a long time. When I called to tell him about my little bean, he burst into tears. I wish I could have seen that. I wish he could see me now.” Victoria patted her stomach, then rubbed it for a minute, somewhat sadly, prompting Max to rub it for a moment, too.

Eventually, Max shifted uncomfortably and stretched her arms over her head. “I’ll think about it. And if I do go, I don’t want you coming with me. No need for that ‘little bean’ to get into trouble too early.”

“Very well,” Victoria said. She started her car, took off her hat, and let the air conditioning unstick her short hair from her forehead. “Make the choice think is right, Max. You always do. Au revoir, cherie.”

Max waved faintly. “Au revoir.”

Max was finally back at her desk, feeling proud that she’d gotten through editing so many of Victoria’s pictures. She needed the distraction. Sooner or later she’d have to call the correctional facility and give an answer. She was scared to go back to Arcadia Bay, for fear that she’d be berated like in her other reality. She kept in touch with Joyce and Warren and Kate and all that, but even she knew she could stand to call a little more often, and of course, visit. Mas hadn’t been back in Arcadia Bay since she first left to try to further her career, and she was afraid of how different it would look. Everything was going to feel smaller, but the weight of the memories she’d made with Chloe there were going to feel as heavy as ever. That was probably the main reason she didn’t want to, heck, didn’t even try to go back. Had she always been this much of a fucking coward?

Max sighed and looked at her cell phone. She put her hand over it and it lit up beneath her palm. She answered immediately, and after giving a normal greeting, she let herself be influenced by a single thought: Make the choice you think is right, Max. You always do.

“Have you given any thought to the visitation request?”

“Yes,” Max answered. “I’d like to visit. I want to set up a date. I can probably be there sometime next week.”

Dr. Hill laughed softly on the other line. “We’re delighted to hear that, Miss Caulfield. We’ll let Nathan know you’ve accepted his request.”
Max reluctantly returns home nervously to see how things have changed since she left five years ago.

Thank you all for your patience on this chapter! I think from now on I'll be updating every other Saturday, but if anything changes, I'll put it on my blog, caulscott-garbage.tumblr.com. Thank you!

"Max, seriously, you have got to be the slowest walker I've ever met!"

Max's feet slowed and she hunched over, trying to catch her breath. "It's not fair. You've got a skateboard!"

Chloe rolled her blue eyes and stopped moving. "It's not a skateboard, it's a longboard."

"Then we should both be able to fit on it!"

Chloe laughed and took Max's bony hands. Max climbed onto the longboard, satisfied. They rode through their neighborhood in silence, watching as the houses passed.

"Wait Chloe, stop here!"

"Um, no way. It's way too hot for that."

"I see something! I want to take a picture," Max explained.

Chloe rolled her eyes again and brought her blue longboard to a complete stop. Max was obsessed with that silly camera, but Chloe liked seeing her so happy, so excited to use it. She remembered when Vanessa called her mom to ask about maybe getting Chloe a camera as well, but William had only laughed and say that photography was "his thing." Chloe ended up with a Skateboard Shannon that Christmas, and Max had gotten her little yellow camera.

"Chloe, look!" Max said. She held up her picture, which was still slowly developing. After a few seconds, Chloe could make out a tiny bird's nest, with three small eggs. Once the picture was fully developed, the eggs were a soft, perfect sky blue.

"A robin's nest!" Chloe shouted. She threw her hands into the air, nearly releasing the picture, and she quickly brought her hands down once she saw birds fly out of the bush Max had taken a picture of. She handed the picture back to Max, who was laughing, and when Max calmed down enough to put the picture in her little camera bag, she saw that Chloe had begun to cry.

This was her last summer with her best friend Maxine Caulfield. Her family was moving to
Washington and soon Chloe would be a phone call and a holiday card.

Max pulled Chloe down to the curb and pulled her head onto her shoulder. “Chloe,” Max started softly, “please don’t cry. I don’t leave for another three weeks!”

Chloe cried harder. “When you leave, you’re gonna have this great new life and you’ll forget all about Chloe Price and this town full of nobodies.”

Max took Chloe’s face into her palms. “Chloe Price, I will never forget about you.”

Max awoke with a start, suddenly anxious. It felt like the world was spinning around her and her mouth filled with saliva. Quickly, Max unbuckled her seatbelt and ran out of her seat and into the aisle of the plane, desperate to get to the bathroom. The plane rocked uncomfortable from side to side as Max felt her insides do the same. Max stayed still in the middle of the aisle trying to steady herself, earning odd looks from other passengers and prompting a flight attendant to come to her.

After taking one look at Max’s green, sweaty face, the flight attendant moved to the side and pointed in the direction she had just come from. “Bathroom’s that way, to your right.”

Max held up her hand as a silent “thank you” and rushed past her. Luckily, the bathroom was unoccupied and Max went in, locking the door behind her. She dropped her head into the toilet and emptied her stomach. Once she was sure she was finished, she closed the lid to the toilet, sat on it, and began to cry. She remembered that day, riding on the longboard—the cool breeze of the summer weather on her face, the warm touch of Chloe’s hands as she held them. She still had the scar on her knee from when she scraped it that day, sometime after taking the picture of the robin’s nest. After Max had calmed Chloe’s crying fit, they both got back on the longboard for a last ride around the block in Chloe’s neighborhood.

It was a cool summer afternoon, and everything was perfect. They’d had breakfast at Chloe’s, then rode her new blue longboard to the neighborhood park, where they gossiped about school. They stayed there and ended up playing with Chloe’s annoying neighbor, Thomas (who Max secretly had a crush on at the time), then they lay in the grass and watch the sun move across a perfect blue sky.

“You fucking liar,” Max whispered to herself. Chloe was right to be worried. And she died thinking Max didn’t care about her. And even now, Max was trying to figure out a way to live with that.

Once she was calm, stayed there in the bathroom for a moment, looking at herself. She thought about how stupid she felt for getting mixed up and ending up on her way back to Arcadia Bay.

She wanted to be excited about this trip—she was going to get to see Joyce and David, Kate Marsh—but what bothered her was that they weren’t the reason she was going. She couldn’t even think of a good reason as to why she wanted to visit Nathan, but she felt like she was going to regret it if she didn’t. Brooke didn’t want her to go, and that was a fight she wasn’t expecting. She remembered how it was coming home from work the day she accepted Nathan’s visitation request—but she couldn’t exactly be mad at Brooke for freaking out. This was Nathan she was going to see. Max recounted just how angry Brooke was when she told her she was going back to Arcadia Bay.

“How was work, Max?” Brooke had asked.

Max held onto the door frame as she unzipped her boots. She glanced toward the kitchen as if to
ask Brooke for a moment, and nodding, Brooke turned her attention back to the ground turkey burgers on the stove. Max set her boots on the tile by the front door and closed it behind her. She went to set the alarm, but then she remembered that Daniel came home later on Fridays, so she opted just to lock the door instead. Max walked over to their small kitchen and sat in her usual barstool. Knowingly, Brooke poured her a glass of water and set it in front of her. “Tough day?”

Max gulped her water uncomfortably. “Sort of. I just know I have a lot on my plate this week. I have to finish Victoria’s pictures on my laptop, I have to figure out what to pack, and I have to—”

Brooke turned off the stove, loudly setting the spatula in the now-empty burger pan. Brooke rested her weight on one foot and took a deep breath. Slowly, she turned around. Judging by the look in her eyes, Brooke could tell Max was ready for a lecture. When it came to big decisions, Max had learned to act fast. Probably due to a week of tough choices five years ago. Brooke set the plate of burgers in front of Max, who noticed the burger bar in front of her. “You’re going to visit him?” Brooke asked.

Max sighed and grabbed a bun out of the nearby bag and smothered it with honey mustard. “Mad?” Max asked.

Brooke sighed and grabbed a bun and a patty for herself. “I’m trying really, really hard not to be,” she said after a long pause. “What made you decide to go see him?”

Max sighed and set her burger down without taking a bite. “Victoria came by and she—”

“VICTORIA!” Brooke shouted. She lunged for the house phone and began to dial. “I knew she’d try to trick you into—”

Max stood and took the phone away from Brooke. “Victoria just came by and said she’d also gotten called by the facility. We talked. She told me to do what I thought was right. So I’m going to visit him.”

“But why?” Brooke whined.

Max sighed and pushed her burger plate away from her. Just like that morning, she wasn’t hungry again. “Would you believe me if I said it was for closure?”

“But you have closure! You being…alive in this reality you made should be closure enough! You saved us all! Shouldn’t the fact that she’s even alive be enough closure for you, Max? He killed your best friend! You’re closure is—”

Max stood up abruptly, sending her plate sliding across the counter. “It’s not for me, it’s for him. His closure. I’ve gotten through with living the decision I made because I’ve had people to share my grief with. He doesn’t. Maybe he thinks I could be that person for him.

Brooke looked at Max incredulously. “Why, Max? He is scum. Why would he—”

“I don’t know!”

Before Brooke could retort, she and Max heard the front door unlock. The girls shared a worried look, wondering if Daniel had heard them fighting. They knew that Daniel was going to make a comment about how they’d ruined their no-fight streak—they’d gone a record three months without fighting about anything. Max took her plate and food to her room and closed her door just as Daniel had entered the apartment.

Once Max had finished eating and silently took to the kitchen to wash her plate, she returned to
her room to pull out her giant suitcase. She pulled out a few outfits to wear during her weeklong stay in Arcadia, when she remembered that she was supposed to receive an email about how she should dress when visiting an inmate. Max sighed. This was turning out to be a lot more of a hassle than she thought it’d be. She wasn’t even entirely sure why she wanted to visit Nathan—sure, there was the closure thing to get Brooke off of her back, but something in her told her that she owed it to him. Max had gotten to live her dream once she left Arcadia Bay, but Nathan was going to spend the next ten years in a six-by-eight. As Max went through her emails, cursing herself for not giving Dr. Hill her personal email, she heard a soft knock on her door.

“Come in,” Max said, pulling her hair out of the curled bun Octavia had put it up in. Her long hair fell to her shoulders, and she scratched her head, easing the tension the bobby pins had left.

Max’s door opened and in came Brooke, with a plate of brownies, only two, presumably one for Brooke because Max could never eat more than one of Daniel’s Abuela’s Famous triple chocolate brownies. Brooke tiptoed over Max’s piles of clothes and set the plate down in front of her, while gently touching her shoulder. Max smiled up at her then reached for a brownie. Max took a satisfying bite and then set the brownie down on the plate. Brooke moved the plate to Max’s side and scooted closer to her with open arms. Tearing up, Max leaned in and accepted Brooke’s hug.

“I told Daniel we lost our streak,” Brooke said finally. “It was the only way I could get him to make the brownies.”

“I figured,” Max laughed, pulling away. “You here to eat or are you gonna help me pack?”

“Help you pack, of course,” Brooke laughed. “It’s the least I can do.”

Brooke began folding Max’s picked-out clothes, as Max searched her email for a message from Dr. Hill. Once she finally found the email, she stepped over her brownie and Brooke and went to her closet. She opened up her “work” side and pulled out identical blouses, one red, one gray.

Brooke leaned over and saw Max standing, staring at her two shirts on the floor. “Trouble deciding?” Brooke asked.

“A bit,” Max said. She pointed to her cellphone in her hand. “Dr. Hill sent me an email about dress code. If I wear a skirt, it has to be past my knees. No cleavage, hair up, no jewelry—so that’s definitely Chloe’s necklace out the window. My shoes can’t be too tall, so that’s another downside, not to mention the one pair of slacks I DO have are a bit…fitted.”

Brooke laughed and set a pair of folded pants into Max’s suitcase. “I never would have thought I’d ever hear Max Caulfield complaining about what to wear,” she laughed. Max decided on the darker red blouse, as it was a gift from Victoria. She handed the hanger to Brooke, and rehung the gray one. Brooke sat awkwardly for a moment before standing, then took a deep breath. “Max, can I be honest with you for a minute?”

Max said nothing. She only nodded.

Brooke pulled Max over to Max’s bed, and they both sat on the comforter. “Max, I’m sorry I yelled at you and got angry. I’m just…worried. The whole thing is super bizarre. Nathan wanting to visit you is one thing, but so close to the anniversary of Chloe’s death? I just…I can’t help but to think that something weird is going to happen.”

Max stood there in shock. How could she not have realized it? The anniversary was coming up soon. “All the more reason to go,” Max choked out. “I’m scared, too, Brooke, but I can’t help feeling like this is the right thing to do. Maybe Nathan is doing this as a part of his therapy; maybe he’s just
going to tell me to fuck off as soon as I get there. But I have to go back. It’s the right thing to do.”

Defeated, Brooke sighed. She knew Max was right. Max hadn’t been back to Arcadia Bay since she won her first “Everyday Heroes” contest. Sure, she did the long distance thing with Warren for a while, but she was never ready to go back there, always flying Warren out to see her. But maybe now that the wound was healing, Max could go back and face the horror she’d left there. Brooke knew she couldn’t change Max’s mind. “Well, fine. But if you’re totally sure about going, I have something you’ve got to take with you.” Brooke walked out of Max’s room, over to the closet near the front door and came back with a white box, decorated with small, Chloe-blue butterflies.

“What’s this?” Max asked.

“It’s a gift. I was saving it for Christmas but…I feel like you’d appreciate it more now.”

Max took the lid off of the box. Breath escaped her as she looked up at Brooke, tears in her blue eyes. In the box was Max’s old yellow camera, looking brand new, with a blue butterfly painted on its side. Max pulled the camera out of the box, along with five cartridges of film, and hugged her old camera to her chest. “How?” was all Max could manage to whisper. There were a million thank-yous she wanted to give, but she was so choked up, even managing to get out “how” was a struggle.

“It’s a joint gift. We sent it to Warren, right after it Brooke. He bought the upgraded replacement parts, then Joyce and David rebuilt it together, then Kate repainted the whole thing and added the butterfly. There’s more in the box.”

Max tipped the box onto its side and out dropped a picture. The picture was of Max, smiling, in a pair of pajamas. She was four years old, holding up that same yellow camera. It was Christmas morning, and in the background was her mom, laughing. Max knew Brooke probably had to break her mom’s arm to get that picture, but it make the gift that much more special. Max, still crying, waved Brooke over and hugged her. She and Brooke eventually finished packing, with Max secretly packing her journal and old cellphone while Brooke was distracted finishing off both of the brownies Daniel had made.

So now here Max was, hogging the bathroom of her plane on a trip to a sad past she almost wished she could forget. Max felt brave before she’d gotten on to the plane. She packed all of her things perfectly with Brooke’s help. She and Daniel sang horribly to Bon Jovi on the way to the airport, and she even smiled and waved once she’d gotten to the point where Daniel and Brooke couldn’t walk with her anymore. But now she was afraid. When she first accepted Nathan’s request, she believed that it was just a visit. Maybe he was lonely and looking for a chance at redemption—or maybe he was going to tell her to fuck off and die. Max didn’t like to think about the unknown. In her life, for the past five years, everything was a plan, a schedule, a date on a calendar, a reminder on her phone, and a sticky note to be added to her planner. For the first time in five years, Max had no idea what was going on.

Max exited the bathroom sometime later, her face cooled by sink water, and staggered back to her first-class seat. The flight was pretty late, and she’d hopefully get to her hotel at a decent time so she could get some sleep when she landed. Max pulled out her laptop to watch an hour long movie that Warren had been pushing for the last three months. Max leaned back in her chair, put in her earbuds, and watched as “Dead Leaves” flashed across her laptop screen. The movie was animated, not exactly Max’s cup of tea, but it was interesting enough to keep her mind off of Arcadia Bay.

Max was in her rental car, driving to one of the few hotels in Arcadia Bay. She sipped soda just to keep her awake long enough to reach her room and check in safely. The hotel was super nice,
probably had real high-end stuff, most likely courtesy of Sean Prescott, Nathan’s less-than-a-father. He treated Nathan like a spotless heir, not a son, not a human with feelings who made mistakes. Max remembered how disgusting he’d been at Nathan’s trial. He claimed that he wasn’t to blame for Nathan’s dilapidated mental state, complaining that Nathan had only made a “drastic change in his normally calm demeanor” once he’d become close to Mark Jefferson. Had it not been for Nathan’s faithful sister, Kristine, bringing in years of medical records detailing Nathan’s severe depression, possible schizophrenia and confirmed borderline personality disorder, Sean would have gotten away with treating his son like a product. Kristine also detailed Sean’s cruelty in diary entries, deeming him responsible for Nathan’s poor mental state, thus making him partially responsible for Rachel and Chloe’s deaths. Unfortunately, Sean Prescott only had to pay a fine, and the amount was negligible to him. Everyone in Arcadia Bay thought he was absolute garbage, and he resolved to live quietly in his enormous beachside mansion. Maybe he was trying to figure out a way to live with himself, too, but Max didn’t think he deserved the benefit of the doubt.

Max dragged her suitcase into her room, and plopped down onto her bed. She decided to unpack in the morning, knowing that tomorrow was going to be a long day. She was planning on a few surprise visits, then she had to work up the nerve to actually visit Nathan. Max quickly changed into her pajamas and crawled into the crisp, clean sheets of her hotel bed. She fell asleep almost as soon as her head hit the pillow.

She had a nightmare.

Max was in a black tornado, Arcadia Bay swirling up in the wind around her. No matter which direction she moved, the storm moved with her. Suddenly, Max could hear someone calling for her, and it sounded like they were in danger.

“Max!” she called. “Max, help me! My boot is stuck! Please! Hurry!”

Max sprung up, knowing exactly what to do. She was back on Arcadia’s train tracks, running up the nearby hill, trying desperately to cut the right wire with pliers acquired from a broken-into shed. No matter how hard she squeezed, Max couldn’t clip a single wire and eventually, she watched in horror as the train neared Chloe. She closed her eyes and looked away when the impact came, only to open them find herself back in the middle of the tornado, with Chloe standing in front of her, just like she was the last time she’d seen her alive.

“Screw you, Max,” Chloe said. “You let me die. All you ever do is let me die!”

Before Max could even react, Nathan Prescott appeared and grabbed Max’s hand, pulling her away from Chloe as the tornado dissipated, uttering nothing more than an annoyed “Let’s go.”

Scared, Max followed him silently, not daring to wriggle out of his grip. Max could feel her mouth moving. She knew worlds were forming but she could not hear her own voice. She urged and urged until Nathan dropped her hand and turned around to face her.

“My god, Max Caulfield, do you ever stop talking? Did no one ever teach you to shut the fuck up?”

Max said nothing. She only cried.

Nathan grabbed her hand again and continued pulling forward. “We have to get out of here,” was all he said.

Without warning, the floor fell out from beneath Max, and as she fell down, the last thing she heard were Nathan and Chloe’s voices, calling her name in horror.
She came to on the floor of the dark room, Mr. Jefferson hovering over her, his hot breath in her ear. She cried as he snapped her photo over and over again, hitting her legs into place, moving her arms with the tip of his shoe. Max laid there, reliving her hell, when she heard Mark Jefferson say something he didn’t say in her memories of the dark room.

“Good, just like that. Once she’s in position—” snap “—perfect. Just like that.”

“I did good?” Nathan’s voice asked. He snapped another photo.

“Perfect,” Mr. Jefferson said. “You’re both perfect.”

Max awoke panting, her body tangled up in her sheet. She struggled to break free, crying as she only ended up more tangled in the sheet. Max forced her body to calm, then slowly kicked her sheet away until she was freed. She looked at her wrists, inspecting them for marks that showed they’d been bound by tape. She did this every so-often, when she felt like she was back in that place.

“Look,” she said to herself. “You’re not here. Your wrists are free. There is no tape. The dark room is dead. The dark room is dead. The dark room is dead.”

It didn’t feel dead. It felt like a part of her was going to be stuck there forever.

Once Max was showered and dressed in her black slacks and red blouse, she attempted to copy the up-do Octavia had given her before. Once her hair was put together, she got into her rental car, and headed to the Two Whales Diner.

Driving through Arcadia Bay made it feel like home again. Every tree, every bird, every streetlight she passed seemed more and more familiar as she got closer to the diner. Max drove around to the side of the diner and parked her car. To her surprise, Frank’s RV was nowhere to be found. Max began to wonder if Joyce had finally kicked him out of their parking lot as she exited her car, but her question was answered when Frank came rolling up to the diner in a large green garbage truck. When he opened the door to get out of the car, Pompidou slowly trotted over to where Max was standing. Smiling, Max bent town and pet the dog, while Frank went to empty the garbage cans. Max waited, petting the dog, until Frank came around, calling for him.

“Pomp? Pompidou! Boy, where are you?”

“Over here,” Max called, waving Frank over. Excitedly, Pompidou ran back to Frank, who walked over to where Max was standing.

“Max Caulfield? Shit, I haven’t seen you in years! I’d hug you, but,” Frank paused, motioning to his dirty work clothes. “Shit, kid, how’ve you been?”

“Pretty good,” Max laughed. “How’s Remi?”

“Good!” Frank smiled warmly. “Just had our second little girl. Maribel Marie. Man, I really don’t wanna bother you, but you’ve got to check this out.”

Smiling, Max followed Frank to his work truck. Frank was another who’d made a turnaround after Chloe’s death. He’d joined them at the Diner after the funeral, claiming that Chloe was a pain in his ass, but all around, a pretty good kid. He broke down and told them of a time where he’d mixed shrooms and alcohol and had had a wicked bad trip. Chloe had stayed and taken care of him all night. He’d thrown up in his sleep and had she not been there to turn him on his side, he’d be dead. Once Frank decided to quit his addictions, he was able to get a job at the diner cleaning up at night,
then was able to pull a more permanent job as a garbage man. He met Remi Stanford about a year after Chloe died, had married her after only three months of dating, and had soon welcomed his first little girl, Rachel Chloe. He’d still been living in his RV at the time his first daughter was born, so Max assumed he’d saved up and bought a house.

“You’ve got to check this out,” Frank smiled. He brought Max to the side of his truck that was facing the street where painting on the side was a collage of different-styled blue butterflies that made a giant one. Max laughed, as she could tell that the nicest, best-drawn butterfly belonged to Kate Marsh.

“It’s beautiful, but what’s this gap for?” Max asked, pointing. On the bottom corner of the right wing, there was a small gap, not fitting like the other gaps of the painting.

“Shit, Joyce said I should leave that for you,” Frank said. “I’m off Wednesday, you should come by, see the girls, paint it then. I have a house now! Sold that old piece of shit RV and got a place with a yard where my girls can play.”

Overcome, Max teared up, then leaned in to hug Frank, despite how he smelled. Laughing, Frank hugged her back, then leaned down to pet Pompidou, who had laid down by Max’s Max’. Frank and Pompidou climbed into his car, then Frank started the engine as Max waited by the side of the diner. “Wednesday, okay? So you can see the girls!”

“Wednesday!” Max chuckled, waving as Frank and Pompidou smiled back at her. Feeling nostalgic, Max pulled her yellow camera out of her bag and took a pictured of them, then waved with the picture in her hand as Frank drove away. She put the camera and her picture back into her old camera bag, took a deep breath, wiped her tears, then headed into the Two Whales Diner.

The place hadn’t changed at all, and Max quietly tiptoed in, heading to a booth in the back near the jukebox. After sitting for only a moment, one of the three waitresses, Maria, came to take Max’s drink order. “Now here’s a face I haven’t seen in a long time. Black coffee, right?”


Maria laughed. “I know just what to say to get her good an angry.” Maria winked and went into the nearby kitchen, where she exclaimed, “Joyce, I need you out there. The most freakin’ difficult customer is in booth four. Says they only want to be served by you or they ain’t paying.”

“Excuse me? If anyone in this damn diner thinks it is my job to cater only to them, then they ain’t welcome here.”

Joyce stormed out of the kitchen and made a beeline to booth four and her frown quickly turned into a smile once she saw Max’s face. “Maxine Caulfield—oh, sorry, Max, never Maxine.”

“I’ll make an exception,” Max said, standing up with open arms.

Once the embrace was over, Joyce pinched Max’s cheek. “I know you’re a big ol’ successful photographer but that is NO EXCUSE to go four years without seein’ me!”

“I know!” Max said. She didn’t have an excuse for not coming to visit—she didn’t want to come to visit. Max had spent months crying on the floor of Chloe’s messy room, clutching the bullet necklace so hard her knuckles were sore, and she still wasn’t totally ready to go back there. But she knew she would if Joyce asked. Max felt like she owed this family a lot more than she ever owed Arcadia Bay. Max felt bad, but Arcadia made her feel kind of bitter. If this town knew what she’d sacrificed to keep them all a life, they’d have treated Joyce and David much, much better than they
did when Chloe died. It all came down to power. Sean Prescott had paid off any news place he could to get them to focus on Chloe’s school truancy and drug use, to make it seem as through her death had been a long time coming because of her recklessness. Had it not been for David’s testimony, which eventually brought Kate forward, on the bizarre relationship Nathan had with Mark Jefferson and Max as a key witness to the murder, Sean Prescott would have successfully gotten Nathan out of jail time.

“Where are you staying?” Joyce asked. “Can you come by, say hi to David, and have some breakfast back at the house?”

“Ah, sure,” Max said. “I’ll take my coffee to go.”

“Perfect,” Joyce said, taking off her name tag and apron. “Maria, can you and Nancy cover for me?”

Maria waved Joyce away, and Joyce pulled Max outside. Joyce walked over to Chloe’s beat-up truck, unlocked it, and got inside. “See you at the house, Max.”

Max was parked across the street, unable to leave her car. She took a different route than Joyce, knowing she’d arrive much faster, and was contemplating leaving before Joyce got there, claiming that she had things she needed to take care of, urgently. Should I even tell Joyce why I’m here, Max thought. Joyce would be pretty pissed to find out she’d come back for Nathan, not for a visit. It was going to come up sooner or later, and the angrier Joyce was going to be.

Joyce pulled up to the front of the house and parked in the driveway, crooked, next to the black car David had been fixing up. She climbed out of the truck, then waved Max over to the house. “Now, young lady, would you like pancakes or a bacon omelet?”

Before Max could answer, her stomach growled. Embarrassed, she only sipped on her coffee.

Joyce laughed. “How about a little of both?”

Max nodded and slowly followed Joyce into the house.

The house felt very, very small now. Joyce asked questions and made comments and Max answered, but everything felt silent. Joyce’s words were muffled as they beat against Max’s brain. Max couldn’t hear anything in this reality. She heard William’s voice as he walked outside the door and to his death. She heard the wine bottle fall to the floor when she and Chloe had knocked it down. She heard Joyce yelling at them for running in and out of the screen door, telling them to pick “inside, or outside!” But above everything else, she could hear Santa Monica Dream fade into Piano Fire, and she heard Chloe yell “Dance, hippie!” And just like that, Max’s eyes snapped to Joyce, who was returning the milk to the fridge.

“Can I go upstairs, Joyce?” Max asked frantically. She had a weird feeling, like something up there was calling her. “I just…I just want to see her room.”

“Of course,” Joyce said, slowly closing the fridge. “Take as much time as you need.”

Slowly, Max turned out of the living room and went up the stairs, feeling every creek rush up through her body and down to her fingertips. She ran her fingers up the bannister, collecting dust as she went further up. Max’s hands shook with unnecessary nervousness, and her heartbeat was out of
control. Max had tucked Chloe’s bullet necklace between her blouse and undershirt, but now it felt like it was burning her skin. Max pulled the necklace out, warm to the touch, and let it hang against her chest, still feeling an odd burn in her heart—she couldn’t get to Chloe’s room fast enough. Max quickened her pace, and soon she was at Chloe’s closed door, her eager hand on the cold handle. Slowly, Max pushed the door open. The room was almost exactly the same.

There was only one difference. Hanging on Chloe’s closet was a massive frame, taking up the middle section off the door. It was Max’s picture—the one she took right before they laid Chloe down for her final rest. It looked like a giant Polaroid, with a white trim on the bottom of the picture. Everything else was the same, untouched, messy room that Max remembered. Max looked at the closet a moment more, wondering if Chloe’s snow doe was still on the shelf near it. Knowing that if she broke it there’d be no going back to fix it this time, Max grabbed the chair at Chloe’s desk, brought it over to the shelf, and stood on it. Max got the doe out and stepped off the chair. She held onto the doe as she strolled around Chloe’s room. Partway under the bed was the metal box where Max knew there was a picture of Chloe and Rachel together along with a CD. In the red ashtray were the dusty remnants of a joint, and Max laughed, wondering if Chloe chose to “wake and bake” the day she came to Blackwell to get money out of Nathan.

Max sighed and gently set the snow doe on the bed, then walked over to the electrical outlet on the ground near Chloe’s TV and turned it on. She pulled the CD out of the metal box under the bed, careful not to disturb anything else in the box, and put the CD in Chloe’s stereo. Santa Monica Dream quietly spilled out of the speakers as Max sat on the floor and cried quietly for herself. Though her vision was blurry, Max pulled her camera out of her bag and took a picture of the doe on the floor. She waited for the picture to develop, then sat and listened to the song by herself.

“Max?” Joyce called softly, opening the door. “Breakfast is…where did you find that?”

“Sorry if I was being nosy,” Max said, immediately, hoping Joyce couldn’t sense the worry in her voice. “I saw a sparkle up there,” Max said, pointing, “so I got the chair and got it down.”

Max stood and handed the doe to Joyce, who was smiling. “Max, I would have broken it. David and I have been looking for this. The anniversary…it’s two weeks from tomorrow. This doe was a gift to Chloe from William. I want to put it by her grave. God, I hope she’s with him now. Whether heaven exist or not, those are two souls that would find each other even in…in…a tornado, or somethin’. Chloe was a daddy’s girl.

Max smiled. “If it’s okay, I’d like to come back for the anniversary.”

“Oh, Max, you know you’re welcome here any time. I don’t like you bein’ a stranger.”

“Trust me, I know. I need to call more often, too,” Max laughed.

“Ah, so I’m not the only mother who’s been nagging you.”

As Max laughed, Santa Monica Dream dame to an end, and Piano Fire began to play. Max subtly swayed to the music, and noticed Joyce’s eyes were tearing up as she moved. “Are you okay, Joyce?”

“Ah, I wish I was. I miss my little girl. I like this song,” Joyce said, trying to wipe her ever-falling tears. “Chloe put it on for me the day William died. We were up in her room, then she climbed up on the bed and started dancing like a crazy person. I just laughed and laughed until she pulled me up on the bed and had me dance with her. Oh, screw it.” Joyce kicked off her short black heels and climbed up onto the bed, dancing the way she did with her little girl.
As if by duty, Max held up her camera and took a picture, giggling as she did so. Carefully, Max set the snow doe and her camera on Chloe’s desk and joined Joyce, kicking off her shoes and climbing up and dancing on the bed. The two of them held hands as the song went on, both falling back onto the bed once it finished. Max and Joyce laughed until Joyce stood up and slipped her shoes back on. “I needed that, Max. Now let’s get downstairs to breakfast before it gets too cold.”

After saying goodbye to Joyce and promising to visit David when he was home later that week, Max got into her car. As she drove she checked her watch. Visiting time at the jail didn’t start for another hour, and the facility was only fifteen minutes away from Max’s next destination. Smiling, Max got into her car and drove just down the street, took a left, and ended up at Elaine Sawyer Elementary School. She quickly exited her car and went to the front office, her speech explaining why she was there already ready. She didn’t have to explain, the office knew who she was and why she was there. Max put her “visitor” sticker on her chest and headed down to room three in the kindergarten hallway.

Max slowly opened the door and entered the room quietly, making eye contact with the very excited teacher. She finished the book she was reading to the kids, put in on her lap, and focused her attention on them. “Okay, Marsh-mallows, it’s time to go back to your seats. I want you to write one sentence about the story in your best handwriting, then I want you to draw a picture and do FIVE-STAR coloring, no scribble-scrabble. Who’s sweet?”

“The Marsh-mallows!” the kids yelled, all standing and quickly getting back to their seats.

Max walked over with open arms and embraced shy Kate Marsh. “Hi, Kate,” she said.

“I can’t believe you’re here!” Kate giggled.

Max couldn’t believe she was here either. “Yeah…I’m here to visit Nathan,” Max confessed. She couldn’t be frank with Joyce, so the least she could do was try to be frank with Kate. She hoped Kate wouldn’t be angry with her.

“I thought this would be—Jacob, that’s not cool for school. What do sweet Marsh-mallows do?”

Jacob looked down sheepishly. “Sweet Marsh-mallows keep their hands to themselves,” he said.

“That’s right, back to work,” Kate said. She looked at Max apologetically. “Sorry about that. You said you’re here to see Nathan? You got a visitation request, didn’t you?”

Max told her the entire story. “Did you get one, too?” Max asked.

“Sort of. But Stella told me about yours the other day. I have visited Nathan before, to try to forgive him for what he’d done to me. I haven’t seen Mark Jefferson, though. I’m still trying to work through that. How are you feeling about the whole thing?”

“I’m really scared, Kate,” Max said. “I mean…coming here feels like I’m doing the right thing, but I also feel like it’s a set-up.”

Before Kate could answer, her small brown watch started to beep. She clapped her hands rhythmically as the kids ran to clean up to get ready for recess. The little boys and girls all hand tons of questions for Max once they’d all gotten outside, wondering who she was and why she was there, and if she was going to play with them, but Kate got them to leave her alone, reminding them that they were cutting into their play time.
“Max,” Kate started. “Let me tell you a story. Back at Blackwell, before Chloe did, I was having a very rough time. My faith was constantly being tested, as was my resolve. I never told anyone this, but that week could have ended very badly for me. That Tuesday, I had been planning to climb up to the roof of the girls’ dorms and jump off. I was so embarrassed because of that video but mostly, I felt so alone. I’d isolated myself from everyone. But then when I heard the gunshot that Monday and saw Nathan covered in blood, and you—you coming out of the bathroom in tears, I realized that I needed help. I wanted to die because I couldn’t cope, but after seeing you pull yourself together enough to talk to the police, I felt strong again. I talked to my dad and sisters, went to the hospital, and felt like ‘Kate Marsh’ again once I started regularly going to therapy.

“Now when I visited Nathan, I did get a visitation request—but I didn’t visit him for two years. I was never pestered, but soon I felt it in every thought I had. Even though Luke was angry at first, he eventually gave me his blessing to go visit Nathan. When I first got to the facility, I was totally losing it,” Kate continued. “I felt like it was a bad idea, going to see him. But I took deep breaths and pushed through, and when he was sat down at the table, he was very surprised to see me—very quiet, too. He almost looked…scared. I pulled out the piece of paper that had what I wanted to say to him on it but instead of letting me say it, Nathan asked if he could read it. So I let him.

“Nathan is a really slow reader,” Kate chuckled. “Or maybe not, but it felt like I was waiting forever for him to finish reading. When he was finished, he set the note down, and he began to cry. He said he didn’t deserve my forgiveness, and gave me a real, true apology for what he’d done to me. I was so overcome that I teared up. I’ve made peace with forgiving him because it was important to me. But seeing after all that time that he still hadn’t made any progress on forgiving himself was…heartbreaking. So once he was calm, I took his hands, and asked if he would pray with me. He said he didn’t really believe in God, but he obliged, and I prayed for him the find the strength to forgive himself. He smiled before I left, and I was happy to see it. I’ve visited him a few times since then, and he’s been getting better. It was nice to be happy to see him, to feel like he wasn’t a negative in my life anymore.

“Then about a month ago, totally unrelated, after I visited Nathan I came home and there was Luke—in a black tuxedo, on one knee, all of it. He’d already gotten permission from my father to ask me to marry him, but I was so overwhelmed, I told Luke I needed time to think about it. Luke was hurt, I could tell, but he left to give me some time. I didn’t want him to think I didn’t love him—I do, but I was just so scared. I was afraid of everything. Was I really ready to be married at only twenty-three?”

Max was surprised. She had no idea that Luke had proposed to Kate, or that their relationship had gotten so serious. “What ended up happening?” Max asked excitedly.

Smiling, Kate held up her left hand and show Max the silver ring with the small, circular diamond on her ring finger. “I took a leap of faith.” Kate held Max’s hands and squeezed them. “I don’t know how your visit with Nathan will go, but something in you says it’s the right thing to do. So I’m telling you now to have a little faith, because I could have ended up dead, or unforgiving, or without the man I love in my life if I didn’t.”

Max smiled and pulled Kate into a hug. “Thank you, Kate.”

*                                                          *                                                          *

Max was nervous and her hands were shaking, she clenched her fists to try to calm herself, but there was no point. She was here, now, and she was going to see Nathan Prescott.

She sat at the off-gray table, nervously tapping her foot, watching as inmate after inmate came into the visitation room, none of them Nathan. On the middle of the table was a colorful stack of
square-shaped paper, along with a nearby wastebasket on the floor. As the door opened again, Max caught a glimpse of that familiar threatening stance, as well as Dr. Stella Hill coming out slowly. She walked over to where Max was sitting, and Max shot up to greet her.

Knowing she had to stay professional, Stella squeezed Max’s hand when she shook it, letting Max know she was happy to see her after all this time. “Good afternoon, Max,” Stella said warmly. “Nathan is getting ready to come out. He can get very nervous, and an officer will be standing by to make sure he doesn’t have any outbursts. Nathan calms himself by folding paper, so that’s why it’s on the table we brought you to. Keep your hands close to you, speak calmly and clearly, make eye-contact, and this will be a smooth visit.”

“Yes, Dr. Hill.”

Stella looked back at one of the officers, who nodded at her. He tuned and opened the door Stella had come through, and there was Nathan Prescott, in an orange jumpsuit. He didn’t look surprised to see her—he seemed angry and apprehensive, with how his body tensed when he saw Max sitting there. He was quite a bitter taller than the last time she’d seen him, and he seemed bigger, but his face was slip, and it looked like he hadn’t slept in days. His fists were clenched so tightly his knuckles turned white, and he furrowed his brow when he was sat down in front of her.

“Max Caulfield,” he said sharply.

Max almost couldn’t speak. This was weird. Here was the boy who killed her best friend, angry as usual, staring her down and making her feel as small as he did five years ago. “Hi…Nathan,” was all Max could muster up the courage to say.

Nathan took a sharp inhale and reached for a piece of paper on the center of the table. He began to fold quickly, and clenched his fist when the paper ripped. He looked up at Max and said through clenched teeth, “What the fuck are you doing here?”
Guests

Chapter Summary

Max finally has her meeting with Nathan...and it doesn't go anything like she thought it would.

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! Thank you all for reading! I hope this chapter isn't too short, I was just so excited to add it! I'm posting this chapter early because I have finals coming up (as well as 4+ papers to write, barf) so there may be a three week wait between this chapter and the next, but if that changes, I'll put all updates on my caulscott blog, caulscott-garbage.tumblr.com! Thank you all for sticking around and thank you for your comments! I have the next two chapters outlined and I am very excited to write!!

**There is a part that mentions that Nathan's hair is brown because that's what it says on his wiki, but I always thought it was dirty blonde myself. Oh well XD

Nathan was different. Different, but exactly the same. The first thing Max noticed when he first came into the room was how tall he'd gotten. Most of the people Max knew were considerably taller than she was, standing at five-five, but Nathan looked to be at least six feet now, probably due to some after-trauma growth spurt. He looked somewhat thinner, probably from not eating, and his hair was a bit longer and totally unkempt. His jumpsuit was fitted and Max could see the slight definition of muscle on his arms. To Max’s surprise, the other prisoners had short-sleeved jumpsuits, but Nathan’s was long. Nathan was also the only inmate who was in a pair of handcuffs.

Max wanted to speak—she knew she eventually had to say something, but all she could focus on were the bitten nails on his hands folding the colorful paper quickly, quietly, perfectly. His hands were shaking a bit less now, and the table was quickly becoming home to origami…everything. There was a crane and two flowers, and as Nathan finished a hat and began to start on what looked like a box, he finally spoke. “Are you gonna say something or are you just gonna sit there like an idiot?”

“What am I supposed to say?” Max asked. She was trying to stay calm but it’d come off a lot meaner than she’d intended. Nathan had no reason to be angry with her, but sourness peppered his tone. Max did feel bad that her testimony as a witness put him away (amongst the choice to use him to sacrifice Chloe) but this anger was different, as if he was mad that she was even here. Her being here was her doing him a FAVOR.

If he wanted to be angry at ANYONE, it needed to be Sean Prescott. He did all he could to torment Nathan as a child and it showed with how Nathan treated everyone at the school from his second week at Blackwell. The first week? He was different. Nice, almost.

Almost.
Max remembered her first day at Blackwell. She had been so excited to be in Arcadia Bay and even more excited that Mark Jefferson was going to be teaching her. She remembered being greeted by Warren before she even entered the school, and being thankful to have already made a friend before her classes started. Warren gave her a tour around the school and most importantly, he showed her where her class with Mr. Jefferson would be.

At the end of the day, Max was excited for that last class, knowing that a whole group of people were just as interested in photography as she was. Max walked into class, only to see a boy sitting on the table where the last open chair was, next to a girl that Max learned was named “Victoria.” Victoria shot Max a dirty look before sliding past her and sitting in her chair. Max looked at the boy and felt herself getting nervous. He wore a red jacket with a buttoned shirt underneath, black pants, and brown shoes. His look screamed “money,” and Max could smell his expensive cologne. He was handsome, with blue eyes that made her feel like jelly and coiffed, perfect brown hair. Class didn’t start for another five minutes, but Max didn’t want to stand there in the middle of the classroom looking like an idiot while everyone else was sitting with and talking to their friends. Max stepped forward slowly, and suddenly, between looking at his phone and eating a lollipop, he made eye contact with Max, smirked, and motioned to the empty chair. Shyly, Max walked over and took the chair, awed that he even noticed her.

“You new to this school?” the boy asked, eyeing her carefully.

“Yes.”

“Name?”

“Oh, Maxine—Max Caulfield,” Max said. She could kick herself for being so awkward.

“Max Caulfield,” he repeated. He slid off the desk and bit the lollipop in his mouth. He looked her up and down again, seemingly satisfied with the deep red blush growing on her face. “I’ll remember that,” he’d said.

And he did, right up until he confronted her in the parking lot in the other reality. If she’d known what was going on back then, things would be so different now. Chloe would still be alive and who knows? Maybe Max and Nathan would be friends. But Max couldn’t go back to find out, not anymore. She never thought she’d find herself wishing she could.

“I don’t know,” Nathan answered, getting Max out of her own head. He reached for another piece of paper, still trying to calm his hands. “Hi, Nathan. How have you been?”

Max rolled her eyes and leaned closer to him. “Hi Nathan,” she started sarcastically, “how have you been?”

“ Fucking terrible, Max, stupid question.”

Max was annoyed, but she didn’t know what to say to him. He was making her feel so incredibly small. Why am I even here? she thought. If he wanted her here just to use her as a punching bag, she was going to leave. She felt so stupid for having hope that she’d be a part of his road to complete recovery to his various traumas.

But then, Max really looked at him. He barely looked up at her, keeping his eyes on his hands, and his hands busy folding. His eyes were just a little bloodshot, and it made the blue stand out. She could see the veins in his almost transparent skin, and she felt her face turn red as she watched his
hands. The way the skin slid over his boned made her feel strange. His origami-stuff pile was ever growing as he avoided all contact with Max. She inched her fingers forward, trying to test how far she could go; trying to see what it took to get her to notice him. She chuckled at the thought of wanting Nathan to notice her.

Nathan finally looked up at her, annoyed, and pulled the top half of the paper stack up and pushed it over toward her. Max only knew how to make butterflies, so she grabbed a piece of paper and began to fold, working quickly and stacking her butterflies in a pile next to her. As Max worked, she scooted closer to the table, and she saw Nathan ask if he could use Stella’s pen. Max knew he wasn’t allowed to use it, but cautiously, Stella pulled out a pen, leaned close to Nathan and asked him what he’d like her to write. He reached for a piece of blue paper—that perfect, Chloe blue—and made sure that Max wasn’t watching him as he leaned over to Stella’s ear and covered his mouth with his hand. Max pretended not to notice their private conversation, just as she pretended not to notice Stella’s shock as she scribbled on the blue paper. Nathan took the paper back, making sure Max couldn’t see what Stella had written inside, and he watched as Max folded another butterfly.

Once Max had finished her butterfly, a shock went through her body when Nathan tapped her hand. His fingers were agonizingly cold, and Max pulled her hand back.

Slowly, Nathan shrank back and put both of his hands on his beautiful blue paper, and from where he was sitting, leaning back in his chair, pointed to Max’s butterfly. “I can’t make that,” he started. “Show me how.”

“Why are you pointing from so far away?” Max asked.

“I get in trouble if I reach onto your side of the table, dumbass. I only touched your hand because you crossed the line,” he said, pointing again.

In the middle of their table was a dark grey line of duct tape. Max looked around at the other tables, noticing the couples holding hands or inmates patting their kids. Theirs was the only table that had the duct tape line.

Nathan smirked and slid his paper back and leaned once again in his chair. “Only I get the special tape. Apparently, I’m a hitter.’’

Max’s eyes widened and she began to unfold the butterfly she’d started, sliding over to her side of the table. “Good to know,” she said quietly.

“Finish that one first,” Nathan demanded. “Then teach me on a new one.”

To her surprise, Max frowned at him and pointed. “I didn’t come here for you to boss me around, Nathan.”

Nathan smirked again and leaned in, his origami paper almost on her side of the table. “Then why DID you come here?”

Max blushed and leaned back in her chair. She finished folding a green butterfly in silence, then she grabbed a new paper, a dull boring gray. She made sure Nathan was paying attention, and began to fold. He quietly followed what she was going. “Why did you request me?”

Nathan inhaled sharply and his muscles tensed. He looked down so she couldn’t quite see the expression on his face. “I didn’t think you’d ever actually show up, seeing as I requested you four fucking years ago,” he said through clenched teeth.

Max stopped folding and froze completely. She looked over at Stella, who was refusing to make eye
contact. Now Max really was angry. She knew that this was the reason she’d been feeling uneasy because the knot in her stomach began to dissipate. “Nathan, I didn’t—”

“Just keep folding, Max,” Nathan said coldly.

Feeling guilty, Max looked down and kept folding her butterfly, her hands shaking now. She took deep breaths to try to calm herself.

Four fucking years.

Nathan had wanted to see her after only a year in confinement, and she never showed. Kate knew of her request but she, at least, got to tell Nathan that she needed time. But for Max, Nathan was left hanging for four years. She may have inadvertently contributed to his negative mental state. She knew it wasn’t entirely her fault—she’d have to have a serious talk with Stella when it was time for her to go—and for a girl who relied so heavily on the importance of choice, Max hated feeling like she did the wrong thing. It wasn’t exactly in her favor to have a guy who was prone to fits of anger be upset with her.

“Perfect little Max Caulfield is still taking pictures with that old camera, right?” Nathan said suddenly. “Victoria drones on and on about her wedding photos. She told me you guys have gotten pretty close. Barf.”

Max continued folding. She hoped to keep the conversation light. She hoped he wouldn’t get too angry with her. “Uh, sort of. I use a digital camera for that stuff. I edit slow. Still not used to it. She visited me last week.”

“Stop folding so fast, Max,” Nathan demanded. “I know all of that already, she tells me things, remember?”

Max put her paper down, almost finished, and waited until Nathan made eye contact with her. “Why did you request me, Nathan?”

He looked at her. It was a look that Max did NOT like; a look that told her he’d be dodging that question until he was damn well ready to answer it. He reached forward, just up to the tape and used the tips of his fingers to pull at her butterfly. He struggled to get it and Max didn’t help him, hoping in vain that she’d finally get an answer. He flicked his nearly-finished butterfly at her and she rolled her eyes when it hit her bosom and Nathan laughed. Defeated, Max grabbed his butterfly and finished showing him how to fold. She went to give the butterfly back to him and he held up his hand. “That one’s for you. Take it home.”

Max glanced at Stella, who seemed completely indifferent. Max didn’t forget that Nathan had had Stella write something in this butterfly, but it must not have been threatening, so Stella was going to let it fly. Max added the dull gray butterfly to her stack as Nathan got busy folding something else. She put the blue butterfly in her back pocket, carefully folded in half and flattened it so that she wouldn’t mangle what was written inside.

She looked back down at Nathan’s hands, shaking again. “How does it feel,” Nathan started angrily, “to be a household name?”

“I’m not,” Max said humbly. “I just take pictures, that’s all.”

“BULLSHIT,” Nathan said suddenly, ripping the paper he’d been folding. He frantically grabbed another paper and tried to fold, but he ripped it again. Paper after paper ripped as Nathan struggled to fold, his pile of failures growing larger than his cranes, roses, and hats. After all the paper was either
mangled or folded, he went under the table and pulled an old, wrinkled pamphlet out of his outfit pocket. On the pamphlet was a picture of Max with a bunch of people gathered around her picture of Chloe’s coffin at her very first art exposition. Everything in the Chase Space was covered with Max’s art, and there she was, smiling wryly, holding Victoria’s hand tightly. The thing was, every single face was covered with a sharpied black circle. Nathan had only drawn a circle around Victoria’s head. The circle was only partially filled in, as if he wanted to blot her out, too, but he stopped short, and the word “sorry” was scribbled near her head.

“Where did you—”

“Victoria! Victoria who visits me all the time! Who calls me all the time,” Nathan wailed. “You were holding her HAND. I can’t believe SHE held your hand. If she knew you went all this time without seeing me, she’d tear your shit outta the gallery by herself.”

“I didn’t know you requested me,” Max defended, her panic getting the better of her. Had she known he’d requested her so long ago, she’d have had no qualms about visiting him. It would’ve been easier to sympathize had everything been fresh. “I only found out about it a week ago—”

“You could have come anytime,” Nathan said, jabbing his finger on the table so hard it turned red. “But you didn’t. You took pictures and lived your dream and me—I got put in here to rot!” he cried. “You, Victoria—everyone I cared about moved away and I’m stuck here. Kristine…Kristine went to Spain, London, to Africa, and I got put in here, trying to convince myself that Tori’s obligatory visits were worth living for. She’s gonna forget about me—just like you’ve been trying to. But you can’t. I won’t let you. I won’t let any of you forget I’m in here while you’re out living your newfound rich-girl life. You have EVERYTHING, and you always, always fucking did. Parents, friends who genuinely liked you, and now you have money and status, too. You…you get to see Victoria all the time. Whenever. Every day, if you wanted to. You get to rub her growing belly. You’re trying to take my place!”

“That’s not true!” Max shouted, earning a worried glance from Stella. “When Victoria visited me last week, we talked about you, Nathan, only you—how much she loves you and misses you. She won’t forget about you, Nathan.”

“Oh, what, so you’re an expert on Victoria, now?” Nathan scoffed. “You don’t know her and you don’t know SHIT, Max. All you know how to do is make yourself fit. You think you understand this life. No, I do, and look where it got me. You just keep stuffing yourself where you don’t belong—you aren’t like me or Victoria. Fuck, the only thing that made us similar was that our best friends were killed and, ha, I was the common factor in their deaths. I was the MONSTER who killed them!”

Max didn’t know what to say. Nathan was all riled up, leaning onto the table, not crossing the tape while Max sat in her chair, as far back as she could. “What do you want from me, Nathan?”

Nathan jabbed his finger onto the table once more. “I want you to be real, Max Caulfield. I want you to say one fucking thing that wasn’t just a—a piece you stole from someone else. Prove you’re not just some hole to fill. Tell me that you’re not the same type of piece of shit rich asshole as—”

“I’m the rich asshole?” Max started, standing up. “I’m not you, Nathan Prescott. And my relationship with Victoria has NOTHING to do with you. Unlike you—you, who got a freebie into the Chase Space because he had connections, I worked my ASS off for recognition. I didn’t have a rich daddy whose money fueled my drug habit—”

“Shut up, Max—”
“Who got me everything I ever wanted—”

“I said shut—”

“And made sure I never got in trouble. I take responsibility for the things I’ve done,” Max yelled. “I put you in here, and I own that. EVERY. FUCKING. DAY. And I don’t have it all. Because the one hole I’ve ever had can’t be filled because of you, Nathan. Because you took away my best friend!”

“WHO YOU HADN’T TALKED TO IN FIVE FUCKING YEARS! Yeah, I knew about that! Why? Cause she told me. She used to bitch all the time about how you completely forgot about her and how fucking lonely you made her feel. But that’s okay, you just replaced her with Warren. And when you were done with that fucking loser, you had Brooke, then Daniel, then slithered your way to Victoria. You have everything! You get to see the twinkle in Tori’s eyes when she holds her perfect little girl while I only get to see it through pictures and phone calls. YOU’RE A SELFISH BITCH, MAX!” Nathan had said it with such ferocity, his face was red and Max could clearly see the blue veins in his neck. And before Max had the chance to really react and retort, Nathan lunged forward over the table and grabbed at her neck.

This scene was all too familiar. It was just like that fateful Monday, when Max had first used her powers to save Chloe. God, she could kick herself. She’d been so desperate to fit in and not cause a scene that she didn’t tell Principle Wells that Nathan had had a gun. Why was Nathan even so angry, back then? She covered his ass and wanted nothing more to do with that shitty situation. But he was so persistent on knowing what she’d seen and heard, even going so far as to pushing Warren away so that only he had her attention.

And just like that fateful Monday, Max pushed Nathan away, scratching his face before she fell to the ground. He was already being detained while Stella ran over to Max to check if she was okay. Max stood, wide-eyed, wishing she could take it all back, and out of instinct, she held up her hand, trying to fix this. Things went blurry for a moment as she heard Nathan shout, “Let me go, let me go!” Then, Max grabbed her head and noticed three drops of blood on the floor. She rubbed her bloody nose, with her eyes wide, and she looked up at Nathan again.

“Let me go, let me go!” he whined. Max swore he’d said it just like that before, but maybe he had just been repeating himself. “You should never have come back here, Max!” he shouted. His tone softened. “I shouldn’t…I shouldn’t have let you. It’s all my fault. All my fault! Go home, Max Caulfield!” A rather large officer was on Nathan now, holding him down, trying to calm Nathan’s contracting body. “I’m sorry!” Nathan screamed, his face buried in tile. “I’m sorry!”

When Max met eyes with Nathan, she forced them closed and looked away. She really, really messed this one up. Stella grabbed a handkerchief out of her pocket and held it to Max’s nose and sat her down at the table.

“I am so, so sorry, Max,” Stella started. “I had no idea something like this would happen.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about his request, Stella?” Max asked sternly.

Stella looked away from Max, fully of guilt. “I should have told you, but I had a very good reason not to. I will call you tonight. I have to calm Nathan right now. God knows those brutes are just going to slam him against the wall again. It’d be best for you to go back to wherever you are staying.”

But once Max checked out of the facility, she didn’t go back to her hotel. No, she had somewhere much more pressing, someone far more important to see. It was time to come clean.
Max frantically knocked on the door, still holding Stella’s handkerchief to her nose. She was antsy and nervous, but she knew that this was something she had to do. She looked down at her feet, shifting in her not-so-comfortable boots, and she pulled rubbed her neck.

“Max?” Joyce asked upon answering the door, surprised. “Wasn’t expecting you to be back so soon!”

“Is that Max?” David called. Max could hear him stand up. He walked over to the door and stood smiling with Joyce.

Max was even more scared, now. She knew David was going to be angry and he was probably going to ban her from the house. Max began to cry. “I…I didn’t come back here just to visit,” she sobbed. She wiped her tears as she tried to speak. “I got a visitation request from Arcadia Bay Correctional Facility.”

“Was it that prick Jefferson? I banned him from requesting you, permanently. Did he do something to you?” David asked. He was tense now, angry.

“What?” Max asked between tears. “How? How could you have—”

“I work head of security, there. Took the day off to go fishing.”

“No, no, it wasn’t him,” Max wailed. “I don’t want you guys to hate me!”

Joyce held onto Max’s shoulders, trying to calm her down. “Max, you are our family, there’s no way we could hate you. What happened?”

Max continued crying, trying to catch her breath. “I’m responsible for Chloe’s death. I’m the one who let her die.”

After Joyce calmed Max down, she sat situated with a cup of coffee, trying to ease her crazy nerves. She was rocking back and forth, trying to figure out what she was going to say.

“Maxine Caulfield, what has gotten into you?” Joyce asked. “How could you have possibly been responsible for Chloe’s death?”

Max held her breath. She didn’t mean to reveal that much. She’d been trying to figure out how to tell them she was the one who let Chloe die but she felt like it was a millennia too soon for that. “I…I didn’t talk to her. I didn’t text her or call her or do anything for five years. I completely ignored the part of my life that was here.” Max set her cup onto the table and looked up at the ceiling. “If only I’d talked to her. Maybe she wouldn’t have been struggling so badly.”

“Jesus, Max, what happened to your neck?” David asked.

Immediately, Max’s hand flew to her neck. She hadn’t had a chance to look in her mirror since leaving and there must have been a bruise on her neck. She cursed herself, even though it wasn’t her fault she bruised so easily. She took a deep breath. “I didn’t come here for just a surprise visit,” Max admitted. “I…I got a visitation request from Nathan Prescott. I came to visit him.”

To Max’s surprise, both Joyce and David let out a sigh of relief. “Max,” Joyce started. “Don’t scare us like that. Of course we wouldn’t be mad at you for something like that. I think it’s…normal to
want to face him. Hell, even I had to so I could get my own closure.”

Max’s eyes widened. “You visited him? Did you, David?”

“Course I did,” David answered. “I work there, had to see him every day. Might as well make it pleasant.”

Max turned her attention back to Joyce. The years after Chloe’s death had been kind to her. She wore her long hair in a low ponytail that sat thoughtfully over her left shoulder. She had no make-up on her face save for the slight gleam of chapstick on her lips. Joyce was a pretty woman, and Max could see little pieces of Chloe in her. Max’s eyes filled with tears. She missed Chloe. She’d do anything to relive that last week she’d spent with Chloe because her memories of it weren’t enough. Max wondered if Joyce saw the same pieces Max saw, and she wondered how she coped every day with losing a husband, then a daughter. “How…” Max started, letting her tears fall. Her breath was hitched and her eyes burned. “H-how did you do it?” she asked. Her bruised neck suddenly hurt. She could feel the warmth of the bullet necklace on her chest.

Joyce sighed and took Max’s coffee out of her hands and set it on the table. She held Max’s hands tightly and took a slow, deep breath. “I went to see him so that I could try to forgive him, because David and I got to say goodbye to Chloe the day she died.”

“What?”

“I know how crazy it sounds,” David cut in. “But it’s true. We made…peace with losing our daughter.”

“The day before she died, things were our own hellish normal,” Joyce laughed slightly. “She and I fought, she and David fought, and we all went to bed with no ‘I love yous,’ no ‘I’m sorrys,’ as we often did. But the next morning, everything was totally different.”

“I was suspicious, as usual,” David said, joining Joyce on the couch. “She was being so nice—not her forced ‘I-need-money’ nice, genuinely nice. We all sat and ate breakfast together, and for the first time, we said our ‘sorrys’ and ‘I love yous.’”

“I remember how happy she was that day. She’d said she’d heard from you and that you talked on the phone for so long she could have sworn a week went by in a single night. What was weird was that I had this sense of impending doom, but she made me feel like everything would be okay. She kissed David goodbye, and right before I left, she kissed me, too, told me she loved me, and told me never to forget her. And that was the last time I saw her alive.”

Max was completely frozen. Did Chloe have residual memories from their week together? How was that possible? Was there some sort of bleeding effect between the timelines or was this just another parting gift from the universe? Overcome, Max began to cry again. She covered her face with her hands. She wasn’t sad this time, no. She was happy. Relieved. Chloe was put back into that reality and still went through with her death. She could have left town, not gone to the school, or found some way to escape the fate that Max had chosen for her. Instead, she went through with it and saved everyone. She chose to be the hero. “Sorry,” Max said. She tried to wipe her tears but they just kept falling. “I’m sorry,” she went on.

“When I went to visit Nathan, I told him all this,” Joyce went on, handling Max some tissue. “And he told me how sorry he was, how horrible a person he was, how he deserved to rot in jail forever. And the moment my anger was gone, all I could feel was pity. Then I knew I was ready to forgive him—but not after the first visit, hell no.”
David laughed. “I think it ended up being visit thirteen.”

Joyce rolled her eyes and turned her attention back to Max, who had calmed herself a bit. “Max, if it takes seeing that boy to give you closure, then I say to see him as much as you can until you free from the horror of watching your best friend pass away.”

Max opened the door to her hotel room, setting all her junk down before flopping and crashing down on her bed. She looked up at the ceiling, making pictures with its patterns, trying her damnedest not to think about the day. Everything was just as bizarre as it had been that fateful October week five years ago. Everything had happened similarly with that day. A chat with Victoria, spat with Brooke, a fight with Nathan, all ending an afternoon at Chloe’s. Nothing was fitting as well as it used to, though. And Nathan’s anger with her made her upset. Sure, before, when she could rewind, Max had no regrets about using the things she’d heard to try to fit in—but how could Nathan have possibly known about that? And him screaming about her having everything was totally irrational. She worked her ass off flying red eye after red eye, staying up all night editing, and shaking the hands of people who’d told her that her work was garbage and having to do so with a smile. Nathan was probably just angry because he saw her success everywhere. As if he knew what that felt like, working for success.

Max did feel bad about getting in his face during her visit, but she knew he needed to hear it. He was allowed to be as angry as he wanted about how his life had gone, but he had no right to take it out on her. He was suffering, but he wasn’t the only one. But Max no doubt added to his suffering. It still felt like all she did was mess things up even after all these years.

Max sighed and, ignoring her beeping phone, went to the bathroom of her suite. She turned on her light and spooked herself once she saw how dark the bruises on her neck had already gotten. There were shades of blue and purple and a clear pattern of painful finger-shapes that just made her feel embarrassed. No doubt Brooke and Victoria were going to think they were hickeys and that she’d flown all the way back to Arcadia Bay for a booty call. *Maybe that’s just wishful thinking*, Max thought as she laughed. Nathan was probably going to tell Victoria everything and once Brooke saw that Nathan-shaped handprint on her neck, she was gonna go all mom-mode and forbid Max from leaving the house, as well as sending her home without dinner.

Max ran a washcloth under some cold water and held it against her neck in attempt to ease the pain. She took off her blouse and lounged around in her pants and undershirt until she remembered the blue origami butterfly in her pocket. Max took off her pants, quickly throwing on her pajama bottoms from that morning. She pulled the butterfly out, holding the washcloth between her neck and shoulder and unfolded the butterfly carefully with both hands.

As Max undid the final fold, her phone began to ring. Max dropped the washcloth on the nearby dresser and went to answer her hone. She continued to look at what was written on the butterfly and lost her breath as she realized what she was seeing. There were four things written: first, there was the word “truth,” followed by the code to the Dark Room, 542. Max tried to get the image of Kate and Rachel’s folders out of her head as she tried to push through and look at the rest of the paper. Next, was a month-day date that Max recognized but couldn’t place—11/14—and finally there were the words, “I’m sorry” on the bottom. Max quickly put the note down and looked at her ringing phone, not recognizing the number. It was local. She pressed the screen and answered.

“Hello, this is Maxine Caulfield, who may I ask is calling?”

“Maxine? No, you’re Max Teller, riding your bike back through Arcadia Bay without coming to see me!” the other line said.
Max pulled her phone away from her face and squinted at it for a moment. She put it back to her ear a second later and asked, “Who is this?”

“Maxwell Silver Hammer, you know who this is.”

“Warren!” Max exclaimed. “How…why didn’t I recognize the number?”

Warren laughed. Max missed that laugh. They’d had a group chat going with their whole gang, but Max hadn’t had a personal phone call with someone other than her parents in a long time. “It was supposed to be a surprise-ish thing, but Stella and I are all moved in to our place! This is our home number. We wanted to see if you’re free Wednesday night to come to our housewarming.”

Max laughed. “Of course, and I’d be happy to take a few picture with my newly repaired camera.” As if by memory, Max reached for that camera and took a selfie, smiling, of her on the phone with Warren. It was a nice feeling. Max usually got anxious when people took her picture, especially with being drugged as a forced subject. But she couldn’t go to therapy for it—because she was the only one who remember it. She had to deal with it all on her own. When people took her picture without her consent, it sent her straight into a panic attack, ones that got so bad, she couldn’t even take her own picture. But she did today. And she was very happy. She was making progress.

“How’s breakfast with Stella and I Tuesday morning?”

“It’s a plan!” Max smiled. Max waited for Warren to respond, but she only heard a bunch of rustling until Stella’s voice came through the speaker.

“Sorry, Max, this was supposed to be a business-related call. I want to apologize for Nathan’s behavior today. If I had known he’d react the way he did, I would have pushed his visitation request farther,” Stella said. “How is your neck?”

Max was distracted, looking at her developing Polaroid. “Hm? Right! Yeah, I’m fine, my neck is fine. Stella, why did you push back Nathan’s request to see me?”

Stella sighed. Max heard her mumble something Warren, followed by the closing of a door. “Max, you have to understand, Nathan is very, very ill. We’ve spent years trying to build him back up, to heal the damage his and Mr. Jefferson had caused, as well as managing his depression and Borderline Personality Disorder. Nathan was aware of his request being denied; we felt he just wasn’t ready to see you. But, recently, he’s been belligerent with the staff as well as threatening suicide. We know we’re not supposed to cater to his needs specifically, but we figured it couldn’t hurt for him to see you. But after his outburst today, we were able to have a breakthrough therapy session. The reason he wants to see you so badly, as well as Victoria, and possibly the late Rachel Amber, is because he considers you all his FPs.”

“FP?” Max repeated.

“A Favorite Person. It’s a symptom of Borderline Personality Disorder. Nathan picks favorites among his friends, usually people who make him feel loved and safe, and people he has the most emotional dependence on. I found it odd because the two of you weren’t even remotely friendly during our time at Blackwell. But I wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt by allowing you to visit and it ended up being very good for him. So Max, I have a very big favor to ask of you, and I want to remind you that you are not obligated to agree.”

Max knew where this was going. Before Max could ask any questions, she heard a knock on her door. She knew she’d put the do-not-disturb tab on her door handle, so she shouldn’t have been bothered, especially not at nine pm. She made her way to the door as Stella began again.
“Would you be willing to visit Nathan periodically, perhaps twice a month, in hopes to help with his therapy? Your flight and stay will be paid for.”

“Who’s paying for it?” Max asked. There was another knock at the door. Max covered the phone’s receiver and yelled to the door, “Who is it?” There was no answer.

“Your flight and stay will be paid for,” Stella repeated.

“What if I get attacked again?” Max asked. Another knock at the door. “Just a second!” Max shouted.

“Nathan has agreed to be restrained until we are sure he’s ready to be without them,” Stella said.

There was another knock at the door. Max rolled her eyes and shouted, “Give me a minute!” She put her cell between her ear and shoulder while she stupidly opened the door without checking to see who it was. Max’s breath stopped completely.

“Maxine Caulfield?” he said.

Max stood wide eyed, completely frozen. “Stella,” she said softly, gripping her phone. “I’m going to have to call you back. You’ll have my answer by end-of-day tomorrow.” Max hung up the phone. “What are you doing here?”

He sighed. “Maxine Caulfield, I need your help,” he coughed out. “I need you to keep seeing my son.”
Max backed away, tripping slightly over one of her shoes on the floor. “Don’t come any closer to me. Stay by the fucking door.”

Carefully, Sean Prescott stepped into the room, closing the door behind him. Heeding Max, he stayed where he was.

Max backed up until she was by her bed. She felt like an idiot. In her hurry to put a safe distance between them, she carelessly allowed him to block her only exit. Her hotel room was on the seventh floor, so going out the window wasn’t an option for escape. She stayed by her bed, hand on her phone, and was still trying to wrap her head around Sean Prescott being in her hotel room. He was a grade-A asshole. Sure, he owned the hotel she was staying at—shit, he owned EVERYTHING in Arcadia Bay—but that didn’t mean he was allowed to use his power to invade her privacy. Not to mention he treated Nathan like an unwanted animal.

Nathan was not Sean Prescott’s son, he was his heir. He was a placeholder who’d one day be sitting on the Prescott throne, with riches for miles and not a single drop of true happiness. And Sean Prescott was not a father: he was a business man. He did what he could to stay on top, and Nathan had been his most powerful asset until he was held on two counts of manslaughter and given fifteen years. He’d have a chance at parole at seven, which was still two years away. And now Nathan was seemingly useful to him again because Max had gone sparked a good therapy session. Nathan needed real therapy a long time ago—and a therapist who cared that he was hurting, not one that stuck around so he could selfishly gather money on a mentally ill teenager.

“Please,” Sean Prescott breathed. “Please keep seeing my son.”
“Empty your pockets,” Max said suddenly. “Put everything in them on the floor.”

“Maxine, I haven’t come here to——”

“My testimony put your son in prison, I’m not taking any chances! Empty your pockets, now!”

Sean Prescott sighed and slowly began to empty his pockets. On the floor went a cellphone, a wallet, and a set of keys, just one for a car and one for a house. He threw a pack of gum out of his brown leather jacket onto the floor before taking it off and throwing it to the ground as well. He pulled an inhaler out of the back pocket of his black slacks and showed it to her, but he didn’t throw it to the ground. Max allowed it. “What do you want?” she asked intently.

“I told you,” Sean Prescott breathed, his voice cracking. “I need you to keep seeing my son. He’s sick. Dr. Hill told me they’d had a breakthrough therapy session after you’d visited him today. Please. I only want to see my son healthy.”

Max was angry. So Stella spilled the beans. It was a total invasion of privacy, Max thought, but she couldn’t exactly be angry with her. They were in a public place, and it was probably her job to report on Nathan’s condition. But the fact that Sean Prescott took it upon himself to access a guest list in one of his many hotels in order to harass Max during what she was trying to convince herself was a vacation made Max more uneasy than she was before. But since she couldn’t really blame Stella—who was just doing her job—Max was going to cast her bitterness onto him. She made a mental note to ask Stella for discretion for future visits—if there were even going to be future visits.

“He attacked me,” Max said. “I got angry and probably provoked him, but now I know I won’t be allowed to defend myself if he insults me. If you want to track his progress, visit him yourself.”

Sean Prescott stepped forward, frustrated, and Max lunged for her bag, which contained her taser. She bought it just to be cautious, never thinking she’d have to use it. She held it up in front of her, and Sean Prescott took a step back. Max took her finger off of the button, but she kept the taser in her hand. “You stay right there, Sean Prescott.”

He nodded and leaned back against the door. He slid down the door and hung his head in his hands. “He refuses to see me. I’m not even allowed on the premises—David Madsen made sure of that when he took over security there. He even had the audacity, the utter gall to say that he’d been more of a father to my son than I ever was.”

“Oh, eat a dick,” Max said furiously. “A ‘best son’ certificate is hardly nurturing.”

“I…I haven’t been good to him,” Sean Prescott admitted. “But I love my boy. I miss my boy. I haven’t seen him since the trial. I haven’t seen my son in five years.”

Max let go of her taser and the tenseness left her body. She remembered the trial. It, aside from giving Chloe that final goodbye kiss and leaving her to die, was the worst moment of her life.

She had slept on Joyce’s couch, and woke up very, very disoriented. She’d been trying to sleep, trying to keep it together, but she couldn’t. Joyce was there, rubbing Max’s head. She whispered that breakfast was on the table, and that her outfit was hanging in the bathroom upstairs, and she could change in the master bedroom. Max forced herself up, took a few bites just to satisfy Joyce, showered, got dressed, and soon she was on her way to Nathan’s and Mark Jefferson’s joint trial. She was terrified as she passed building after building in the front seat of Chloe’s beat up car. She knew she was going to have to testify as a key witness in Chloe’s murder, but because her name was found on a binder, she was told to be prepared to be questioned by Jefferson’s lawyer. The thing
was, Max was going to have a reaction when she saw him. No one knew about her time in the dark room, so she wouldn’t be able to explain why Mark Jefferson filled her with such dread. It wasn’t easy to get therapy for an event that didn’t happen in the current reality.

Max did her best to be strong. She looked down at her feet as she entered the courtroom, knowing that all eyes were on her. She held her breath—maybe to slow her heartbeat, maybe to stop her tears, she didn’t know. She wanted something to focus on—anything to stop her eyes from wandering to Mark Jefferson, who was sitting across the room.

Jefferson’s lawyer smirked. This was the final day of the trial, the only day Max was scheduled to appear.

“Your Honor, I’d like to call Maxine Caulfield to the stand.”

The judge nodded and waved her hand over to where Max was sitting. Max felt blood freeze in her veins. She didn’t want this. She knew this was going to happen; she’d preparing for this for a month—but know it didn’t like enough time. She never had enough time for anything.

“Maxine Caulfield, is it true that your late friend was a drug addict?” Jefferson’s lawyer asked.

Everything felt like it was going in slow motion. Joyce was trying to be strong, gripping a tissue so tightly her hands looked like they might burst. David was sitting, visibly angry, trying to comfort her, holding her red hands. Nathan sat on the other side of the room, surrounded by officers, looking to the ground as Victoria looked at him solemnly. Max avoided stares, took a deep breath, and forced herself to look at Mr. Jefferson. She looked past his lawyer, right at him, growing sick as he licked his lips once their eyes met. Max turned her attention back to the lawyer.

“I wouldn’t know, but I don’t see what that has to do with your client drugging and kidnapping thirty-plus teenage girls.”

“Please keep your questions relevant to the case, Mr. Sanders,” Judge Harper warned. “Continue.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Mr. Sanders said. “Max Caulfield, what is your relationship with Mark Jefferson?”

“Teacher and student, nothing more.”

“Then why was there a binder with your name on it?”

Max’s brows furrowed. “Obviously, I was his next victim. He pestered me about submitting my photo to the Everyday Heroes contest. He did do that with any other student. Plus if he chose my photo, it’d mean I’d have to be alone with him.”

“Mr. Sanders, it is common knowledge that Ms. Caulfield was to be your client’s next victim—your client admitted to that onc3e he was interrogated during his initial arrest.”

Jefferson’s lawyer cleared his throat. “No further questions.”

Before Max could leave the stand, Nathan’s lawyer raised her hand. “Your Honor, I’d like to question the witness.”

“I’ll allow it,” Judge Harper began, “but I’ll remind you. Miss Trent, not to waste the court’s time. Keep your questions pertinent to the case.”
Miss Trent left her seat and walked over near Max. “Miss Caulfield, your late friend’s toxicology report showed enough THC in her system to prove she had used marijuana sometime that morning. Ms. Price was known to be rude and had had run-ins with the police before, as well as being expelled from Blackwell. I also seem to remember a story of her coercing you to drink her mother’s wine when you were only children. Wouldn’t you agree that Chloe’s recklessness had a part to play in her death?”

Max was ready to climb over the stand and pop Camilla Trent in her smug plastic face. She and Sean Prescott had been pulling this shit all along. They had control of all major news stations and were trying to claim that Chloe’s death was her own fault.

“We were twelve when that happened,” Max started, “and twelve-year-olds are curious, not reckless. But I’m sure you’d agree that reckless as Chloe was, it’s far more reckless to allow a mentally-ill nineteen-year-old to bring a gun to school. Chloe was dealing with the death of her father and my lack of communication. You don’t get to blame this on her,” Max said. She hadn’t noticed at first, but Max had begun to cry. She wiped her tears and tried to catch her breath, but it was no use. Her frustration had gotten the better of her.

“Ten minute recess,” said Judge Harper suddenly.

The whole trial ended up making Max feel sicker than she had when she first arrived. She was called to the stand a second time, and questioned more extensively about Mark Jefferson.

*Did Mark Jefferson every exhibit any odd behaviors?*

*Did he ever proposition you for sex or come on to you in any other way?*

*Did he ever mention the relationship he had with Nathan Prescott?*

*Was there mention of a relationship with Rachel Amber or Sean Prescott?*

*Did he have a sexual relationship with Kate Marsh?*

Max did her best to answer these questions objectively, but she couldn’t help but to slide in a snide remark here and there because she wanted to make it clear that any admiration she had for Mark Jefferson had completely dissipated.

But once Mark Jefferson was called to the stand, everything, somehow, became exponentially worse.

“Why did you choose my client to help with your illegal exploits?” Miss Trent asked, slowly pacing the courtroom in four-inch Louboutin heels.

Mark Jefferson laughed. “I chose him because it was easy. An unhinged rich boy in need of a friend? Controlling him and his funds was so easy it was almost ridiculous,” he laughed. He turned to face Sean Prescott, who was fuming in his seat. “It was easy to be his father because he felt like he didn’t have.”

“So you admit you manipulated my client in order to practice mischief?”

Mark Jefferson laughed again. “For the most part, but it wasn’t all me. When it came to Max, he was willing to do *anything* to get closer to her—it interfered with my work. So I went about getting her on my own and I was angry when he refused to help me get to her my way. We had a falling out, but that didn’t stop me. It won’t stop me.”
Max scoot back in her bench, suddenly feeling like he was far too close to her.

“I still want to see her vulnerable. Bound. Absolutely desperate. She is the perfect subject and I will never stop trying to get my shot—and nobody will get in my way.”

Before Max or anyone could speak again, she stood up from her bench, unable to breathe, and fell to the ground, unconscious.

That was the last thing she remembered from the trial.

*                                                          *                                                          *

“You don’t deserve to see him,” Max said suddenly. “You’ve spent your whole time on this earth being garbage.” She held up her taser again. To this day, she still couldn’t believe the lengths Sean Prescott went to in order to paint Nathan as someone innocent. He payed off the police, and news stations after expunging Nathan’s criminal record, as well as all the trouble on his records at school. Then, he made sure Chloe was completely demonized, claiming that she was a broke junkie who threatened Nathan with a gun so that he’d fuel her drug habit. Obviously evidence would prove that Chloe never touched the gun and, but that’d take time, and the damage to Chloe’s reputation would be done. But Max revealed herself as a key witness with no reason to lie, as in this reality she hadn’t spoken to or seen Chloe in five years. With that, she completely ruined Sean Prescott’s credibility. Sean Prescott was an impossibly rich recluse, now. “You have no right to ask me for favors! Not after the hoops you jumped to rake Chloe over the coals. How DARE you ask anything of me!”

“Then don’t do it for me!” Sean Prescott shouted, his breath hitching. He began to cough and choke, searching himself for his inhaler. He stood up and inhaled his medicine. “I am not asking for you to reshape an heir, Maxine Caulfield, I am asking you to save my son. I am not asking for your forgiveness—”

“You will NEVER have my forgiveness,” Max interrupted. “Ever.”

“I understand that,” Sean Prescott said between coughs. “Please, do this for my son. Help my precious boy be…be the young man I should have always let him be.” Sean Prescott continued to cough violently, eventually standing and getting himself a glass of water in the small kitchen-esque area by the door.

“What’s wrong with you?” Max asked.

Sean Prescott continued to cough until small flecks of red were sprinkled around the rim of his glass. “I am dying. I have been for years. But money puts death at bay—most of the time, it makes you immortal. But I don’t have that long. I don’t have long at all. Between six months and a year.”

“If you’re trying to garner sympathy, you don’t have it,” Max said coldly. Nathan’s whole family would probably be freed if Sean Prescott were to…go away.

Sean Prescott forced a laugh. “I am well aware. But please, Maxine. Everything will be paid for. First class plane rides—perhaps it’d even be better to use the private family jet, it keeps the riff-raff out. You can stay here, though with the quality of this garbage hotel I can’t imagine why you would want to. You can stay with Kristine at the hilltop house. Nathan’s room is available, though I’m sure you’d be more comfortable in the guest room.”

Max held her head and rubbed it. She couldn’t believe all of this was happening. First Stella randomly calls her, Victoria comes by and they have an odd, Nathan-based heart-to-heart, then Max actually goes and SEES Nathan, and the visit is alright just up until the end when he completely lost
control. What could Max even do? Sean Prescott was a dying man, hoping to use Max to absolve him of his guilt before he died. Was he planning on using Max in order to shape Nathan again or was his concern for his jailed son genuine? He could have asked anyone to help Nathan—did he know that Nathan considered Max a Favorite Person?

And why the hell was SHE considered a Favorite Person, anyway? They only time Max showed any sort of concern for him was in the courtroom, and even then she put him in jail. There was the first day of school, though. Max would never admit it, but that odd encounter sparked a crush on Nathan—but she was only eighteen. She had a thing for him, for Warren, hell, even for Dana Ward back before she realized she was interested in men and women. She wrote them all off as crushes. Maybe Nathan’s flirting that day was where her unknown role as a “Favorite Person” began. Maybe his weird promise to remember her held therapeutic meaning for him. But then…why? Why was he so mean to her from then on? Why did he go out of his way to torment her?

Then Max realized something. Everything he had done was because she had tried so hard to stay away from him. She didn’t think it was okay that he grabbed her neck, that he beat up Warren, or that he borderline stalked her—those things were wrong and he’d have to answer to them—but Max suddenly found comfort in finally knowing why he did those things. Max was a Favorite Person who actively went out of her way to do the right thing, and now it was time to do what she believed was the right thing again. Max could say no—there was nothing wrong with her walking away from this. She didn’t have to be there if she didn’t want to be—she didn’t sign up for this. But, in her heart, Max felt like she owed him one. She could have easily went through with her memory and just let Chloe get hit by the train that day they went to the junkyard—but instead, she let Nathan be branded a murderer. And maybe…maybe it was time to come clean. Maybe in helping Nathan, she could finally forgive herself.

“Please,” Sean Prescott coughed. He looked up at Max, and she could see Nathan in him. He didn’t look all that much like his father, but the way Sean Prescott spoke, the way he whined when he begged, the way his eyes squinted when he cried, it was the same way Nathan did it. Max believed Sean Prescott wouldn’t have come to her unless he was truly desperate. Max sighed to herself. Chloe got to do the right thing and her sacrifice saved the whole town. Maybe it was time for Max to be a hero, too.

“I’ll do it—”

“Oh, Maxine,” Sean Prescott started. “You won’t regret this, I promise you that. Thank you, thank you, a million times thank you.” He stood up. “I can hardly—”

“I will do this only if all of my conditions are met. Sit down,” Max said. “One, you pay for everything BUT I am staying here. I don’t want to be any closer to you than I have to.”

“I understand. But I don’t live with Kristine at the hilltop house,” Sean said. He looked around on the floor until he found a pen that had probably fallen out of Max’s purse when she first came back to the hotel. He picked up the pack of gum he’d throw on the floor and began to write. “Here is the address to the hilltop house, along with Kristine’s phone number. If you change your mind.” Sean Prescott disregarded Max’s protests and threw the pack of gum near her, onto the bed. “What else?”

“Stella tells you Nathan’s progress and that’s it. You don’t talk to me or ask my anything—everything, even making a visitation schedule will go through my assistant, Annie, to be approved by me. You don’t get to know what Nathan and I talk about; you only get updates on his health. You’ve already invaded my privacy by…by being here, and that’s not going to happen again.”

“Deal,” Sean Prescott said. He stood excitedly and walked closer to Max, who held her taser up in defense. “Maxine, how can I possibly thank you? Money? I could put in a good word, anywhere,
if you like.”

“I have money. Lots of it. Helping Nathan will be its own reward. And it’s Max, never Maxine. For now, you need to go. I’ve had enough of this family for one day,” Max replied.

Sean Prescott only nodded, bowing his head over and over before he finally left the room. Once Max was sure he was gone, she ran over to the door, locking it and putting the chain on. She slowly walked across the room and plopped down on her bed, hearing the crunch of paper underneath her behind. How she managed to get into these weird situations was beyond her, but the universe must have had a very good reason to keep them coming. There had to be a reason that it all kept coming back to her. Maybe she had a special place in the universe—maybe it trusted her to make the tough the decisions. Maybe the more she made, the easier things would be for someone else. She laughed at the thought. In the long run, none of her choices meant anything.

Still in her bed, Max lifted her hips and held the crumpled remains of her opened butterfly up to her face. She knew she recognized the four bottom numbers, but she still couldn’t think of where. She couldn’t just call Nathan and ask him what the hell his cryptic butterfly meant, so she went to her next best option. Max dialed the number on her cellphone, put it on speaker, then set it on her stomach as she waited for an answer.

“Hello?” she answered sleepily.

“Hey, sorry, did I wake you?”

“No really,” Victoria answered with a laughed. “Been in and out for the last hour while Josh is watching Bladerunner. What’s up? How was your day?”

“Eventful,” Max laughed. “I won’t keep you long, I just have a question. Does the date eleven-fourteen mean anything to you?”

“Yes, and it should mean something to you, too, because November fourteenth is my birthday.”

Max was puzzled. Why would Nathan pair the code for the dark room with Victoria’s birthday? Did she know something about the dark room? If she did, how did she get away with knowing about it this whole time?

“Oh!” Victoria said suddenly. “I’ve got news. Would you like to know the sex of the baby?”

“Um, yes!” Max said, setting the paper aside. She took her phone off speaker. “Boy? No, girl. Nnnnno, no, it has to be a boy.”

Victoria laughed. “The doctor suggested that I shop pink.”

“A girl!” Max squealed excitedly.

“Yes, a girl. Mother’s gonna have a field day with that one,” Victoria said, probably rolling her eyes.

Max laughed, remembering what Victoria was talking about. She’d spent the night at Victoria’s house. It was soon after graduation, way after the trial, and Max’s relationship with Victoria had gotten very, very close.

Victoria and her mom loved each other, maybe really deep down, but they were always bickering about something or other. The only time one of their fights had gotten really bad was when Vivian
Chase claimed she knew Nathan was bad news from the start—as if she could have possibly known what was going on. They’d gotten into a fight that night, with Victoria claiming Vivian didn’t know what she was talking about. Max believed Vivian brought it up to show that she was current and trying to shove her years of neglecting Victoria under the rug. It just ended up looking like she wanted to be the center of attention—and Victoria was not cool with it.

“I’m not being disrespectful, mother, I’m just saying that you’re wrong about Nathan,” Victoria had said.

“I’m wrong? Oh please, that boy has always had a screw loose.”

Victoria set her fork down. Her father took to the bathroom as soon as the conversation had gotten uncomfortable just a few minutes earlier and Max kept her eyes on her plate. “Mother,” Victoria said. “It’s not entirely his fault. He’s mentally ill. Yes, he killed someone and that was totally wrong—but his dad and Mark Jefferson were factors in his unraveling. He’s not just some boy that was always ‘crazy’.”

Vivian sipped her white wine. “Well, I’m just glad you’re okay. At least your father and I were here for her when you needed us. That could have just as easily happened to you.”

“You weren’t there. You were never there. Cita and Ma George were there for me up until I was thirteen and you thought I could be home alone. Had it not been for Nathan and Taylor and hell—even Max, I could have ended up in the same situation as him.”

“I was there for you!” Vivian argued. “I picked out your outfits, drove you to school, and I got you whatever you wanted. You’re being ridiculous.”

“No I’m not! And that wasn’t enough! The cameras, the pictures, the clothes, the cars, the jewelry—it’s never going to be enough! And it can’t take your place. And you can’t make up for years of cash-love now,” Victoria spat. “Max, is there gas in your car? If not, I’ll pay for some. I really want to get out of here.”

Vivian rolled her eyes and as she drank her wine, she put her napkin on her plate. “Oh, so you’re leaving now? What am I supposed to tell your father?”

“Well I mean you’re not going to tell him you were a terrible shadow of a mother, so just tell him I went to get tampons or something. He won’t ask questions. Let’s go, Max. Sorry about all of this.”

Vivian scowled and downed her drink. “You know what, Victoria Maribeth?” she yelled after them. “I hope you have a little girl JUST LIKE YOU!”

Victoria turned around and smirked. “She should be fine, because I she won’t have a mother like you.”

“So…is Josh set on Rebecca Cassidy?” Max asked once her giddiness subsided.

“Oh, god, no. That’s the kind of name my MOTHER would like. We came up with a better name.”

Max was quiet, waiting, and Victoria said nothing. “Well?” she asked impatiently. “What is it? What’s it gonna be?”
Max could almost hear Victoria smile. “In a few months, I’ll be welcoming Natalya Taylor-Maxine Chase-Tobler into the world. Because I love Nathan, Taylor—even though that slut is in Europe with her mom and hasn’t called me in a week—and because I love you, too, Maxine Caulfield.”

Max didn’t try to hide her tears. She felt so…honored. She never thought she’d ever be friend with Victoria, but she was so thankful that she was. “That’s uh,” Max said, sniffling and wiping her eyes, “that’s a mouthful.”

“Oh shut up, it’s perfect and you know it,” Victoria said smugly. “So, now that I’m awake-awake, I want to know about your visit! Nathan was supposed to call but he never—Pokey, your corner of the bed.” Max heard the dog growl and she laughed. “Your. Corner,” Victoria repeated, snapping her fingers. “Sorry. Had to train the little monster to a T, otherwise I might have to buy yet another cashmere sweater. BUT, anyway, yeah. How was your visit?”

Max sighed and Victoria gasped. Victoria knew that sigh. “It…it wasn’t ALL bad,” Max finally said.

“Oh, gee, that sure is comforting.”

And Max explained everything to Victoria. She talked about how anxious she was and visiting Joyce and how nervous she as when she finally saw Nathan. Victoria joked about how tall he’d gotten and about how Max hadn’t grown at all. “You know what they say about tall guys with big feet,” Victoria smirked.

Max felt her face turning red. “I wouldn’t know.”

“Oh please, like you didn’t mess around after Blackwell. But whatever. How was he when he finally saw you? I know how tall he is, I’ve visited him before.”

Max sighed again and began to explain. She went on about how annoyed she was when they sat there folding in silence, and how she wondered why she was even there. Them Max explained why she’d called Victoria in the first place, mentioning the butterfly, then finally, the outburst Nathan had and him being brought down by the police. Max was almost afraid to tell Victoria that part; she didn’t want Victoria worrying about anyone other than herself, her husband, and her unborn daughter. And Max was NOT a good liar, even after all these years, and she didn’t want to have to be careful.

“Oh my god,” Victoria said. “I’m so sorry, Max. I shouldn’t have convinced you to go.”

Max scoffed, trying to stifle her laughter. “Victoria, you didn’t convince me at all. I chose to go. I thought it’d be the right thing—it WAS the right thing to do. I’m going to be visiting him more often, too.”

“Really? After all that? Why?”

“Stella said my being there helped, or something. She asked me to come back. Then Sean Prescott came to my hotel room and—”

Max heard Pokey yelp as Victoria sat up on the bed, as she had startled him. “Sean Prescott? You listen to me, Max. That man is a fucking snake, okay? Don’t you ever let your guard down if you are ever around that man, you understand? Why did he even come to you?”

“He asked—he begged me to keep seeing Nathan.”
“And Stella asked you to as well?”

“Yes.”

Victoria sighed in relief. “Okay, if Stella says it helps, then I say keep seeing him. But do NOT get mixed up with that man, Max. Sean Prescott is a fucking sadist.”

“I believe you. And I will be careful. I wouldn’t be doing this if Stella hadn’t asked me first. And your pictures will be finished by this Friday. I got a little work done on my flight over. Annie will print them for you.”

“Ah, that’s what I like to hear! I’m going to go, Cherie, time for this momma to sleep—as much as I can before my little bun gets here. Be careful with Sean, though, okay?”

“I will be careful.”

“Promise me.”

“I promise,” Max said. “Sweet dreams.”

“Au revoir, Cherie. Fais de beaux rêves.”

With a smile, Max pressed “end” and set her phone down. She got her stuff off of her bed and pulled the blanket up under her arms, still gripping Nathan’s unfolded butterfly. She looked up at the ceiling absentmindedly, working quickly to refold the butterfly. She had crumpled it a bit when she laid on it earlier, but the butterfly still turned out. Nathan was a good folder. Max was worried about his health, too, more than she was willing to admit. Stella had off-handedly mentioned that the police had hurt him while detaining him before, and for Nathan’s sadistic father to find himself to desperate, so sure that only Max could save his son put the state of Nathan’s mental health into perspective. It had to have been pretty bad if he had to come to the girl who helped put him away.

And Max blamed herself for it all. Whatever his mental state was before Chloe’s death was all Sean Prescott—his cruelty, his insane need to keep everything in check. But everything after Chloe’s death, no matter how indirect, Max felt, was her fault. And she’d spent the last five years pretending like none of it bothered her. But now it was finally time to put in some work, just like that fateful week with Chloe. It was time to really do the right thing.

Max set the butterfly on her nightstand and rubbed her tired eyes. She couldn’t believe how much she’d done today. And her adrenaline was finally coming down. Max yawned, decided to put her phone on the too-far charger in the morning, and soon, she drifted off to sleep.

Max walked through her usually dream darkness, wondering what kind of horrible nightmare-land was in store for her tonight. She’d seen Chloe get hit by the train a million times and was getting tired of it. She wondered why her head always chose the train. Maybe it was because of its gruesomeness. But as Max walked through the dark, there was no train, no ricocheting car-bumper bullet, only darkness. As Max continued to move, she smiled, because she was coming upon a head of blue hair, and black suspenders that she could recognize from a mile away. “Chloe!” Max said, running up. “Chloe!”

Chloe turned around and smiled, surprised. “Oh my god! Max! Is that really you?”

Max ran up and embraced her friend. She smelled the same. She looked exactly the same. Everything about her was perfectly preserved as if Max never used the photo she took to get back to
the bathroom at Blackwell. “I can’t believe it’s you,” Max said. She wiped her falling tears. “I miss you so much, Chloe.”

“I miss you, too but holy shit, Max! I can’t believe you actually made it here! You’re...you’re so much older! How long has it been since, you know?” Chloe held two fingers to her stomach and made a popping sound with her lips.

Max rolled her eyes and forced a laugh. “Five years.”

Chloe laughed. “If you’re anything, Max, you’re consistent. Five more years pass and here you are, back in Arcadia Bay. Sorry but I just can’t believe you’re actually here,” Chloe said. Her blue eyes filled with tears and she reached her arms out again, waving Max to come closer. To Max’s surprise, Chloe kissed her before pulling her back into her arms. “I miss you so much, Max.”

Max’s shock faded from her face as she wrapped her arms around Chloe’s waist and buried her head into her shoulder. “I miss you, too, Chloe.”

The two of them stayed just like this for a moment, saying nothing. It was a perfect silence. It was just the two of them again, Max wished she was still alive.

Chloe finally pulled away, kissing Max’s forehead before they parted. “Do you know why you’re here, Max?”

“I don’t know,” Max said. “Where is ‘here’ anyway?”

“I—I don’t know,” Chloe said. “It’s hard to explain. I can’t leave here. But it doesn’t usually look like this. I can’t think of what it looks like normally, but it’s not like this.

“It’s because I’m here,” Max and Chloe suddenly heard.

Chloe turned around, arm out to protect Max, then laughed once she saw who it was. “Nathan, you can’t just pop in like that—it’s hella creepy.” Chloe rested her hands on her waist, her elbows pointing toward Max.

There was Nathan, looking just like he did five years ago. His red jacket was open and on his black shirt was a whale. Max walked around to Chloe’s front and checked her shirt, which had a blue butterfly on it. When Max looked down at herself, she could feel herself getting younger. Her long hair was back in its shorter cut, and on her now pink shirt was a small brown doe.

“Where is she?” Chloe asked, seemingly not noticing Max’s confusion.

“Don’t give me your shit, Price,” Nathan snapped. “You know how hard it is to wake her up. Plus, I’m not from here. You should have just done it.”

“What, and had you greet Max? Yeah, that would have gone so perfectly.”

“What’s going on?” Max asked. “Why are we here?”

“Jeez, don’t freak out Max. It’ll be over soon,” Chloe said.

“Who are we waiting for?” Max asked.

“Me.”

And right before Max’s eyes, there she was. Rachel Amber.
“It’s really nice to meet you, Max, really, but we’ll have to save introductions for later,” Rachel said.

Max couldn’t believe it. What was going on? Had they all met up here before?

And where exactly was “here?”

Max began to speak, opening her mouth, but all that came out was confused gasps of air. She had a knot in her stomach and a lump in her throat and she felt her skin began to cover in goosebumps and a cold sweat.

“Trust me, Max, this will all make sense later. You have to get to the dark room. Eleven-fourteen. It’s important,” Rachel said. On her shirt was a blue bird, like that ones that used to get stuck in Chloe’s house all the time.

Had that been Rachel trying to warn them about Mark Jefferson all along?

Max tried to make sense of all this. “What…what…”

Nathan rolled his eyes and grabbed her shoulders. Rachel and Chloe quickly followed suit, touching on Max’s shoulders as well. “You have to go to the dark room,” he said.

“The dark room, Max, remember?” Chloe said.

“The dark room,” Rachel said.

Rachel in the dark room…Rachel in the dark room…Rachel in the dark room…

Suddenly, Max woke up, her breathing back to normal, looking at the light pouring in from the hotel room window. She reached for her phone, which was dead, and plugged it into the charger—which, now, didn’t seem so far away—in a huff. She looked at the clock on the nightstand. It was early; just a few minutes before eight-thirty.

Yawning, Max walked over to the bathroom. She brushed her teeth, and splashed some cold water on her face, then turned on the shower. She stripped naked and stepped in and cursed herself for not letting the water get warm. She stood there for a moment, letting the cool water get warm as droplets fell onto her freckled face.

After she bathed, she dressed in her classic “Max” outfit, maybe with a little bit of Chloe flair. She wore a t-shirt that had a butterfly skeleton on it, her favorite pair of still-fitting skinny jeans, and her old gray jacket. She stuffed a few pens, her journal and her essentials into her camera bag, along with slipping Chloe’s bullet necklace on over her head. Her upgraded yellow camera hung around her neck. She threw her hair into a bun, and she walked over to the mirror by her door and looked at herself. She quickly snapped a selfie, trying hopelessly to ignore her nervousness, then put the picture in her bag without looking at it. She longed for the day where she could take pictures of herself, where anyone could take pictures of her and she wouldn’t have to mentally prepare for it. Max took a few calming breaths, undid the chain, and headed out the door. She was going to the dark room, but first she was going to the correctional facility. She had an inmate to visit and a promise to keep.
Max makes a few trips around town and ends up finding something very interesting in the dark room.

Chapter Notes

I AM SO CLOSE TO BEING FINISHED WITH SCHOOL I CAN TASTE IT!!
Thank you all for being so patient and for avidly reading my poopy writing, it really means a lot ;-; This chapter gets pretty crazy, so I hope you all like it!!
I'm free from school tomorrow!!

As Max drove to the facility, she looked at Arcadia Bay as it passed by her. The town seemed smaller, but Max knew the only thing that had changed about Arcadia Bay was her. Max almost couldn’t believe that she’d called this place home. She grew up here. All of the family owned stores were still standing, even if somewhat aged. The smell of the ocean still filled the air, always, and all the people she passed carried on with their lives, as if the trial had never happened. Nothing ever really happened in Arcadia Bay until that scandal, and everyone was still trying to get back to the nothing. People found comfort in the nothing and shoving the whole thing under the rug, and Max hated it. She wanted everyone to remember what had happened here. She didn’t want them to forget that even quaint little Arcadia Bay had the capacity to be its own circle of hell.

As Max drove, she was reminded of all the time she spent in the car with Chloe. She remembered when Chloe first came to her rescue. She thought about their late nights at the convenience store for doughnuts that turned into early morning coffee dates at the diner. Max shook her head, trying to clear it, trying not to cry. She’d make time to cry later. Today was about business. Max was still afraid, but she was determined to get to the dark room. She wasn’t afraid of going—she wanted to know exactly what “truth” could possibly still be there—but she was afraid of what seeing the room again would do to her.

Max’s memories, in short, were a problem. She was thankful for what she had left of Chloe, and not just the borrowed shirt and necklace she was wearing. She was happy to have every memory, every journal entry, and every picture from that week. It helped her to cope, knowing that Chloe also had those memories, too. It comforted her, knowing that in death, Chloe wasn’t alone.

But the dark room? That was hell, a hell Max had tried to block from her mind for years. A scent, a color, even a cool compress against her face could break her at any moment. Max often dreamed about her experience in the dark room, crying as Mark Jefferson nudged and prodded, and commented snapped picture after picture. Sometimes she even felt the sharp prick of a needle in her neck, and then suddenly, she heard Mark Jefferson’s voice in her ear.

Chloe and Rachel are fucking each other in heaven right now. Is that what you wanna hear?

Max screamed and harshly pulled over in her rental car, being able to see the parking lot of the
facility from the side of the road. She touched her neck and still felt a sting, and she screamed again, bringing her wrists up to her face. They weren’t bound—no tape, but Max could feel the tape pulling at her skin. Quickly, she brought both of her hands to her camera bag and opened it, carefully sifting through everything in it. She swatted away the various cartridges of film, then pushed Sean Prescott’s leftover pack of gum away, ignoring the fact that she brought it with her in the first place. Finally, Max was able to grab her cellphone and anxiously dialed Brooke’s number. She was probably still at work, trying to test the last few drones before they were bought and sold, but Max was sure Brooke would answer.

“Hey, Max, what’s up?” Brooke said upon answering. Her tone held a twinge of worry. Max called often, but rarely did she call Brooke when she was at work—and Max knew how frustrated Brooke already was with this project. “Is everything okay?”

“Brooke,” Max wept faintly, “he’s got me.”

Max heard Brooke take a deep breath. “Everyone, you need a break. Take an hour lunch. But I expect some real progress once you’re all fed. Okay, Max, hey, are you there?”

“My hands. He’s got my hands Brooke,” Max murmured.

“Max, he is in jail. He does not have you. You are free. And you did nothing wrong. He was wrong. What he did to you was not your fault.”

“My neck, it stings,” and as soon as Max said it, she realized why it stung: Nathan. The bruise her left her was probably much clearer now, and it probably didn’t help that she’d grabbed at her neck when the memory of Mark Jefferson came up.

If thinking about the dark room made her like this, Max could hardly imagine what would happen when she actually got there. But she wasn’t going to back out of it now. She had to go back. She wanted Nathan’s truth. She NEEDED it.

“Are you safe somewhere, Max?” Brooke asked.

Finally, Max was able to pull her wrists apart. “Yeah,” she sniffled. “Yes, I’m sorry. I’m pulled over by South Row.”

“Right! Okay, Max, go to the Railway River. It’s near there. I want you to find something to take a picture of. Anything. Anything BUT yourself.”

Max clutched her phone between her ear and shoulder and scrambled to get the car started. She got herself going and turned right at the first traffic light. She left the facility behind her for a moment and found herself in the dirt makeshift parking lot that trucks had made near the river. Max got out of her car, sorrowfully ignoring the excited onlookers who recognized her as “Maxine Caulfield, photographer,” not “Max Caulfield, perpetual messy twelve-year-old.”

“I’m by the river,” Max said. She wiped her wet eyes and sniffed again. “There’s, ah, there’s a bracelet stuck on a rock.”

“Nice,” Brooke said. “What does the bracelet say? Or is it beads?”

“It’s got a little metal thing on it,” Max continued. She leaned in close, careful not to get her shoes wet. “It says ‘Dream’ on it. The light around it is nice, too.”

“Take a really good picture,” Brooke smiled.
Max held up her camera and quickly snapped the picture. As she waited for it to develop, Max thanked Brooke and assured her that she was okay, and she made her way back to her car. Max locked herself in and searched her camera bag. She pulled a couple of baby wipes out of her pack, and carefully wiped the tears from her face. She looked at the picture of the bracelet once she felt she was together. It wasn’t a bad picture—the bracelet glowed under the cool water of the river, and “Dreams” was on it as clear as day. But Max had gotten one of her lavender converse in the picture. It looked a little weird and unfocused, but it still wasn’t bad. It was actually, Max laughed, a very “Max” photo. Now that she was okay, Max took a left out of the dirt parking space and headed back in the direction of the Arcadia Bay Correctional Facility.

Max met Stella in her office, an almost ridiculously luxurious room with two couches, a chaise lounge, a Cherrywood desk and a number of book that’d make Belle jealous. Stella sat at her enormous desk while Max stood awkwardly until Stella motioned for her to take a seat. Max obliged, taking off her camera and camera bag and setting them in the empty chair next to her.

“I’m surprised to see you here, Max,” Stella said. Max didn’t respond, as she was still not quite finished admiring Stella’s office. “Sean Prescott paid for it,” Stella explained. “He believed that it’d help Nathan. They had to close off a lot of cells for it.

Max rolled her eyes and crossed her legs. “Charming.”

“I can’t exactly be mad—it is my office. But Mr. Madsen was. Anyway, have you given any thought to continued visits to Nathan?”

“Yes…” Max said. She was surprised that Sean Prescott didn’t contact Stella before she did. He seemed like the type of man who always needed to be first. “I’ll keep seeing him. But I have conditions that must be met or it won’t happen. They MUST be met, Stella.”

Stella quickly pulled out a pen and pulled a stack of nearby sticky notes over to her. Max looked at Stella, who was wearing a big, goofy smile on her face. “Max, I can’t tell you how happy I am to hear this. I wish you could have been there for our therapy session yesterday—oh! Maybe you can. We can—” Stella stopped herself and blushed when she saw that Max was stifling laughter. “I’m sorry, but you’ve just got to understand, Max—Nathan…Nathan needs you. He spoke about what he experienced with Mark Jefferson, how conflicted he was about helping him and, for the first time, his feelings for you.”

Max held her breath. “Feelings? For me?”

“Let me rephrase,” Stella said, holding up her hand. “Nathan spoke in depth about why he feels you are his Favorite Person. I can’t go into details unless he wants me to—confidentiality—but I’m telling you, Max. You really made him happy yesterday.”

Max covered the bruise on her neck, and while rolling her eyes, mumbled, “Could have fooled me.”

“That was not his fault,” Stella said suddenly. “It was mine. I didn’t tell him you were finally coming. I thought he’d suddenly refuse and I didn’t want you flying over here for nothing.”

“I understand. So, first condition,” Max said quickly, changing the subject.

Stella got her pen ready. Max went on to tell Stella her reasons. Max, firstly, wanted Nathan restrained until SHE felt comfortable enough for him to be without it. Max hoped she wasn’t being
unreasonable here. She was aware of the part she played in provoking Nathan yesterday—and she was going to apologize for it. But first and foremost, she needed to feel safe with him. Many of her relationships had a certain security set in stone, and she wasn’t going to get anywhere with Nathan as long as she was still a little afraid of him.

“No Sean Prescott, ever. I don’t want him here while I’m visiting Nathan and I also don’t want him to know what Nathan and I talk about. And I don’t want him turning up at my hotel again. All schedules for visitation will go through my assistant at work, Annie,” Max demanded.

Stella held up a finger as she continued to write. She looked up at Max and took off her glasses and rubbed the bridge of her nose. “Sean Prescott came to your hotel room?”

“Yeah,” Max said.

Stella sighed. “Okay, Max, if he does that again, do not hesitate to call the police. I didn’t send him to your room—I told him I’d take care of everything as long as he took care of the costs. I’m sorry he showed up—I swear I didn’t send him.”

Notably, the fact that Sean Prescott came to Max on his own didn’t scare her. If anything, she found it oddly comforting. Max was happy Stella didn’t send Sean Prescott to her door. It made Max happy that he felt the need to come to her on his own. It added an element of truth to his begging spiel. He, even though he was an absolute monster, really wanted Nathan to get help. Whether or not it was so he could make Nathan a “proper heir” again, Max didn’t know and couldn’t tell, but she liked that Sean Prescott was finally showing concern for his son.

“Oh, I believe you,” Max said. She waved her hand and Stella passed her the pen and notepad knowingly. “Here is my PERSONAL email, along with my assistant’s office number so she can take over any scheduling problems. I have two weddings when I get home—but I’ll be back for the anniversary of Chloe’s death. Are we still on for breakfast tomorrow?”

Stella laughed as Max slid the stationery back over to her. “Yes and Warren is VERY EXCITED, too,” Stella laughed again, then looked at Max, a cute half smile on her face. “Max, even after all this time, you are still a hard act to follow.”

Max blushed and covered her cheeks, as if Stella wouldn’t be able to see how red they were if she did so. Max was a little afraid of seeing Warren. She saw him a few months after their breakup, while everything between them was still fresh and sore. They’d slept together that night, which sparked them getting back together for three months, long distance, before Max and Warren made the mutual choice to break it off for good. Max had had only one short relationship since, a six-month fling with a woman whom Max did not know was married. Max had fallen so quickly and completely in love with Talia, and their relationship seemed perfect. But Max finding out she was “the other woman” really broke something in her. She’d been casually dating ever since. Max knew the thought was conceited, but she feared that seeing Warren again would bring up old feelings and end in heartbreak for Stella. So Max was glad Warren hadn’t asked to hang out alone. Maybe he was aware she was his only weakness.

“You don’t have to worry,” Max reasoned, trying to sound convincing. “Warren loves you!”

“I know,” Stella giggled. “But he’ll always love you.”

Max gave a wry smile. She didn’t have anything to say about that. After some silence, Max cleared her throat. “Stella,” she said softly. “Would it be okay to see Nathan right now?”

A wide grin came across Stella’s face. “I was hoping you’d see him today.” Stella stood up and
Max followed, her yellow camera still hanging around her neck. “He’s still pretty groggy from his medication, not to mention sick, so there shouldn’t be any outbursts. He’s resting in the infirmary. There will be an officer inside AND one watching the door. You’ll be totally safe.” Stella stopped right outside the infirmary door. “And Max, thank you so much for this. He’s finally showing some real progress.”

Max raised her eyebrows, then looked to the ground. “It’s what I’m here for.”

Stella led Max through the long hallway, looking forward as men in cells hooted and hollered at them. Max zipped up her jacket and suddenly wished her pants weren’t quite so tight. Stella ignored them, turning right at the end of the hallway. There was a door with a window and a lock, as well as a nearby security room. The words “Infirmary” were printed across the windowed door. The officer standing near the door tensed once he saw Max, then relaxed, forgetting any questions about what Max was doing there. Once he saw she was following Stella. Stella pulled out her set of keys, unlocked the door, and kept her hand on the handle as she turned around to look at Max. “Remember, he’s pretty groggy, so he may tire out.”

“Why is he so groggy?”

“His medication—” Stella stopped herself. She looked up at Max and backed into the door, opening it. “I’ll let him tell you. There is also a security office inside of the infirmary, and a guard inside. Just to be cautious.”

Max followed Stella into the enormous room, avoiding eye contact with the three other prisoners in there. One was shaking uncontrollably, mumbling to himself, eyes frantically following something in the air that Max couldn’t see. Another mad laid in his bed perfectly still, even his chest unmoving. A nurse came over and covered his gray body with a sheet, as the prisoner sitting across from him closed his eyes and said a silent prayer. He was sitting on a bed, his short-sleeved orange jumpsuit gathered around his waist as an attractive female doctor sewed a gash in his arm. His chest and stomach were covered in tattoos, and he visibly tensed as he saw Max walk by.

“You Maxine Caulfield?” he asked in a deep, husky voice.

Max froze. Stella hardly reacted, as did Nathan, who was lying on a bed way at the end of the room, facing away from them.

“Leave her alone, Arlo,” an officer piped in, his hand on his bottle of pepper spray.

“I ain’t gonna do nothing to ‘er,” Arlo argued. He was perfectly still, not an ounce of anger in his voice to signify that he was going to do something violent. “I have a daughter, Caulfield, she seventeen, scholarship at that nice-ass school, Blackwell. She just like you—pictures, y’know. Anyway, she a real big fan. Can I get a picture with you?”

Max was flattered, but she could already feel her heart beating faster at the thought of taking a picture. She didn’t want to say no to a fan, but she was still nervous. She hoped, at least, that she wouldn’t look bad in the photo. Max pointed to her camera, making eye contact with the eager-to-bruise officer. He waved his arm and excitedly, Arlo put his arms behind him, and Max walked over. She held the camera at arm’s length, and have a toothless smile. Once the picture was taken, Nathan began to stir. Max smiled and quickly handed her picture to Arlo, who yelled after her, “My daughter come up on Wednesdays! Hope she can see you!”

Max nodded back at him and passed Stella, who had found a comfortable spot next to Arlo. Stella stood and spoke to everyone else in the room quickly and quietly. Arlo redressed himself, was cuffed by the officer who had been hot-to-trot with his pepper spray, and left the room. Stella helped the
shaking man into a wheelchair and scooted him out the door with Arlo and the officer. The pretty, leftover female doctor went to the bed with the unmoving gray body, who Max finally realized was dead, and wheeled him out of the door. All that was left in the room was Max, a resting Nathan, and an officer reading the newspaper in the monitoring room within the infirmary.

Max reached out, very cautiously, very gently, and tapped Nathan’s arm.

He turned his head to her, eyes half open. His eyes widened once he recognized the calming blue of her eyes and he pressed a button near his hand, lifting the bed up just a bit.

Max, again and always cursing her awkwardness, smiled softly and waved to him. “Hi, Nathan.”

Nathan’s eyelids lowered and he smiled. It was a weird, sleepy smile that made Max suddenly very away that Nathan had changed a lot since she’d last seen him at the trial. He was a man, now, and the idea made her feel very odd. She felt a lump in her throat without warning, and her whole body felt warm, and she prayed that she wasn’t blushing. She was embarrassed when she found herself hoping that he didn’t smile at anyone else that way.

“Hi, Max,” he said softly, still with that ridiculously satisfying look. “I’m so happy,” he began again. His blue eyes filled with tears, and the look was gone. “Thank you,” he said between sniffles. “Thank you for being here for me. Thank you. Thank you.”

And just like that, Max had to catch herself, to stop herself from trying to wipe those tears. Her shaky left hand was already lifting, and in an attempt to save face, Max brought her hand up and rubbed her neck. “You’re welcome,” Max said. “I just want you to get better.” And it was true. Max wanted him to feel like...a person again. He’d never known that feeling before, as he’d been poked and prodded into the right direction since he was born.

“Did I do that?” Nathan suddenly said. He reached out to touch the blue and purple marks on her neck, but his handcuffs only let him go so far. They were chained to the bar on the bed, sliding as Nathan moved his arm. He put his hand back down.

Max covered the bruises with her palm, feeling very careless for bringing attention to the. “Don’t worry about those, Nathan. I forgive you.”

“I don’t deserve it,” Nathan cried. “I was mean yesterday. You should stay away. I can’t be good. I’m bad for you.” Nathan leaned forward to his hand to wipe his tears, and immediately pulled away to turn his head over his left shoulder and throw up in the trash can near his bed.

“Jesus,” Max said, her brows furrowing, confused. “What are they doing to you here?”

“They help, but not all the time,” Nathan explained. He pointed to his IV. “Morphine makes me nauseous. That dumbass rent-a-cop that tackled me yesterday cracked my fucking rib. And my regular medication makes me feel sick, too. So not I get to throw up. I hate this. I hate this, Max. Being sick. My other meds were better. I was almost happy, so close.”

“Almost happy?” Max asked. Nathan gave her a mean look and she hoped she hadn’t angered him.

“I had other meds—good ones. Insurance mess. Now I have this shit for the rest of the month. So I can either be sick or be crazy.”

Max looked him sadly. She wanted so badly to touch him, to squeeze his hand, touch his arm, but she couldn’t. She felt bad that she felt safe that he was restrained, and Nathan was still pretty unpredictable. He could have an outburst at any moment—and there was no saying Max was even
really safe with him restrained. Max balled her hand into a fist before bringing it down to her side, trying to crush her urge to touch him. “You’re not crazy,” Max said.

Nathan scoffed and leaned over to throw up again. Max looked around the room until she found a tissue box on the bed Arlo had been sitting on. She grabbed a tissue and without even thinking about it, she went and held onto Nathan’s cheek as she wiped his mouth. To her surprise, he didn’t turn away. When Max was finished, Nathan rested his head against her forehead, eyes closed. He smiled as he noticed her forehead grow warmer, and when he pulled away, he was giving her that look again. The lump reformed in her throat, and Max knew there was no hiding her blush now. Max put her hands on her cheeks to try to calm herself, but it was no use. Nathan pressed the button by his bed again, lying down the same way he had when she and Stella had first entered the room. He faced the wall, and Max couldn’t guess the expression on his face even if she wanted to.

Max sat down on the bed next to him, not close but not far away, trying to calm herself down. Her heart was beating so fast, she thought she’d have a heart attack. She hadn’t felt this way since the last time she was with Talia—not the three times Talia came to her job spewing about how sorry she was; it was the last time she’d had Talia all to herself. They had rented a hotel room—it was romantic then, but oh so painful now that Max knew the hotel was just a tactic to hide from Talia’s husband. Max remembered that night, the wine, the expensive restaurant, her skin rubbed raw from being against Talia’s. Max’s heart beat like it did the same moment she thought Talia was going to tell her that she loved her. And her heart stopped when Talia, instead, said, “Max…I’d leave my husband for you.”

As if Max was supposed to know she was married.

But Max’s heartbeat, now, being stuck right before that perfect “I love you” moment was as exciting as it was confusing. Max didn’t know what this feeling was supposed to mean, but she knew she didn’t want it to stop.

“The only good side of recovery,” Nathan started, still looking away, “is…it’s the end of it. The result. Feeling better. Normal. Like person. That’s supposed to be worth it, right?” Max could tell he had started crying again. “I’m supposed to feel like a fuckin’ god after this, right? The suffering…the suffering has to be worth it, right?” Nathan turned to her, that look on his face, minus the smile. Her bones turned to jelly. She crossed her legs. “Tell me it’s worth it, Max. Tell me it’s worth it and mean it, Max.”

She couldn’t say no to that look. Impossible. Max touched the bruises on her neck, feeling like they were fire on her skin. “It’s worth it,” she croaked.

Nathan shot up and those sublime muscles tightened under his white shirt. She crossed her legs tighter. “No!” Nathan shouted. “I want the truth! I want you to say it. I need you to say it. Is it worth it? It is worth it, Max? Would you drown first to breath underwater?”

Max stood up slowly, a grave look on her face that chilled Nathan to the bone. As she got closer to him, he lowered himself back onto the bed, suddenly calmed by her presence. Max gently but firmly held onto his upper arm with both hands, and looked him in his tearful eyes. He was shaking—badly, only being calmed by her warm hands on his cold skin. Soon, his jitters stopped, and he exhaled purposefully. He looked back at her now, right in her blue eyes, wondering why a wave of pure, soft calm washed over him.

“It’s worth it,” Max said, sounding sure now. She moved her hand to his chest. “I promise. It will all be worth it.”

And there it was—that smile again. Nathan reached up his hand, for what, Max didn’t know. And
she wouldn’t know—the handcuffs wouldn’t let him go too far. Just like that, the weird heartbeat was gone, the look was gone, and now it was back to normal—Max Caulfield sitting in silence as Nathan stared at the wall, making faces that Max couldn’t see. Feeling very good about how things had gone, Max slowly stood up, her legs back to normal. She turned toward the door she came in and began to walk.


Max froze, releasing a slow exhale. She turned on her heel to face him. He was still staring at the wall, not at her, and Max wished she knew what face he was making. She wanted to know what he was thinking. “Yes?” Max asked. Her voice was shaking. She was nervous. Why, after all this time, was he still capable of making her so nervous?

Nathan turned his head back to her, pointing to the camera hanging around her neck. “Can you take a picture?”

“Of what?”

Nathan rolled his eyes. “Of a monkey’s asshole, Max—of us. I want a picture of us, Max Caulfield.”

Max was dreading this. It was hard enough to take a picture with Arlo. But now, she had to test her resolve again. Max tiptoed over to the bed and bent down, bringing herself closer to him, preparing her smile. But before Max could snap the photo, she felt Nathan’s icy hand on the back of her neck.

“A butterfly?”

Max cringed as he slowly rubbed his hand over the tattoo. She’d gotten it so long ago, after a night of drinking with Victoria, she’d almost forgotten it was there. It was a blue Morpho, butterfly that perfect, almost glowing Chloe blue. “Yeah,” Max said. “For me.”

“The hair, too?”

“No,” Max said. “That was for Chloe.”

Nathan looked down as Max turned to look at him. “And this picture?”

Max took a deep breath and stood. She walked over near Nathan’s head, which was resting on the pillow. Max tapped his shoulder, and instead of moving over—like Max wanted—Nathan sat up higher on the bed, swinging his arm around her hips. Embarrassed, Max’s eyes shot to the police officer on the monitor room, wondering if they were breaking the rules. As Nathan replaced his arm by his side and rested his head on Max’s other hip, she realized he was slumped on her for a reason. Nathan couldn’t fully sit up because his medication would make him throw up. He wasn’t trying to make her feel uneasy; he was trying to keep it all down. Max rested her hand behind Nathan, leaning over him just a bit, and holding her camera at a length that would get both of them in the picture.

“One—two—three,” Max spoke gently, just before snapping the picture.

Nathan lifted his head with a start and covered his eyes with his hands. Max stood quickly, ready to wipe his mouth again, but Nathan waved his hand, seemingly signifying that he was okay. “Fuck,” he said, still rubbing his blue eyes. He turned back to Max, blinking, as if he couldn’t see her though she was standing right in front of him. “I forgot how bright that stupid thing was. Why can’t you just get a regular camera?”
And Max handed him the polaroid. Upon seeing it, he smiled. And Max quickly snapped another
photo. Max waved this second polaroid around for a second and smiled. “That’s why,” she said,
turning the photo toward him. In the photo, Nathan was gently holding the first picture, a soft, gentle
smile on his face. It was a tender Nathan. “You can keep that one,” Max continued. She put her
camera and the picture of Nathan in her bag. “But this one is mine.”

Nathan looked at her for just a moment before turning his whole body to the wall, admiring his
picture. He and Max were done with each other for now. Max walked out of the room and into
Stella’s open arms.

Max was confused. “Um…Stella?”

“You did GREAT today,” Stella said, her hands now on Max’s shoulders. “I was in the outside
security room with Mr. Madsen. He’s given me permission to have future visits in my office—if, if
that’s okay with you.”

As they walked back to the front of the facility, Max thought about the picture of Nathan in her
bag. “We’ll… we’ll see. Maybe after a meeting without restraints. He did better this time, but there
will probably be future outbursts. But…it’ll take some time.”

“Right,” Stella said. “I’ll talk to him about the plan.” Stella and Max were at the entrance to the
facility now. “Max, what was that stuff Nathan wrote on the butterfly? I’ve been curious but I felt the
need to…to have a little tact with my questions.”

“Oh,” Max started. “Well, 08’14 is Victoria’s birthday. But I don’t know what the first three
numbers mean,” she lied.

“Probably a date as well. Maybe May fourth 2002? Oh, well. Only Nathan knows. I’ll tell you
how the session goes. And again, thank you, Max.”

Max nodded and walked out the door, waving faintly as usual. She took a deep breath, then
headed to her rental car. It was time. It was finally time.

Max hoped she was ready to return to the dark room.

And there went another minute, car off, hands at ten and two, still sitting in the car, staring at the
dilapidated barn. It looked pretty much the same, albeit a bit smaller, but covered in half-ripped
cautions tape. Max knew that the room was free reign, that she wouldn’t get in trouble for snooping
around in a years-old tornado bunker, but she couldn’t help but to be marked by fear. What if she
didn’t find whatever Nathan wanted her to look for? And why did he even think she would be able
to find something there? Just how much faith did Nathan have that she was going to find something?
Max took a very, very deep breath, holding it as she ran her fingers over the bullet necklace. Max
slowly exhaled, picturing Chloe in her mind. “I need you here,” Max said. “Help me through this.”

Exiting her car, Max stretched and had her camera around her neck, ready. She locked the car
once, twice, three times, and even a fourth as she walked around to the side of the barn, where she
knew the real entrance was. She moved the thin wood that blocked her way in, climbing carefully
over a delicate web that held a seemingly calm spider. The barn was pretty much the same, not
exactly as messy, but a few more footsteps and shoe markings. Max mad her way to the open hatch,
stopping momentarily before descending the stairs. Max gripped her camera with shaky hands, and
aimed at the stairs. Quickly, she snapped a photo of the steps, cursing herself for being so nervous.
She had been here before. This place was familiar, but now there was a fear that she wouldn’t find
whatever Nathan wanted her to look for. The place was probably stripped of everything now, and Max, being her usual self, was not about to leave empty-handed. She checked her photo, not proud of it, not hating it, and put it in her bag as she slowly made her way to the dark room.

Max was at the door, looking at the worn-down “542” on the nearby keypad. The door was ajar, which led Max to believe she wasn’t alone. But, there were no footsteps on the dirty ground that weren’t her own, and Max decided that she was overacting, letting her underlying fear of the dark room get the better of her. The room, Max knew, was going to feel like a prison to her. She knew it wasn’t going to be anything like Nathan’s six-by-eight cell; it was much, much different. Going inside would force her to see it all again, to feel the thickness of the air as Chloe’s voice cracked, begging Max to come to the junkyard with her. She’d have to see the floor she laid on, smell the sour scent of alcohol in the air, and have to relive one of the worst moments of her life, which didn’t actually exist in reality. Max wanted so badly to leave this place, but her memories would never let her. She was doomed to let this room be a part of her—but she tried her damnedest to put that aside for now. Right now, she was here for Nathan.

With all her might, Max opened the door to the dark room, letting a wave of dust blast from the room, wiping the dust off her clothing as she very slowly stepped inside. The room was nearly the same, save for a few key difference. There were no binders in the open cabinet near the desk, where the computer was also missing, taken by the police as evidence. The sink area was dusty, and Max wasn’t sure there was even running water any more. The white couch was still in front of the sheet, now stained gray from years of dust, with small pieces cut out of it, likely containing DNA. On the sheet still stood the tripod, minus Jefferson’s expensive camera, and the nearby table still had a bottle of principal Wells’ preferred whiskey. Max figured at some point Jefferson was going to try to pin everything on the principal. He probably had all the evidence for it lined up, but Kate foiled that plan. Plus, the only evidence the police even had of Wells’ involvement was the presence of his alcohol, and it was too late for Jefferson to try to spin a story. On that table, next to the bottle, was something that made Max’s skin crawl—a mangled roll of duct tape. The roll that had tied Kate and Mark Jefferson’s other victims up was probably long gone, and this one was probably brought along by some stupid teenagers who wanted to recreate the crime scene to scare each other. As far as Max could see, there was nothing with Victoria’s name on it. No papers with her birthdate, no lockbox visible in the open cabinets.

Max walked over to the table and couch and sat down after wiping the dust away with her hands. She was staring straight forward, looking at the now-dingy once-white sheet, enraged, jittery, and unblinking. When she did finally close her eyes, it was because she could feel it on her skin again, her hands bound, duct tape sticking to her cheek, Mark Jefferson poking and prodding her, getting her into position for him to take her picture.

*Why did he do that?* Max thought. Not just to her, but in general. Why was he so twisted? There was no sort of sexual deviancy to this—that, at least, would have been something Max understood, but this was far worse than a sexual craving. It was about control. He wanted to feel powerful, but Max couldn’t understand why. Mark Jefferson was talented and his talent had gotten him wealth, and he was *popular*. Maybe that was why it was so easy for him to capture all those girls. Money and fame made everything easy for him. It was easy to get a girl in the car when he rolled up in a BMW.

But why *her*?

Why was Max the perfect subject?

There was no crueler fate Max could have gotten than panicking over an event that happened only in her memories. And just like that, Max’s wrists stung again, wrapped up in imaginary tape.
“He’s not here,” Max told herself, repeating it over and over as she heard Mark Jefferson’s laughter growing ever louder in the silence of the room. “You’re not—”

“You’re back here with me,” Max suddenly heard.

She picked up the old bottle of whiskey, ready to swing, but of course, the dark room was empty. There was no way she’d actually heard Mark Jefferson’s voice while she was here, but her mind wasn’t having that. Max tripped on the leg of the table as she stood, crying and holding her neck as she felt a sharp pain go through it. Scared, she stood up and swung the bottle of whiskey as hard as she could. The bottle flew from her hand, hitting the back wall, where most of the length of the white sheet had been hanging. Max sat down on the ground, holding her aching neck, trying to regulate her staggered breathing. How long? How long would it be until she was finally free from this hell? It’d been five fucking years of this shit, always coming up at the worse times, with absolutely nothing she could really do about it. How could she do anything? What would a therapist even think? No matter who she went to with this, she’d only sound crazy. And she couldn’t have that, not with her career on the line.

As Max sat and calmed, she looked over at the far side of the wall, where orangey-brown whiskey stained the white sheet. She noticed it clinging to something against the wall, but she couldn’t tell what. Max instinctively gripped the bottom of the sheet upon standing, and pulled it as hard as she could, until it fell to the ground. On the back wall, a single, flat safe had been covered by the sheet. The only way anyone would have noticed it is if they knew about it—and Max could barely see it even after she’d thrown the bottle at it.

Ignoring the whiskey-soaked floor and carefully stepping over the bottle’s broken glass, Max rushed over to the safe’s keypad and promptly typed in the only idea she had of a combination: Victoria Chase’s birthday. Max pressed in zero-eight-one-four, then got filled with an odd sensation of nervous relief. Suddenly, Max felt her mouth fill up with saliva, and she ran as fast as she could through the room, up the stairs, then outside where she could throw up. Once she wiped her mouth, she looked over to her rental car. She could leave, right now. She could go back to her hotel, pack up her things, and vow to never come back to Arcadia Bay, ever again. She could be free from all of this.

But would it be worth it?

Max made her way back to the new dark room safe, ignoring the instinct to vomit with sheer will. Upon opening up the safe, she found three things inside. There was an old brown journal, which has probably been there for forever. There was also Rachel Amber’s binder, which was probably a fake, seeing as the real binder was locked up in evidence. And the last thing was something that made Max’s blood run cold. She quickly took out the safe’s contents and set Rachel’s binder along with the brown journal on the table. Then Max picked up the last thing, a she couldn’t believe it was there. Max opened up the binder with her name on it, holding her breath. Inside were photos of her. It wasn’t just pictures of her doing things, nothing like surveillance. They were pictures of her, hands bound, lying with eyes half open, and one of her sitting in a brown chair, documenting the time she’d spent in the dark room in the reality that only she experienced. Without another word, Max gathered the contents of the safe from the table, loaded them up into her car, and got the hell out of there. She was never, ever going to the dark room again.
Max takes a look at the things she found in the dark room, and visits an old friend.

Thank you guys for always being so patient and for sticking around and reading my fanfiction. I am officially out of school, and I only have about 15 days off before I start my summer job. But you KNOW I will keep updating this! I think the entire thing is going to end up being 10-12 chapters, if I can just figure out where I want everything to go. Lots of crazy twists this chapter, thank you for reading!

Also please leave comments!! I love reading and responding to them. I'd LOVE to see predictions as well!!!!

Max sped home in her rental car, cursing as she caught every single red light on the way there. The binders and journal bounced around in the front seat, and Max hoped there wasn’t anything fragile in there. Max pressed down hard on the gas, as if it’d really get her to her hotel faster. She couldn’t believe all of this was really happening. Nathan had really counted on her to eventually come see him, keeping the secret of that other safe the entire time he’d been incarcerated—or longer, Max didn’t know. He had had faith that Max would see him, and it scared her that he knew her so well. It made her wonder what things would have been like if they’d ever given each other the time of day. But most of all, Max felt sick. Nathan had to have been the one to put those binders in there, and given his entitled personality, he probably had a good look at the pictures inside—which meant Nathan knew all about her time spent in the dark room.

Max skidded to a stop and quickly gathered all of her things, dropping the journal more than once as she rushed into the hotel lobby. She was greeted by the staff as she rushed to the elevator, responding to them half-heartedly, because she only wanted to see whatever was in those binders. She hastily unlocked the door to her room, dropping her bag on the floor after closing the door behind her, and spread her things out on top of the comforter of her freshly made bed.

“Okay,” Max started. “Timeline.” Max knew that the journal was the oldest thing in the safe, so she put that on the left most corner of the bed while she kicked her shoes off. Next, she put down Rachel’s binder. If it was somehow the same binder from evidence, then she already knew what was inside. Max went to move that binder to the middle, carefully, knowing her binder was the definite last. Now that she knew what order things went into the safe, she didn’t know what order she wanted to look at them. She had no interest in reliving the dark room for the third time that day, so she knew her own binder was out of the question, even if it was last.

Max really wanted to read the journal, but she was far too curious about Rachel Amber’s binder. Was this the binder from evidence, or was it a completely new binder? And what could have been inside of it? Why was Nathan determined to get Max to see it? Unable to contain her curiosity
anymore, Max sighed and pushed her own binder over to the side and sat on the bed where it had been. Max pulled Rachel’s binder into her lap and inhaled deeply. She held her breath, just for a moment, then exhaled slowly, hoping she’d be ready to face whatever was in the binder by the time the air was out, but even then, she wasn’t ready, so she repeated the exercise again as she thought about how bizarre this whole situation was.

Max had never wanted to come back to Arcadia Bay. She, though she knew how wrong it was, wasn’t planning on coming back for the anniversary of Chloe’s death, either. She was content in her memories with Chloe, and she’d thought that it’d be enough for her. But when she came back just a few days ago, she felt so different about it. Arcadia Bay, post Chloe, had felt like an empty shell. Max had memories there, but after that week finding out one of her favorite photographers was a psychopath, Max thought that Arcadia Bay was just any old place. Things happened here, but it still had this front of being this perfect little tiny town where things were always good and nobody got hurt. Max hated that everyone went so far to forget that this place had the capacity to be terrible. Max wanted no part of that, so she left, and acted like leaving was the best choice she could have made.

Annoyed, Max decided to stop wasting time going over things she already knew. She was just stalling because she was afraid. The last time she started following a trail and snooping around, her best friend was killed in front of her, twice. Who was going to be the casualty this time? Even though she would never admit it out loud, Max didn’t want to lose Nathan. She’d done enough to him. He deserved a quiet, peaceful life, even if a portion of that life was spent in prison. But there had to be a good reason Nathan was mixing her up in all of this. Was there someone else she had to save? And was it okay that the person she needed to save was probably herself?

Finally ready, Max slowly opened Rachel Amber’s binder, to reveal no pictures, no documents, no newspaper clippings, nothing. Inside were a bunch of empty sheet covers, and a single disc, in one of the inside flaps. Once Max saw the watermarked “DVD” on the disc, she scrambled to grab her computer and watch it. She felt the bullet necklace burning her chest, and she knew there was something crazy on that video. Max nearly tore the DVD out of the small paper envelope it was sealed in and shoved it into her computer without giving it enough time to warm up.

“C’mon, c’mon, come on!” she whispered, impatiently bobbing her knees up and down as she sat cross-legged on the bed. Her computer FINALLY loaded and Max sat there, desperately clicking on her DVD drive, trying to start the video. As the video loaded, a dialogue box opened, and Max squinted as she read, leaning into her computer.

“A password is required for this content to play,” Max started. Immediately, Max typed in Victoria’s birthday, eleven-fourteen, only to receive a second dialogue box that said, “Incorrect password, two attempts remaining.”

“Are you cereal? Fuck you, Nathan, lazy bastard.”

But then, Max remembered all that was written on the butterfly he’d given her, the one that was resting on her nightstand. Max rolled her eyes and looked up at the ceiling. “Sorry, Nathan,” she said. She picked up the butterfly, opened it, and carefully typed in everything on it, one letter after another. A smile crept onto her face as the media player on her computer started up. Max looked to see just how long the video was.

“FOUR HOURS?” she groaned. She glanced at the clock, noting the near six o’clock time. A ten o’clock bed time would be so bad. Max knew she eventually needed to rest, but she needed to get through the entire video tonight. Whatever was on this video could be answers, and having the answers may help Max figure out just what she wanted to ask Nathan.
Before Max started on the videos, she needed to make sure she was up for whatever she was about to see. Max could guess that there would be substantial footage of the dark room, and she didn’t want to be pausing every ten seconds for the expected breakdown. Max hoped that she would be able to get through it with minimal pauses. Thinking quickly, Max got on her room phone.

“Front desk, how may I help you?”

“Ah, sorry, I though this was room service,” Max said.

“I can take care of orders for you.”

Max took a moment to look at the menu, then smiled, and prattled off her order and went to change. She yanked her legs out of her pants and went to slip on her comfy pajama shorts. As Max moved the binders onto the desk in the front of the room, she made sure to keep the journal on her bed by the computer—she knew she had to read at least ONE entry before bed. Max waited with her hand hovering the spacebar on her computer, wondering if this really was the right thing to do. It was times like this where Max really missed her powers. Being indecisive like this was still so annoying to her even after five years powerless. As Max reminisced how easy everything was so easy all that time ago, she was brought out of her memories by a sudden knock at the door.

After thanking and tipping her waitress, Max carefully set her pasta down on her bed, and her requested pot of coffee sat on her nightstand while she went to grab a mug from her small kitchen area. Max sat down on her bed, socked feet under covers made warm from her laptop. Max set her laptop at her crossed feet, on top of the covers. Her coffee mug sat on the nightstand, and she had her pasta dish in her hand, scooping bites into her mouth. In her excitement to get out of her room that morning, she’d totally forgotten to eat, and didn’t eat in preparation to not barf at the dark room—even though she’d thrown up anyway. Max knew it was bad when the dark room and its persistent horrors stopped her from eating, so she knew she’d have to set up reminders on her phone so she could eat regularly again. Max knew Brooke was going to be disappointed and try to get her to eat, but Max could not stand the idea of being forced to eat—it made her appetite dwindle. Maybe there was something she could do to get it back.

Max slurped her noodles and pressed the spacebar, starting her four-hour video.

She was nearing the end of the video, eyes wide, knees to her chest, as she sipped her coffee. Max felt pretty successful, only having to stop the video twice to calm down, not to mention she finished all of her pasta along with its sides. Max wiped her tired eyes, focusing intently on what was going on in the video.

Max, in short, was beginning to understand why Nathan was so attached to her. One of the reasons was totally insane—well, if anyone other than her had come across the videos, they would have thought so. Nathan, Max discovered, had had the same powers of time manipulation that she had. Sean Prescott, being the A-plus person and father he was, used Nathan’s powers to get all of his riches. Max watched when Nathan first got a camera, proudly showing his photos to his dad, who ignored his interests as much as he could. The only time he feigned enthusiasm was when he needed Nathan for his powers. He’d have Nathan go back and tell his dad to make certain choices that ensured he be getting a lot of money. Max was practically elated when she first saw how Nathan was when he first got his powers—he was far too young to really understand what to do with them. She almost wished that the two of them had been friends—then they could have used their powers for good together.

“Shit’s still so crazy, dude,” Nathan had said about halfway through the video. “Going back, I
finally proved it to dad—and we’re spending so much time together.”

Max had wiped her tears. “Fuck you, Sean Prescott,” she said. “You’re the monster here.”

Then later, Max had seen how Nathan was becoming undone. He was pacing his room, often with a bottle of whiskey in hand, trying his damnedest to keep himself together. “It…it helps,” Nathan wailed, holding up his bottle. “It makes…it makes my brain feel ca-ca-calm. Calm. CALM. Fuck!” he’d yelled, throwing the bottle at the wall and smashing it. “Oh, shit. Oh shit, shit, shit, shit.”

“Nathan?” Max had heard off-screen. “Nathan, are you okay?”

Nathan ran off-camera, presumably to his bedroom door, and Max could hear the soft sound of him crying. “I’m fine, Kristine. Shelf fell. Leave me alone.”

“Nathan, let me in. Talk to me.” The door handle wiggled.

“I SAID I’M FINE, GO AWAY!”


But now, Max was nearing the end of the video. There was only a few minutes left. Max had seen a different side to Nathan on this video. Not only did she see him happy and then up until his breaking point, she also got to see how he was with Rachel.

It was like he was living in ecstasy.

Not a single outburst, not a single set of words he shouldn’t have said. no non-gentle hands, no countless apologies. When Nathan was with Rachel, the effects of the time-rewinding didn’t hurt him.

And it made Max a little angry. She wasn’t here to be a corpse’s replacement. But she shouldn’t have been upset. Nathan talked about Max on the video often. And he never had a bad thing to say. Not Max was at the end of the video, trying to hold it together, but it was getting tough. Nathan and Rachel were in the junkyard, and Rachel was wearing the outfit she died in.

“So tell me more about Max,” Rachel said. “Tell me how you met.”

“We haven’t REALLY met yet,” Nathan said. “It one timeline, she’s me and Tori’s best friend. But in the…in the right timeline, she fucking hates me.”

“Well, why don’t you just—hmm, I don’t know, be nice to her?” Rachel asked. She was standing a ways from Nathan, a beer by her feet, swaying from side to side.

Nathan laughed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Yeah, no, I already fucked that up. Or I’m about to, at least. At some point she is in the bathroom while Chloe’s bitching at me, but she doesn’t narc on me. Still, she doesn’t tell me what she saw. I get a little handsy,” he said, giving Rachel a funny face.

“Ooh, handsy?” Rachel cooed. “What, did you slap her ass or something?”

For a moment, Max saw Nathan blush. “Not THAT kind of handsy. I bruised her neck, she scratched my face, then I beat up her friend.”
“Jesus, Nathan,” Rachel said. “You have to watch your temper. But it’s kinds cool that you’ve been to so many realities. What’s it like?”

“It’s fucking terrible, Rachel,” Nathan sighed, still rubbing his nose. “The reality we’re about to make right now is our best bet for everyone being happy. But going through time is a constant fucking headache.”

Rachel stopped swaying and picked up her beer. She took a swig, burped, then replaced the bottle. “Are you gonna be happy in that reality? Even after…even after Chlo?”

“If Max is happy, I will be. Well, shit, I’ll manage, I guess.”

“Max must be a goddamn dream for you to do all this for her,” Rachel said. “Hope she’s worth it.”

“It’s not…it’s just…” Nathan started. His face growing red, he downed his own beer. “She has her own choices to make. But we have to make the reality where those choices are an option. Plus, there’s this one reality…this one where—” he stopped himself.

“No, tell me!” Rachel yelled.

Nathan’s face was all read now. I’m not gonna tell you if you get all sparkly-eyed an shit, okay? I’ve never told anyone this.”

“Spill!”

Nathan swallowed hard and rubbed his hands together. “Okay, so, in the universe where I kill Chloe and you…and you…”

“I get it, keep going,” Rachel said.

“In that reality, Jefferson gets caught. But there’s…there’s one where I get to see Max every day. We both get caught. And then I only see bits and pieces of it. A sunset by the lighthouse. But Max is with me. And there’s a little kid there.”

“YOU HAVE A KID WITH MAX?”

“I don’t know if it’s with Max! I don’t even know if it’s my kid!” Nathan said. “But any reality where I have a kid—if it is my kid, I want to be a good father. But even more so, I want Mark Jefferson to fucking rot.”

Rachel leaned hear head on Nathan’s shoulder and breathed out deliberately. “Well then…I guess it’s time.”

“Yeah, it is,” Nathan breathed. “Are you ready?”

Rachel sniffled and wiped her eyes. “Yeah, I’m ready. Lemme finish my beer first.” Rachel skipped off away form Nathan and picked up her drink. She gulped the entire thing down, let out a tremendous burp, and then wiped her soaking wet eyes. She pursed her lips and breathed out, puffing up her cheeks with cold, fearful air. “Are you sure this is the only way?”

Nathan’s face flushed red and he began to cry. “I wish it wasn’t, Rachel. But it’s the only way. It’s the only way the storm doesn’t kill everyone—unless Max wants it to.”

Rachel ran her fingers through her hair and looked at Nathan, a cold look in her hazel eyes. “She
better be worth it, Nathan. I mean, I know Jefferson’s gonna suffer either way—which I don’t mind. But you know, Max may make the wrong choice and the storm may still come. So IF that happens, is she worth it?”

Nathan picked up his beer bottle and quickly gulped whatever was inside. “I hope so, Rachel. I hope so. Are…are you ready?”

Rachel was really crying now. “No…but just do it. Just…just do it.”

“You know you might—”

“I know! That’s why you brought three of them, right? Nathan, just do it. Do it and get out of here before I freak.”

Max had heard similar words before. Max didn’t think Nathan would be morbid or stupid enough to film Rachel’s death, and she wanted to turn the video off, but there was still more to watch. Nathan held Rachel gently and helped her to the ground, then walked over and shut off the camera. The screen on Max’s laptop was blank for what felt like ages. Max figured the camera was just on while Nathan was traveling or something, so she reached forward to end the video. Suddenly, Nathan’s face popped up on the screen, a familiar scratch on his cheek and a gun in his hand.

“Everything’s done,” he sobbed. “Fuck, I hope I didn’t fuck this all up. R-Rachel—oh my god, Rachel. Fuck, Rachel. I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry. I went to shoot…to shoot Chloe. Then I was back at the front of the fucking school. I tried. I tried to rewind or fast forward or shit, something—but it didn’t work. That means it’s all up to Max now. But if him here, not on my way to jail, then shit, man. Max fucked up. It means she’s with Chloe. Fuck, man. Jefferson’s gonna fucking kill me. He’s gonna fucking kill me. I hate this,” he cried. “I hate living like this with my fucked up head. I hate it. I want to die. I want to fucking die.”

Shortly after that, Max understood everything. Nathan had been so nasty to her that week because he thought she’d already made the choice to stay with Chloe. He must have seen that the storm came in the reality where she scratched him, so he assumed that if he was scratched, then Max sacrificed Arcadia Bay. But he didn’t know Max had to go through that in order to get to the choice of fixing everything. Nathan was so mean to her that week because he believed he’d killed Rachel for nothing. He thought Max could fix everything, and he thought she really did let everything go to shit.

And Sean Prescott? He was worst than Max thought. He exploited his son horribly, risking his sound mind and mental health all for money. Nathan turned to drugs and alcohol to try to numb his pain, and to try to feel normal again, and it messed him up. He’d already had his illnesses—depression and Borderline Personality Disorder—but years of abuse and misdiagnosis made them worse. Max knew why everything was so bad for Nathan, now.

Max slowly closed her computer, and rubbed the tears away from her eyes as she breathed to clam herself down. Max wanted to look more inside her binder and to read that journal, but she knew she wouldn’t be able to handle it—the video was already to much. Max had been able to see how cruel Sean Prescott was, as well as Rachel Amber’s last words. She also got to see that Nathan had absolute faith in her and thought the world of her. Any animosity she held toward Rachel melted away once she realized what Rachel had sacrificed. Max could have killed all of Arcadia Bay for Chloe—and dammit, she wanted to. She wanted nothing more than to run away with Chloe and be with her, but she couldn’t. She couldn’t do it. And Max hoped—genuinely hoped—that Chloe and Rachel were able to meet again. Max suddenly felt the urge to visit the junkyard, to visit Rachel’s small memorial cross that was there, but she knew it was too late—and she had breakfast plans in the morning.
Max spent her last few minutes getting ready, primping her hair, then she took a look at herself in the mirror by the door. She was in her favorite dress, a sleeveless halter with a wine-red rose belt. She wore matching patterned stockings, with blue-striped socks to keep her notoriously cold feet warm. She wore a pair of clunky platform heels, and as always, she had Chloe’s bullet necklace hanging around her neck. She pulled on her leather jacket and walked out the door.

Max had expected to meet Warren and Stella at the Two-Whales Diner, as it was THE perfect breakfast in Arcadia Bay. Instead, Warren changed their venue to a really nice place uptown, and Max expected it was to impress her now that she made a lot of money. Max appreciated the gesture, but she saw no point in paying thirty dollars for a fancy bacon omelet when she could get a better one at the Two Whales for less than half the price. Either way, Max was happy to be connecting with people in Arcadia Bay again. Max drove along on familiar roads, smiling as the light breeze washed over her cheeks through her open window. She parked the car in the front lot of restaurant “Coolridge Café,” next to Warren’s beat-up blue car. That old nasty thing was Warren’s baby, and Max was surprised it lasted this long. Max laughed at the thought of gifting him a new car. He’d probably just use its parts to salvage that old thing.

Looking at her watch, Max walked into the café, and noticed Warren sitting in a booth near the back. His eyes lit up when he saw her, like they always did, and he stood up to greet her. “Max, hey!” he started, opening his arms for a hug. Once she heard his voice, it was like Max was eighteen again. She could remember every kiss he’d ever given her, every caress of her face and shoulders, every single second of uproarious laughter, and the immense warmth she felt every time he told her that he loved her. She remembered the night they first slept together, how nervous they both were and how they both tried to calm it with laughter. As Max felt her face grow red when she hugged him, she suddenly smelled the gentle lavender scent of Stella’s perfume. Then, Max remembered the fight they had that initially broke them up.

“What do you mean you don’t want to move in together?”

Max paced her first tiny apartment in frustration. Who knew a fight over not changing the toilet paper roll could grow into something so big? “We have been over this, Warren. Bullying me is not going to change my mind. I told you, while I am working, I need my OWN SPACE to—”

“You are ALWAYS working, Max! You never have time for me, for us anymore!” Warren shouted. We have a life here! We could get married, have a family, but all you care about is your job!”

Max’s brow furrowed and she kicked Warren’s dirty shoes to the side as she made a beeline to where he was standing. “You’re damn right I care about my job, Warren Graham. I worked my ASS off to get where I am today.”

Warren scoffed. “No, you used your best friend’s murder to get famous.”

Max went silent.

“Max, I’m sorry, I didn’t—”

“Get out,” Max said. “And go find someone else to be Mrs. Graham.”

“Max, please, I didn’t mean it,” Warren said. “I shouldn’t have—”
“Yeah,” Max said, handing Warren his shoes, “you really shouldn’t have.”

Max hoped Warren wasn’t thinking about their fight as they were hugging, and she especially hoped he wasn’t reminiscing the drunken apology that had gotten them back together for those three months.

“You look good, Max! And so tall!” Warren smiled.

Max smiled and gestured to her shoes. “I got tired of people thinking I was an eighth-grader. Where’s Stella?”

“On her way,” Warren said, sitting back down. “She got called in to calm Nathan down, he’s on one today. How’re the visits going?”

Max set her bag down and slid into the booth across from Warren. “They’re going. Yesterday was a pretty good visit, but you know how he’s prone to…outbursts.”

“Yeah,” Warren said. “So how have you been? Working? Got a line of guys out the door?”

“Always working,” Max said, sipping one of the waters on the table. “And no guys.”

“Oh,” Warren said, blushing. “A line of girls out the door?”

Max chuckled. “Nope, nobody. Just me and my camera which, thanks, by the way.”

Warren smiled warmly, that big, goofy smiled that Max loved. She took out her camera and snapped a picture, just as Stella walked up with a tired look on her face.

Warren stood and let Stella slide into the booth across from her, giving her a kiss on the cheek once he sat down beside her. “Rough morning?”

Stella downed her water and reached for Warren’s. “I’m pretending this is bourbon.”

“Jesus, babe, what happened?” Warren asked.

“Nathan. He is ON ONE, today.”

Max closed her menu, deciding on the raspberry-stuffed French toast. “Can I…should I visit?”

Stella ran her fingers through her hair and leaned her head on Warren’s shoulder. “If you dare. He’s just yelling and screaming and swinging at everyone today.”

“Man, I’m glad I kicked that guy’s ass when I had the chance. He’s crazy,” Warren said.

As Stella reamed Warren about his insensitive terminology, Max thought about the day she let Warren beat Nathan up. She felt sick when she thought about it, but ultimately, she thought it was the right thing to do. She rewound five and six times that day, trying to figure out what to do. In the end, when Max let Warren beat Nathan up that day, Chloe took away Nathan’s gun. Max didn’t know what happened in the other reality where Nathan kept the gun, but she didn’t care. He was safer without it, even if he was a little beat up.

The rest of breakfast was nice and uneventful, spent reminiscing about days at Blackwell and
catching up on their lives as adults. Once Warren and Stella kissed goodbye, Max and Stella stayed chatting by their cars.

“You’re not very happy there, are you? And I SWEAR I’m not trying to shrink you,” Stella giggled.

For once, Max didn’t mind discussing her job. She felt a little bad that the conversation was pretty much kept to her and Stella during breakfast, but she knew Warren was just happy to be spending time with the both of them. Max had told them about Talia and Victoria and Victoria’s baby, being a bit more private about how she felt about her job while Warren was around. Once she was sure she could trust that Stella would share anything with Warren, that’s when she got deeper into how she felt about working as a wedding photographer. “It’s not that I’m not happy,” Max said. “I’m just upset that my work is so…so *shitty*.”

“SHITTY?” Stella blurted. “Your work is *amazing*, Max.”

Max paused and thought for a moment, not wanting to risk sounding cocky. “I…I appreciate that you like my work. I just feel like it’s so bland. I don’t feel anything when I look at it. But here, look. This is what I like. This is the kind of stuff I feel good about.” Max opened her bag and gave Stella the picture she’d taken of Warren earlier.

“You feel good about Warren? Max, are you still in love with him?”

“NO!” Max yelled, almost too enthusiastically. “No, I meant it’s a good picture. Hey, if it makes you feel better, you can keep it. I didn’t come here for Warren, Stella. Our time came and went. I’m here for Nathan. I’m thankful for the time I had with Warren, but we’ve both moved on. Shit, I feel like I’m still half in love with my ex, Talia, the one I told you about, and I—” Max stopped short once she saw that Stella was covering her mouth, trying to stifle her laughter. “You were kidding.”

“I’m sorry, Max,” Stella giggled. “You just made it so easy. I needed the laugh, I’m sorry. I have no worries about you and Warren. I have the suspicion that if the two of you wanted to be together, you would be.”

Max smiled. “So, about visiting Nathan today…”

“I would do so at your own risk. Hell, it would probably help if he saw you. I’ll let you in. Make sure you wear your jacket when we get in—I know that outfit’s not approved, but I have a little pull when it comes to Nathan.”

* * *

Stella and Max walked into her unusually unlocked office and Max was happy to whip off her hot jacket. Max stopped short when Stella’s arm shot up to guard her and keep Max still. On one of Stella’s couches, Nathan sat bleeding from the nose and mouth, with a very frustrated David Madsen leaning against her desk. Max looked intently at them both, as did Stella, but Stella couldn’t see their silent conversation like Max could. Max could see it in their facial expressions, their small, barely noticeable gestures. David was scared for Nathan, and Nathan didn’t think he deserved anything but Hate from David. But from Stella’s standpoint, the only thing present was a fight.

Stella dropped her bag and rubbed her forehead. “What the hell happened?”

David sighed and turned and slammed his fist on Stella’s desk. “Three inmates cornered and assaulted him in the shower room. We had a security breach. They should never have been left alone in there.”
“The bathroom? Did they—”

“Should I step out for this?” Max blurted, knowing exactly where the conversation was going. She already had enough freedom, walking around in a tight dress and heels. She didn’t want to violate Nathan’s privacy as well.

“Why should you?” Nathan said. He turned and spit on the floor and Stella cringed. “You just stood there when Warren wailed on me. Why shouldn’t you just stand here now?”

Max crossed her arms. “Remind me, was that before or after Chloe took the gun from you? Oh, right, it was after. So if we’re done comparing notes?”

Nathan forced a laugh as David watched him, and Stella went to the bathroom in the office. They heard the faucet turn, and Stella tossed a cold towel to Max, who then joined Nathan on the couch. She lifted the towel and Nathan pointedly scooted away from her. She went to reach for him again, but he held up his restrained hands, with tightly balled fists. “Don’t fffffffucking touch me, Max Caulfield.”

“Fine, I won’t,” Max sneered. She laid the towel over his hands and dug around in her purse for her phone and appointment calendar. She began checking her email and writing things down. David took Max’s indifference as his cue to leave, while Stella took a seat at her desk, just long enough for her to put her things away. Stella, after putting her purse in her desk and typing a short message on her computer, stood and walked too the door. “I’m going to talk to David for a moment. There are security cameras in here, remember, and there will be security posted outside this door.”


Stella rolled her eyes and left her office, leaving Max working and Nathan struggling to hold the cold towel up to his face. He looked over to Max, who was working, and looked away whenever he knew she felt his eyes on her.

“Can I help you?” Max asked. She kept her eyes on her work.

Angry, Nathan waved his hands in front of Max’s face. “Can you press this against my face?”

“Don’t fffffffucking touch me, Max Caulfield,” Max mimicked him. Eventually she looked over at him, just to see his reaction, and noticed him trying to wrap his restrained hands around the towel, unsuccessful. He sighed and looked down at his hands, frustrated. Max closed her calendar and sighed. She scooted closer to Nathan and let him rest his hands on her knee. She pressed the towel against his face and he winced. “Did you get checked out by the doctor?”

“No point—ow! It’s a towel, not a fucking brick, Max.”

“You could do it yourself,” she smirked. She readjusted her hand for a gentler grip, and lightly dabbed the towel on his face. “Lose any teeth?”

Nathan moved his head away from her and forced a smile. His teeth looked like a checkerboard. “Nope, pearly whites all here. Move that towel again and that dress is gonna be my new blood-rag.”

Max rolled her eyes and padded his face. He moved away from the towel, but if she told him not to move, he’d probably lose it. “Why can’t you hold it yourself?”

Nathan leaned into her hand and moved the towel to another section of his face. “It hurts to bend my fingers. They stepped on them when they cornered me.”
Max nodded and kept up with the towel. They sat in silence for a bit, Nathan content with having the cool cloth on his face. He groaned slightly as Max cleaned him off, and the sound sent an odd sensation through her body. As Max tried to control herself, she wondered why the other inmates would jump him. Nathan was no kingpin—as far as Max knew. He had no drugs running, no sort of cash flow. The only reason they would have done anything to him was if Sean Prescott had done something to them in the past. Nathan was their ticket to his father, and all they could have done was hurt him—or worse—humiliate him.

“The inmates who attacked you,” Max started, moving the cloth, “they didn’t…did they…”

“No, they didn’t. So there’s no reason to go to doctor tits and have her stick a q-tip up my asshole,” Nathan said. “They said my dad fucked them over. They couldn’t get to him, so they got to me. Not exactly how I want to spend my day after getting my ribs cracked, Max!”

“Hey, don’t try to project your anger onto me, Nathan. If you want me to go, I’ll leave. I have work to do anyway. I came here today because I wanted to. I wanted to see how you were doing. So if you could at least fake a little gratitude, that’d be nice,” Max said.

It was true. Nathan had had a rough day, and Max was genuinely concerned for his wellbeing. Max kept her glare on him and he gave her a mean look that was classically Nathan. He mouthed two words to her, and she didn’t know whether it was “fuck you” or “thank you,” but she imagined it was the latter. They glared at each other for a moment, waiting for the other to speak, both saying nothing. Max swallowed hard, hoping that it somehow would stop the blush she knew was growing on her face. Nathan took the towel out of Max’s hands and set it on the table.

“Is my face still bleeding?” he asked.

“Aх, it’s, it’s—”

“It’s a yes-or-no-question,” Nathan said. “Am I bleeding anymore or not?”

“No,” Max said. “You’re not.”

“God, finally,” he sighed. Nathan took Max’s hand and opened it up. He put her palm against his cheek and held it there with both hands, his eyes closed. He looked calm and peaceful. His brows were just a bit furrowed, but Max knew that was normal for him. His breath whistled as it hit her palm, and Max started to wriggle her hand away. “Move your hand again, and I’ll break your wrist,” Nathan said, eyes still closed.

Max was scared now. She heard from him before that he was a hitter, but she’d only seen a little of his violence—the bruises on her neck were evidence of that. Max didn’t want anything worse than these bruises, but she didn’t know how to keep her hand still. The fear of Nathan’s wrath kept her hand shaking.

Nathan opened his eyes and Max slammed her eyes shut in anticipation. She felt his cold hands on her cheeks, and she slowly opened her eyes. His face was so close, their noses were almost touching. He had a weird look in his eyes, and Max prayed things weren’t going in the direction she thought they were going to go.

“Max,” he said softly. “Relax. I’m not gonna break your wrist. The towel made my face numb and cold. Your hands are warm. I’m sorry.”

Nathan leaned in again, but before Max could close her eyes to brace for whatever was going to happen between them, she felt Nathan’s head on her lap. She looked down at his dirty blond,
unkempt hair, and as always, he was looking away from her. Max wanted so desperately to see his face, to get an insight as to what he was thinking, but Nathan was a surprisingly private person, and Max knew she wasn’t going to know anything unless he wanted her to. Max hated feeling like he had control over her. Eventually she’d be at his beck and call, visiting whenever he felt he wanted to see her. What was she even really there for? SHE wanted to help him recover. But why did HE want her there, aside from sharing the same powers as her?

Defeated, Max returned to her work, writing with her right hand as she absentmindedly rubbed Nathan’s head with her left. As she looked over her work schedule, she checked a few emails, then stopped short when she felt something odd on Nathan’s head. He winced, and Max figured it was just a bruise from his fight earlier.

“When I was six,” Nathan began. “I was messing around with Victoria’s big-ass Saint Bernard when she wasn’t home. While we were playing, I sat on his back and he carted me around. I think his name was Bear. Well, the stupid fucker started chasing a squirrel and got halfway up a tree with me still clinging onto his back. I fell and hit my head. Laid there for god knows how long. When I woke up, my mom was holding me, crying. Victoria was there, too. I got a concussion, and I needed stitched. My mom cried a lot. She was so scared. That’s what the scar you touched is from.”

Max had never heard anything about Nathan’s mom before. Max always figured she got tired of Sean Prescott’s shit and left him. Nobody ever really had any reason to talk about her because she wasn’t going around making everybody’s lives miserable. She was just someone that everybody knew existed, but no one ever thought about. “Tell me about your mom,” Max said gently. She felt her lap grow damp. Nathan was crying.

“My mom was so fucking great, Max,” Nathan said quietly. “She used to say that Kristine and I lit up her life. Rachel—Rachel Amber reminded me of her. My mom loved me, Max Caulfield. She loved me with all her heart. That’s what she said in the letter. She left it on my pillow. She told me to try to be happy, to try to keep my head on straight. And then I found her dead in the bathroom. The bathtub had blood all over it. She was still in her work clothes. We replaced the bathtub; it was stained red. Dad got rid of all her pictures. I never saw her again after that day. Dad had her cremated. Kept her ashes from us. I was fifteen when I found her. But she was sorry. She was so sorry. And I’m sorry, Max. I’m so sorry. I’m sorry Rachel had to die. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” Max didn’t know what to say. “I…I’m sorry,” was all she could think TO say. “I’m sorry, Nathan.”

“Max?” he said, wiping his tears with his hands. He turned so he was looking up at her. He looked sad. “Did you go to the dark room?”

Max closed her eyes and swallowed hard. “Yes, I did, Nathan.”

“So you—”

“I know about your powers, yes,” Max interrupted. “And you know about mine.”

Nathan faced away from her again, swallowing hard himself. “Thank you for still coming to see me. After all of that.”

Max said nothing, she only rubbed his head. She wanted to ask questions and get answers, but she could ask later—or maybe check out the junkyard. She owed Rachel an apology.

But right now, Nathan needed Max to comfort him, so she stayed there, working and rubbing his head, until he eventually drifted off to sleep.
Breakthrough

Chapter Summary

Max has a small epiphany that will hopefully make her future visits easier.

Chapter Notes

IT'S FINALLY HERE!!!! I am so glad you guys were all so patient waiting for this! Trust me, I felt terrible that I couldn’t just GET IT DONE! My job is EXHAUSTING what with constantly micromanaging because nobody at that place but me and my honorable coworker knows what the heck they’re doing.

However, let me remind you that this piece of writing is for entertainment. I should not be getting constant anonymous messages on my caulscott blog telling me I need to update—as if I don’t already know. This is something I am doing for FREE in my FREE TIME and if it gets to the point that it's more hassle than it's worth, I will not continue the fanfiction. Happy reading!

CHAPTER 7 [BREAKTHROUGH]

“Hey, Max, sorry to bother you, but—” Stella stopped short once she saw Max’s finger over her own mouth, begging Stella to lower her voice. Nathan was still asleep on her lap, and she didn’t want to wake him. Stella obeyed Max and faintly tiptoed into the room, quietly closing the door behind her. “Max,” she whispered this time, “visiting hours just ended. I told David that you were gathering your things. Nathan and I have a session we have to start.”

“Yeah,” Max breathed. She stuffed her calendar and phone back into her bag. She looked down at Nathan, still asleep, and slowly brought her hands to his head.

“Hey, stop, I’m awake,” Nathan said. “I’m awake. Don’t touch me.” Nathan rose slowly, eyes closed, and raised both of his arms—as if he had a choice not to—over his head to stretch. He rubbed his tired eyes and sleepily moved his hair out of his face, careful not to let the cold handcuffs touch his chin. “Was I asleep for a long time?” he asked.

“Just under two hours,” Max said.

“Nathan,” Stella said softly, “will you be okay here alone while I walk Max out?”

Nathan held up his handcuffed wrists and waved them around. “How much trouble can I even get into, idiot?”

Stella glared at Nathan as she picked up the dried towel on the table and pointed to the carpet. “Well first, you spit on my floor, then you threatened to break Max’s wrist if she didn’t do what you wanted—completely disregarding our little chat about compromise—and last week, you broke a vase.”
Nathan blushed. He’d totally forgotten about all the security that was around all the time. That meant Stella knew about his mom—and no doubt she took notes on it so it’d be easier to bring up later. She was going to be bothering him about it for weeks. “I did you a favor, that was an ugly-ass vase,” Nathan said finally.

“Oh, so I suppose the carpet is ugly as well?”

“Yup.”

“And Max?”

Nathan got quiet again and buried his face into the couch. “Leave me alone, Stella.”

Stella smirked and walked Max to the door. For just a moment, she closed it behind her, and spoke to one of the officers who had been posted outside the door. “Two days ago, you cracked my patient’s rib. Today, your screw-up got him beat up and that is an unnecessary trauma that may have set back my work. Twice, twice my patient has been punished because of your incompetence. I am going to leave you with him just so I can walk Max out—keep in mind that Mr. Madsen will be watching in the security room. If another single thing happens to my patient under your watch, I will have you FIRED. Is that clear?”

The officer gulped audibly and opened the door to Stella’s office, then closed it gently behind him once he was inside.

Stella exhaled in relief and looked at Max apologetically. “I’m sorry you had to see that, Max,” she said. “I can’t believe he’s even still working here. All he does is screw up.”

Max was in awe of Stella. She’d never seen her so in control before. Back at Blackwell, Stella only hung out with Kate and Alyssa, and the three of them often kept to themselves. Max found a friend in Victoria and Brooke, and she only breached Stella’s group to hang out with Kate. Max and Stella only ever really spoke in passing, and Max realized they’d never really talked this much before. Max admired Stella, because despite how badly Nathan treated her, she seemed to really care about his progress and his recovery. Max just hoped that Sean Prescott’s money wasn’t influencing how much she cared.

“Stella,” Max said. “I think we should be friends.”

Stella gave Max a dumbfounded look. “I thought we were friends?”

“We are, I’m sorry, I mean,” Max paused. She was trying to find the right words to say, as she often was. “I mean, I think we should hang out every now and then. Phone calls. Movies. That sort of thing. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to—I’m sorry.”

Stella laughed and Max blushed in response. “Max, I’m gonna shrink you for just a minute: there is no need for you to apologize unless you’ve done something wrong, okay?”

“I’m sor—” Max stopped again. Stella was right. Max needed to accept that sometimes she wasn’t going to get the words right, but there was no reason to apologize for it. “Thank you, Stella. And damn, you whipped that officer into shape!”

Stella forced and laugh and rubbed her eyes. “It’s my job. Thank you for doing this, Max, seeing Nathan. You have no idea how good this will be for him.”

“Why the sudden push for me to see him now? Is it just because Sean Prescott is dying?”
“What? No,” Stella said. She sighed as she walked Max to her car, and tapped her food, angrily looking at the ground as she tried to find the words. “Max, Nathan’s up for parole. Soon. You may be the key to getting him healthy enough to be…to be free. But I don’t want you to think about that—all you have to do is be here for him. And thank you for coming to see me, too.”

Max stopped her car at the junkyard, thankful that no one else had tried to take a day trip there. Max needed to be alone when she saw Rachel. She needed their conversation to be completely private. The junkyard, as everything in Arcadia Bay, was much smaller than she remembered, and she shivered once she felt the familiar shake of the ground when the train went by. It made her think of all the stuff she went through with Chloe.

Saving Chloe that day was the absolute worst. Seeing the train fling her body parts all over was something Max would never forget, no matter how many realities she crossed. But then again, Max knew it should have prepared her for the ache of Chloe’s actual death, but somehow, watching it again made things worse.

As Max reminisced, she felt her cellphone vibrate for the millionth time that day. It was a miracle that Nathan was able to sleep through all of the buzzing. Bothered, Max tore through her camera bag, cursing Brooke, as she assumed it was just a worried phone call due to her breakdown yesterday. Max was thankful that Brooke cared so much but she shouldn’t have had to stop her world just to make sure Max wasn’t crying. Max pulled out her cellphone, ready for a lecture on lack of calling, then froze once she saw who was trying to reach her. Quickly, she answered. “How the hell did you get this number?”

“Oh, Maxie, I thought you’d never answer.”

“What do you want, Talia?”

“I miss you,” she said. “I miss—”

“Go and miss your husband, Talia. I’m blocking this number. Don’t call again.” Max hung up as quickly as she’d answered and blocked the number as fast as she could, right in the middle of Talia’s second call.

“I miss you? Fuck off,” Max seethed. Talia had had plenty of time to make this phone call. She had plenty of time to miss Max and had it been closer to the initial date of their break up, Max would probably have been more inclined to take her back once she was issued an appropriate apology. Max was nobody’s consolation prize—if she wasn’t going to do that for Nathan, there was no reason for her to do it for Talia. Max took a deep breath to try to calm herself down. It was funny: Max had always thought that Talia was her angel, that Talia had made her a better person, but now that they weren’t together, all Talia did was bring out the worst in her.

Max shoved her phone back into her bag and continued walking into the junkyard, hoping to find Rachel’s small memorial still intact. No doubt some asshole teenagers came around and kicked her cross out of the ground just to be rebellious. Just like Talia had rebelled outside of her marriage and dated Max. Max scoffed and tried to remember that she was here for Rachel, not to find a place to be angry at Talia. Max continued through the junkyard, dodging shiny green Heineken bottles and remnants of cigarettes. Max laughed at the slight musty smell in the air, as it reminded her of Chloe’s room every times she smoked. It sometimes made Max a little sad that the only way Chloe was really happy was when she was high, but Max couldn’t blame her—she had a pretty shitty home life, what with David’s abusive behaviors and Joyce’s outright neglect.
Max couldn’t get over how little the town had changed, even though it seemed so different when she’d first arrived. Max was older and taller and such, but everything in the junkyard was right where it was supposed to be. The bus was still half-decayed with broken wood all around it and all the forgotten cars still sat, rusted. The only thing that seemed to be missing was the cross for Rachel Amber’s memorial. Max went to the tiny spot where she and Chloe had first found Rachel’s body and saw that her cross was nowhere to be found. Max rolled her eyes and bent down, scanning the area as she moved slowly through the wet dirt.

Eventually, she came across Rachel’s cross, some ways away from the memorial, covered in dirt and smelling an awful lot like beer. Max dusted the cross off as best she could, at least so she could see the sparkly pink “R-A-C-H-E-L” across it. Instead of putting the cross back right away, Max held onto it. She didn’t know if it would really be safe in the ground, seeing as some asshole had already taken it upon themselves to ruin it. Max looked away, scanning again for something, and soon saw Rachel and Chloe’s little room. Max smiled.

“It doesn’t belong here,” she said quietly. Max closed her eyes for a moment, knowing she’d have to prepare to see that room again. From where Max was standing, all she could see was caution tape, broken from constant entry. Carefully, Max walked over fractured beer bottles and mounds of cigarettes and went inside the room. She took a deep breath, trying not to get sick. The room didn’t smell bad or anything, but Mark Jefferson’s vandalism—atop Chloe’s and Rachel’s—was still there.

“Rachel was here,” Max read to herself, trying to ignore that harsh red spray over Rachel’s message. Slowly, as Max lowered the cross to the table, she was surprised to see droplets of water fall onto the cross as she set it down. “Fuck,” Max whispered.

She sat down next to the cross and hung her head in her hands. After all this time, she was still a wreck over Chloe, and still, stupidly, jealous of a girl long dead. Rachel just had that...that thing. She had this thing that everybody loved and Max knew she didn’t have anything like that. She felt like she wasn’t good enough for Chloe, and now she felt like Nathan would have recovered a long time ago, had he not killed Rachel, and had her there instead to help him through his healing process. Max was always going to feel like second fiddle to her. “It-it should have been me,” Max sobbed, trying to find reason in this shitty situation. “That way, everyone would be happy. Rachel would still be alive—” and Max stopped short, for a very small, very quiet doe had entered the room. Max tried to find words, but they caught in her throat, leaving her speechless. She wanted to reach for her camera and snap a picture of the curious doe, but it she had gone away as quickly as she’d come.

It was time to stop and Max knew it. It was time to stop being jealous of Rachel—Rachel, whose leap of faith on Max resulted in her death. Max was acting selfishly, wishing Rachel were alive so she didn’t have to make any more touch decisions. She could miss Chloe as long as she needed to, but there had to come a time where she finally accepted her decision so that Chloe could rest in peace. Chloe had gone through with it, making herself a secret hero, and Max needed to learn to be content with that as her final memory of Chloe: Chloe being brave. It was time to just let go and remember why she came back to Arcadia Bay in the first place. She didn’t come here to let her anxiety make her feel bad about herself, nor did she returned to be racked with guilt. She was here to help Nathan Prescott, the boy who’d given up his life because he believed in hers.

Max wiped her tears a final time and took another deep breath. It felt as though a weight had been lifted from her heart. She didn’t know how long this newfound clarity would last, but she hoped she’d be able to go at least a day without feeling like every decision she’d ever made was wrong. She walked back to her rental car, got in, took the long street back onto the main road, and once it was safe, Max turned and began to drive.

* * *
Max awoke to an unfamiliar white ceiling, her entire body feeling too cold to function. She moved her arm into the air, only to see a clear tube attached to the vein inside her elbow. She felt alright, albeit a bit sore, and went to sit up.

“Max, don’t move. They’re going to give you an MRI and a Cat scan. Do NOT move,” Joyce said, moving to touch Max’s hand.

“Is this real?” Max asked. She turned her head and eyes slowly, only to see a sick-looking David holding his head in his hands. “Am I dead? Is, is this the dark room?” Max began to panic. “What happened? What happened to me?”

“Max, you have to stay calm,” Joyce said. “We’re in the hospital. A semi lost control and he hit your car. Luckily, David was on his way home, so he was able to get you here quickly.

“It…hurts,” Max breathed, trying her hardest to focus on staying still, “my arms…and my chest, too.”

“It damn well should!” David shouted. “That shithead hit you so hard your seatbelt gave you a huge bruise across your body. I’m so sorry, Max. He should have been more careful.”

Max breathed out loftily, and stared up at the ceiling. What a day this had been. She was able to have a moment with Nathan that was nice, almost tender, and now here she was, possibly having escaped death. If fate was a person, Max was ready to fight them, because she had no idea why things were getting so damn difficult. She just wanted to be here, to do the right thing, but fate was determined to make her fail. But just as Max was going to resolve to stay out of fate’s way, she remembered the doe. Not only the one she saw when she was looking for beer bottles for the Reckless Chloe Gun Challenge, but the one she’d seen today as well. She had been at the height of her sadness, the precipice of her doubt. Then the doe showed up and reminded her to keep a level head. She knew what she was there for. Max pressed a button on the panel to her left and was slowly raised into a half-seated position in her bed. She was careful not to put the bed up too high, for she was covered in wires and things she knew would be painful to just up and tear off.

“Nurse,” Max called, flagging down a woman wandering in scrubs. “Do I really need the MRI or the scan?”

“Absolutely, Miss Caulfield. But, if your readings are normal, we won’t have to keep you overnight,” she replied.

Max sighed and relaxed against her bed. This sucked. And then, as Max clanked in horror at her half-shredded purse, she realized that things were about to be much, much worse. “My phone, David, my phone. Did it survive the crash?”

“Max, seriously? This is no time to be worrying about—”

“David,” Max said. “Did the media get in on any of this?” Max asked frantically.


Max slammed her eyes closed and pointed to her bag. “Please, please, hand me my phone, a phone, I don’t care.”

Quickly, Joyce came to her feet and immediately tore through Max’s bag, ignoring any
carefulness, as the Michael Kors was done for. Inside, Max’s phone was broken beyond repair. Once Joyce held up the phone for Max to see, Max began taking deep breaths, only to have them turn into hyperventilation. She tried her best to stay calm, in hopes to thwart her oncoming panic attack. Max glanced at the tv on the nearby wall, and resolved to try to keep her eyes off of it, just in case somebody tried to switch the channel to the news—which, no doubt, was probably glorifying everything to make it sound like she was in critical condition. Max knew Brooke had probably already called her a billion times, followed by a level-headed Stella trying to console an enraged Nathan. This was a disaster before Max even really had a chance to assess everything. Trying to remember the doe, Max finally spoke.

“Joyce, please, I need to use your phone to call Brooke. She worries a lot and this news will NOT be good for her to hear through TV. No doubt she’s calling me right now. Please,” Max said gently. “She’s got to know that I am alive, at least before Channel Four News-At-Nine suddenly finds a blood clot in my brain or something.”

Without skipping a beat, Joyce reached into her pocket for her phone, much to David’s annoyance.

Max only smiled. It was nice to take charge, for once. Everything she did had an air of desperate helplessness that resulted in half-assed decision-making. It was so nice to feel like she was getting a little room to breathe; like she was on top of things without having to go back and rewind and fix what she was doing. The thought that everything was going to be okay wasn’t what comforted her; it was that she finally felt like she was doing something right. This was the first decision since seeing Nathan that wasn’t overshadowed by doubt. Maybe seeing him was helping her, too.

Max thanked a still disheveled Joyce with a nod and quickly dialed Brooke’s cellphone number, who answered her phone before Max could even take a breath to say hello.

“Joyce! Oh, thank god, Joyce. How is she? Is she okay? News says her condition is—”

“Brooke—”

“Max!” Brooke yelled. She sighed deeply and Max knew she was crying. “Max, for fuck’s sake, are you okay? What is going on? The news said—”

“Brooke,” Max said firmly. “Remember what I said about the news—anything for ratings. So far I’ve only got a bruise and a damaged car…and maybe a little hurt pride. I feel FINE—but they’re doing an MRI, a cat scan, probably even some x-rays, just in case. But I am fine right now. Do you think you can get a hold of mom and dad for me?”

“Max, I can’t—”

“Brooke, please?”

Max heard Brooke take a deep breath. She knew Brooke was going to hold this over her head for the rest of her life, and Max knew that she’d deserve it. Her parents were pretty disconnected unless Max told them she was going to be on tv or something, otherwise they were content with just each other and the dog Max had gotten them a year ago. “Okay Max,” Brooke said finally. She wasn’t Chloe, but she was a great friend in her own way. “But you BETTER call me before you go to bed, got it? I fucking mean it, Max. If you sleep before calling me, I’m gonna fly there and kill you myself.”

Brooke hung up before Max could offer a “thank you,” and she was right to do so. Max knew that Brooke was bound to explode with anger had she spent another moment on the phone with her.
Max was in enough trouble as it was. She had another very important call to make.

“Joyce,” Max said softly, as a nurse came and changed the bag for her IV, “do you have the number for the prison?”

Joyce hesitated for a moment. “I do, but please tell me you’re not going there to visit again? You need to tone it down—you might have broken bones. A cracked skull!”

“Definitely bruises,” Max tried to joke. “I just need to tell Stella that I am okay. No doubt Nathan is losing his mind right now.”

“Hell, he deserves to be a little inconvenienced,” Joyce spat. “This is not about him.”

Max didn’t know what to say. Joyce said she’d forgiven Nathan, so it was odd for her to say something so biting. “Joyce?”

“I am not in the wrong here, Maxine Caulfield,” Joyce said, putting on her scary mom-voice. “Do you have any idea how it feels to get a call from someone you care about only to hear that your kid was killed on a bathroom floor? Of course you don’t—and I pray you never do. But right now, while Brooke is dialing your parents, they are probably watching the news. They are filling with the same dread that I did, and once they see the little ‘Brooke’ flash across their cellphone screens, they are going to panic. I’m not trying to tell you that calling Stella about your condition is wrong, but your parents deserve to hear your voice after thinking that you bit the bullet.”

Max swallowed hard and closed her eyes for a long while, trying to hold back tears. Her eyes burned and a lump formed in her throat, making it hard to breathe. She didn’t even think about how this was like Chloe’s death all over again for Joyce. She didn’t think about how her parents must have been worried about her—despite her car accident, knowing that she didn’t talk to them as often as she should. Her first thought was what it was going to do to Nathan. Max felt awful—how could he come before anyone else? It didn’t make any sense. Not wanting to feel any worse—or guiltfully cutting her trip short—Max chalked her wanting to comfort Nathan up to their session today. It was just some leftover proudness that she felt because he opened up to her.

It had to be.

“You’re right,” Max said confidently. “I’ll call them right now.”

Max pressed the button on the panel and laid all the way down, calling her mom on her cell, and bid her a tearful “hello” as she was wheeled away for her MRI.

* * *

As Max tossed and turned in her less than home hotel room, her mind was full of thoughts of Blackwell and that entire fateful year she had when she returned to Arcadia Bay. Eventually she stared up at the bumpy white ceiling, trying to force herself back to sleep. Sleep hadn’t been easy since she’d come back to this place. It seemed like her whole life was supposed to be here. first she got accepted into Blackwell, and started two odd romances with Warren and Chloe once she’d returned—but neither of them were what she came for—and she obviously didn’t stay for either for them. Now she was willingly returning for a criminal?

“What does it mean?” Max asked. She rolled over and thought about all the dreams she’d had about Chloe lately. She wiped a tear and covered her eyes, trying not to be loud, though she didn’t know hat for. “Why? Why do my dreams bring me to you?”

Between tossing and turning, Max was finally too sore and too exhausted to fight sleep anymore.
She wished she wasn’t, because as she drifted off to sleep, her head filled with something horrible:

Max was walking through the same empty space, a white nothing with no option but to move forward. Max could feel death in this place but she wasn’t afraid of it; if anything, she welcomed it. Max just continued walking, wondering what purpose this odd place served. She moved and soon, she began to feel an odd sense of familiar. Her long hair lifted from her neck, and she felt herself shrink, only a little, but definitely enough to be noticeable. And as her hips cramped, Max realized what was happening—she was eighteen again. Max couldn’t fathom why being eighteen again would have an impact on whatever was about to happen, but then again, she had no idea if anything was even going to happen, so she just kept moving on.

Soon, she saw that perfect patch of blue, the shade that made her feel like she was home. Max ran to the blue, exclaiming “Chloe, Chloe!” until she was shushed harshly by none other than Rachel Amber.

“Rachel!” Max shouted, only to be shushed again. Max calmed some. “I’m sorry Rachel, I—”

“What do you want, Max?” Rachel asked.

Max could hear the annoyance in her voice and got nervous. “Chloe—”

“Chloe is with me now,” Rachel said. “There is no reason for you to worry about her anymore.” Rachel looked down at Chloe affectionately and rubbed her blue hair.

Max looked at Rachel angrily. “Of course I’m going to worry about her. She’s—”

“What, she’s what? Your best friend?” Rachel sneered. “The one you ignored for five years, or the one you killed? But then again, I can’t really be mad. Chloe got what she always wanted—me. And when your screw ups kill Nathan, he’ll be mine again, too.”

Max awoke in her bed, barely able to breath, trying to find something to focus on in order to quell her oncoming panic attack. Max saw the soft green glow of the lights on her dock, reading the time as being near three A.M. She didn’t know why she was having such a shitty dream after an epiphany and that point, she didn’t want to know why. So instead of dwelling on it, she eliminated it. The only Rachel Max knew was the one who let herself be killed over faith, not this nightmarish petty Rachel who wanted Max’s friends for herself in some sort of bizarre popularity contest. Max purged the dream from her mind, trusting in the Rachel she knew. Her heart calmed and soon, she found herself smiling. She was sitting up at almost three A.M. laughing. Laughing until her stomach hurt. And once Max totally got that out of her system, she was able to go to sleep.

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Max smiled the next day as Remi Bowers held her new baby to her chest as Max painted the blue butterfly on Frank’s work truck. Pompidou slept at Remi’s feet while Rachel Chloe colored a giant green coloring book next to them. Max couldn’t believe all the influence Chloe still had after all this time. Even the charity Joyce made in Chloe’s honor, appropriately named “The Blue Butterfly Foundation,” hadn’t missed a night on the news and was still gaining members daily. Joyce was able to spread awareness on mental health and gun control nationwide, while also explaining that she wished the cost of change hadn’t been so dear. Max hoped that people smiled when they saw the butterfly mosaic come around town, and she hoped that her contribution meant something.

“How is she?” Max asked.

“Fussin’, just fussin’,” Remi smiled. “And she’s so perfect.”
Just as Max went to turn and dip her brush into that familiar blue paint, she felt a little someone holding onto her leg. Rachel Chloe was nearly five now, with a wide, half-toothless smile on her tan face. Max smiled and scooped Rachel up into her arms, earning a giggle from the curious little one. Rachel laughed and smiled and pat Max’s smiling face. “Wanna help me paint?” Max asked brightly, and a very excited Rachel nodded eagerly. “Remi, is it okay if her shirt gets dirty?”

Remi laughed, then quieted when Maribel Marie began to whine. “Even if it shouldn’t get dirty, with her, it always will. I got a rowdy one!”

Max laughed and spun around just a little bit, then covered her paintbrush in that perfect Chloe blue. Max carried Rachel over to the truck and pointed to where she wanted Rachel to color. She knew Rachel’s tendency to color with reckless abandon, so Max could only laugh when Rachel did just that.

Frank joined in their laughter as he bent down to kiss Remi, Maribel, and then opened his arms to a very antsy Rachel. Rachel wriggled as Max looked at Frank knowingly, so Max set her down and she ran into Frank’s waiting arms.

“Ahhh, that’s my little girl. Want to talk to baby?” Frank asked. Rachel nodded, somewhat timidly, then walked over to where Remi was holding the baby.

Rachel gently touched the baby’s head, only to earn a cry from her. Rachel backed away, dejected, only to begin crying herself.

“No, no tears, Rachel,” Remi said softly. “You are okay. How about you tell Maribel what you did today?”

Rachel wiped her tears. “I painted wiss Max, a boo butterfly! Butterflies fly around and drink sugar from the plants.”

“That’s right!” Remi smiled. And after a moment, Maribel smiled, too. “Maribel, can you say buh-loo? Blue?”

“Boo!” Rachel exclaimed.

Remi looked up at Max, who as giggling, and began to laugh herself.

Max never imagined Frank would end up a man with a family. She never thought he’d even make it to thirty, but he was really thriving now. Quitting his bad habits took time, but he was finally able to do it and meet Remi once he was clean. Remi knew all about Frank’s troubles and sorrows, and suggested counseling to help him learn to let go and most importantly, to forgive himself. Remi and Frank were living in their dream house now, with their two perfect little girls.

“Lunch is ready,” Frank said. “Hope you like spaghetti,” he continued, turning to Max, “it’s the only thing I really know how to make.”

“Yeah, but it’s an old family recipe,” Remi said, winking and cuddling their girls. “So you KNOW it’s good.”

Max smiled and nodded. “I’ll finish up out here and join you guys.”

As Remi and Frank got the girls into the house to get them ready, Max turned back to Frank’s truck, and continued painting. She traced a thin black brush around Rachel’s brush stabs, making her butterfly look like a mosaic within the one Frank already had. Max was proud of her work, and as she went in for a second coat of black, she thought about Rachel Amber.
For Max, Rachel didn’t feel like a person. She was a concept, only alive in Max’s world because of memory. Chloe, Nathan, and Frank all got to experience being in love with her, and Max only knew her from pictures and videos. Max wondered what it would have been like to be friends with Rachel. And even though she still sometimes felt like second best to her, Max couldn’t help but feel connected to Rachel in a deeper way. All these people that loved Rachel now all had something special in their hearts for Max. Frank was thankful for her determination in finding Rachel’s killer, as was Chloe. Frank was able to find a friend in Max when he was going through his rough detox period, and Max liked to think that she helped put him on the road to meeting Remi.

Then there was Chloe, who loved Rachel, and loved Max. Max knew her feelings for Chloe were…difficult. Max knew she loved Chloe—and not just as a friend. At one point, she fancied the thought of starting a life with Chloe: buying a home, making pancakes at two a.m., kissing her beautiful blue bride each and every morning before they both went to work. But she’d made the choice to give that all up to save everyone in Arcadia Bay.

And Max wondered what Nathan felt for her—because he still seemed a bit closed-off to her emotionally, even after he revealed to her how his mom died. She wondered if it was faith, or something else entirely.

But before Max could really dwell on it, her stomach growled, so she took it as a sign to think about it some other time.

* * *

“So how are things goin’ with Rott?” Frank asked, in between bites of fantastic garlic bread.

Max swallowed hard. She’d hoped to stay away from the subject of Nathan, especially while she was here. Max was afraid that Frank was angry with her, but the way he referred to Nathan was odd—affectionate, almost.

Almost.

Max didn’t really know how to explain how things were going with Nathan. When they weren’t bad, they were pretty good, but good wasn’t even that good when things weren’t bad. There was still so much about Nathan that Max didn’t know. She knew their shared experience with time reversal put a permanent connection between them, but it didn’t mean that she knew him. What was his favorite color? His favorite food? What did he like to do? Max found herself wanting to know these things. She had a silly hope that it would help her to understand him and have a bigger part in his recovery. But did it matter if he didn’t feel the need to know her?

What if Nathan just didn’t care? No, that wasn’t possible. There was a possibility they had a future together. Did he want…

No. Max didn’t want to think about that.

Figuring a bite had stalled Frank long enough, Max spoke. “They’re okay. He’s…he’s very—”

“Complicated?” Frank answered.

“And difficult, right?” Remi chimed in.

“Exactly,” Max confessed. “He’s been pretty good adjusting over all, but there’s no balance of…of power, I guess. He has all this pull, this promise of action if I step out of line, and I hate it. There is nothing mutual or fair about our…relationship. He just gets, gets, gets, and I don’t know how to tell him it isn’t fair that I’m not ‘getting’ too without him getting angry about it.”
“You just have to tell him, Max,” Frank answered softly. He didn’t even look up from his plate. Noticing the growing uncomfortable silence, Frank spoke again. “You can’t just keep giving him what he wants—that’s not good for you. Back when I was dealing and living in that shit—crappy RV, he tried to pull that with me and I wouldn’t have it. You gotta teach him that he won’t get what he wants acting like that. I know he can’t help it sometimes, but he shouldn’t be rewarded when he’s being a dick.”

Max never thought of it that way. “But…shouldn’t he be comforted?”

“Only if he recognizes that he’s hurt you. I understand he needs guidance, but his behaviors are still bad; the mean things he says are still mean, and he needs to apologize for them. Comfort is easy after that.”

Max understood what he was saying, now. It was normal for Nathan to have outbursts, and he should be helped through them. But when he did and said hurtful things, he needed to acknowledge and apologize for them, not act like they didn’t happen. Max could only hope that she’d be strong enough to apply this once she saw him later today.

“Oh!” Rami said, between repositioning Rachel’s hands on her fork and calming Maribel. “Max, Joyce wanted to know if you were coming back for the anniversary in a few weeks?”

“Yes!” Max said. She’d forgotten about it already. Annie was going to have her HEAD for missing so much work in such a short amount of time, and Max already knew Brooke was seething for already having this many days on dish duty. Instead of worrying about it now, Max changed the subject, focused on her time with Remi and Frank, and kept a smile on her face. Today, she still had to go visit Nathan, and she’d already gotten a text from Stella on her new phone, detailing his bad mood.

* * *

“Did you get my text?” Stella opened frantically, meeting Max at the door to the facility. “About Nathan?”

“I did,” Max said, readjusting her bag. “Is it that bad today?”

Stella sighed and pushed up her sleeve, revealing a sizable bite mark. “You tell me, Max.”

“Yikes.”

“You don’t have to see him today, Max,” Stella pleaded.

“Yes, I do,” Max said. “I should. I may be able to help. At least, I hope I can.”

Stella lead Max to the door to her office and sighed deeply. She looked at Max, and Max read her face easily.

Nathan was inconsolable, and Stella didn’t want Max to try to do something she hardly had any experience with. Stella was worried about Max’s mental health, too, not just Nathan’s. Max resolved to one day bring Stella the proof and tell her everything about her other reality, and Warren, too, but it was too soon. Max gave Stella a reassuring smile and pointed toward the office.

Stella sighed again, in defeat this time, and closed her eyes for a moment, trying to regain her composure. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Once Max walked in the room, Nathan was there, absentmindedly playing with some coasters on
Stella’s coffee table. There were papers strewn across the floor, as well as some of Stella’s books, and the lamp that usually sat on Stella’s desk was also on the floor, broken.

“Give him some space,” Stella whispered. Heeding Stella’s advice, Max sat on the floor near the couch, where Nathan pretended not to notice her at first.

“Get the fuck out of here, Max,” said Nathan crassly. “Why the fuck do you even come here? You can’t even trust me with these on,” he paused, holding up his cuffed wrists. “I killed Rachel. And Chloe. And if you piss me off, I might kill you, too. That’s what I do, Max. And I hate myself. I hate everyone. I hate it all.”

Max sat there, saying nothing, her annoyance growing.


As Nathan went on, Stella once again made eye contact with Max. She knew this was bound to escalate, and she needed to have the police ready. Max didn’t know why, but she trusted that Nathan wouldn’t hurt her. She nodded, and let Stella slip out of the room, unnoticed.

“Hey,” Max began softly, “why don’t we—”

“Shut the fuck up, Max. You should fuck off just like Stella. Pretty stupid of her to leave us here alone, right? You know you’re not safe with me. Rachel thought she was and I practically poisoned her. Shot Chloe right in her fucking stomach. And I could kill you too, remember, if I wanted—”

“Then do it,” Max said callously. Nathan’s stomach dropped and the shock that went through his body settled on his face. “What?”

“If you want to kill me, then do it. There’s virtually nothing stopping you,” Max said. She was DONE. Beyond done. “How’re you gonna do it, I mean, without those handcuffs getting in the way?”

Nathan hesitated, mulling over what Max said. “Max, I—”

“You could smash my head against the corner of the coffee table. Or stab me in the neck with a pen,” Max said, getting closer to him. “But then again, that’s going to be pretty messy.”

“Max—”

“Or maybe drown me in Stella’s toilet? Even worse if you pee in there first.”

“Max. Stop.”

“Or,” Max said. She sauntered over to him and grabbed both his hands and intertwined her fingers. Slowly, much to Nathan’s displeasure, Max trough his ice-cold hands up to her neck. It was hot with her anger, and Nathan’s face grew red. “You could squeeze my throat with your bare hands, couldn’t you?”

For a split second, Max felt Nathan’s grip around her neck tighten—not enough to hurt her, but enough to accelerate her heartbeat. “Stop!” Nathan yelled.

“I’m so fucking sick of this,” Max said, tearing his hands from her neck. He could only look at them in shock. “If you want me dead—if that will somehow make you feel better, then JUST—
FUCKING—DO IT. Your threats are as exhausting as they are empty, Nathan Prescott, and you need to make up your mind: Do you want me here or not?"

“FUCK YOU, MAX—”

Max looked at him. She had no idea what face she was making, but it shut him up quickly.

“If you yell at me one more goddamn time,” Max started coldly, “you will NEVER fucking see me again, Nathan Prescott. Choose your words wisely.” Max had her finger pointed at him so hard, it stung. She was taking Frank’s advice; she was not going to be pushed around anymore. If he was ready to recover, she was going to help him through it as best she could, but not at the cost of her own mental health.

Nathan opened his mouth to yell, then closed it quickly, knowing full well that she was serious about not coming back. As he tried to process the weight of her words, he began to cry. He slowly moved closer to her, as if there were some great distance between them, not just a few feet. He lifted his cuffed hands above her, enclosing her in his arms, and slowly pulled her to the ground as he painstakingly lowered himself with her.

Max sat there, dumbfounded, as she felt his warm tears on her stomach through her shirt. Her arms were behind her on the floor, steadying her as he quietly sobbed, holding her so tight she didn’t dare move.

“I don’t want you to go,” Nathan said, not looking up at her. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. Please stay. I don’t want you to go away again. You were gone so long. Please don’t go. Please. Everyone leaves me. Everyone hates me.”

“I don’t hate you,” Max said gently. “And I’m right here. I’m not going anywhere.”

*                                                          *                                                          *
Max tried to be nonchalant as Stella cheered and smiled and held her hands. Simple words could not express her excitement. They hadn’t planned on getting burgers at the diner after Stella was finished at the facility, but it just ended up that way—and Warren was salty that he couldn’t join them.

“I was freaking out, Max! I mean, he BIT me! He hasn’t done that in TWO YEARS, Max—and you trusted that he wouldn’t CHOOSE you? And he DIDN’T coke you? It’s unheard of!”

Max only laughed. She didn’t know what else to do. She had no explanation for her trust in Nathan. Before Max could speak, her new phone began to ring. The number looked familiar, so she figured it was a friend on her simcard whose number didn’t carry over. She held up a finger to Stella, asking for a moment, and Stella happily dove into her fries as Max answered her phone.

“Hello?”

“Uh, Hi, is this Maxine Caulfield?”

Max hoped it wasn’t another fan who’d gotten her number. Changing it again would be a hassle.

“Speaking. Who is this?”

“Whew! Sorry to bother you. This is Kristine Prescott. Dad wanted me to speak to you about arranging future visits with Nathan. Are you free for lunch tomorrow?”
Preparations

Chapter Summary

Max prepares for her first meeting with Kristine and her future visits in Arcadia Bay

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for your patience! THIS CHAPTER IS OVER 10,000 WORDS!!!!! I'm back in school now so I don't know how often updates will come, but I will ALWAYS post chapters the MOMENT they are completed! I hope you like where the story is going!

***Small unimportant note, I made Mrs. Prescott's name "Melinda."

CHAPTER 8 [PREPARATIONS]

“Uh,” was all Max could manage. How did she even…that’s right! Sean Prescott must have passed her number alone to Kristine, knowing she wouldn’t call Kristine on her own. Sean Prescott was a snake, a smart one.

“Oh jeez, I should’ve been subtler, right? I’ve always had a knack for coming on a little strong. Can I start over?”

“Uh, sure,” Max said, as if she could really say no.

“Okay, so, this is Nathan’s sister, Kristine. Our dad, Sean, asked me to call you so we could arrange a visitation schedule for Nathan. I don’t want to be all formal and cardboard about this so I thought we could do lunch so we could get to know each other first. Plus, I want to thank you for even doing this for my little brother.”

This whole thing was totally surreal. Max figured she’d have to go through some secretary or some shady business partner to arrange things with Nathan—not his sister. And Kristine was very…familiar. She spoke to Max as if they were old friends, two girls reunited after five years apart…a narrative that Max was reluctant to go through again.

Max was reminded of the email she’d read when she was snooping through Nathan’s computer to find evidence of him killing Rachel years ago. It mentioned Kristine’s trip to Brazil, their parents’ disappointment in him…

Wait. Parents.

Nathan told Max that their mom was dead. Had he lied to make her feel more comfortable with him? Max felt herself brewing with anger. God, did he do this just to see how long she’d believe it? What a fucking asshole.

Judging Max’s silence, Kristine grew nervous. “I’m sorry, did I overdo it again?”
“No, no,” Max said, momentarily snapping out of her anger. “I’m just—I’m with a friend right now. Just um, just text me the place and time tomorrow and I’ll meet you there. Is that cool?”

“That’s PERFECT,” Kristine gushed. “I love planning. See you then.”

Before Max could respond, Kristine hung up. Sitting there, she tried to hide her anger. Did Nathan lie to her to try to make her more sympathetic, to make her more willing to stay there for him? That had to be it! Feeling as though her friendship with Stella wasn’t yet ready for an angry sobbing session, Max decided to temporarily numb her sorrows the only way she really knew how—alcohol.

“Hey, Stella, I know we just got out food, but do you wanna hang out somewhere else after this? Is Warren expecting you home or anything?”

“I would DIE for some tequila right now! Lemme just swallow this thing and we’ll go. Plus, I want you all to myself!” Stella laughed. She bit into her burger as Max giggled into her own.

Max was at her limit. She had finally started to sober up while Stella was still throwing them back like she didn’t have to go in to work tomorrow. Max chuckled. Maybe she was drinking so much because she had to go to work tomorrow.

“Max, are you sure you don’t want another shot?” Stella asked. She was giggling like a kindergartener, spilling as she tried to down her sixth shots.

Max waved her hand, signaling that her four shots an hour and a half ago had been enough for her. “Are you sure you don’t need to slow down?”

Stella laughed out loud and spit out some of her drink. She looked at the bartender apologetically as he wiped up her mess, but he was amused. “No way, Max. I never get to let loose.”

“Really?”

“Really,” the bartender cut in. “Recognize me yet?”

Max squinted, and sprang up when she realized. “Justin! God, it’s been SO long! How have you been?”

Justin laughed. Like Nathan, he was much, much taller and he’d abandoned his glasses where down the line. His voice was barely any deeper, but Max could have kicked herself, because Justin was wearing his iconic red hat. He’d grown an impressive beard, and remembering that the bar was called “Justin’s,” Max knew he was doing pretty well for himself.

“I can’t believe I didn’t recognize you!” Max smiled. Uh oh. Maybe she was less sober than she thought. “How have you been?”

“Pretty good. Still skateboarding every once in a while. But me and Zach pretty much—”

“Zach? Zachary Riggins? You guys are friends?” Max asked excitedly. She couldn’t believe it. All these people who’d come here for some dumb ass school ended up making a home out of Arcadia Bay. That should have been the town’s slogan.

“Yeah,” Justin laughed out loud. “He’s the bouncer.”

Max stood up. “We will continue this conversation, I promise, but I HAVE to go say hi. Watch
“Stella for me?”

“I am an ADULT,” Stella giggled, knocking over the plate of salt Justin had in front of her.

Sighing, Max pulled a crisp fifty-dollar bill out of her wallet and put it into Justin’s hand before spinning out of her chair and making her way outside to the front of the bar.

Outside, there was Zach, looking far stronger and far more good-looking that she remembered. She prayed she wasn’t blushing as she called out for him. “Zach? Zachary Riggins?”

“ Took you long enough!” Zach laughed, scooping Max up into his strong arms.

Max didn’t know if it was the alcohol or her dry spell, but something about his cologne was intoxicating. Max could feel her skin getting hotter. She had never been all that attracted to Zack—sure, he was cute, but his “Football Star” persona that he’d tried desperately to keep intact even after his year at Blackwell was annoying.

Zach put Max down once he’d sensed her slight discomfort and laughed as he let her go. “Stella was laughing when you walked right past me going in and I thought it was ‘cause she was drunk already. Shit, Max, how have you been?”

“Really good!” Max said, her voice shallow. “How are you? Are you still with Juliet?”

Zach laughed heartily. “God, no! I’m glad that ship sailed; we weren’t good for each other. I’m actually going to be celebrating my three-year with my girlfriend soon.”

“Someone I know?” Max asked coyly. This time, Zach blushed. Max hoped she wasn’t flirting. She always got kind of friendly when she drank, and hardly realized it until after she’d sobered up. She was suddenly very aware that Brooke wasn’t here to drag her away in case she got too comfortable. She kept in mind that she needed to keep it cool.

“ Uh, yeah,” Zach smiled. He went into his pocket and pulled out his phone. He handed it to Max, whose eyes sparkled once he saw that the lock screen was a picture of him and none other than Alyssa Anderson.

“YOU AND ALYSSA? TOGETHER?”

Zach laughed. “That’s pretty much what she said when I first asked her out. And man, she really made me work for it. She turned me down for a long time before I wore her down. And now? It’s crazy.”

“That’s so great!” Max squealed. She didn’t want to say she couldn’t believe it, but she couldn’t. She always figured that Zach and Juliet would stay together. They’d force themselves into a loveless marriage where they only found comfort in the fact that in having each other, at least they weren’t alone. Juliet would throw herself into work while Zachary would fall into depression after a torn ACL in his knee stopped him from football forever. Juliet would have her affairs, Zach would have his, but they’d go nowhere, still together, resenting each other forever. Max laughed at the story she’d spun. Now it seemed ridiculous, obviously, but still so funny. She giggled. “How did you come to work here? With Justin?”

“Oh, Justin is a bro, Max. I was getting into some bad shit after Alyss’ and I had a really bad fight. I used to spend night at my place feeling like I wasn’t doing enough over here. Trevor had just quit—you should see him now, he’s huge—because he and Dana didn’t want to start their family here. I think they moved to New York or something. A real place-y place. Justin needed a guy a couple nights a week and here I am. During the day I coach at the middle school near me and Alyss’s place.
She teaches fourth at the same school as Kate. Come to think of it," Zach laughed, “she was sore when you visited Kate that day. It was so funny. She’s so cute.”

Max smiled as her chest filled with a familiar warmth. God, she missed that feeling more than anything. She’d felt it every time Warren said she was a great photographer. And every time Talia told her she was cute. Maybe she’d been too hard on Talia. Maybe she was really trying to fix things with Max. Max knew she didn’t want to call Talia, but she was going to unblock her number, in case Talia was still as persistent as she used to be. Maybe things would be okay.

As Max went to congratulate a clearly Smitten Zachary, Stella stumbled out the nearby door, tears in her soulful brown eyes.

“Oh, Max,” she cried. “I thought you left me. I feel so sick. I need your help.”

Max looked at Zach apologetically, who only smiled once he realized that Max was about to have a very long night. Max helped Stella off of the ground, and nearly knocked Justin over, who was in a rush to get outside.

“Dude, I looked away for TWO seconds,” Justin panted. “She booked it.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Max chuckled. “C’mon, Stella, you need a time out in the bathroom.”

“I don’t wanna be in trouble,” Stella sobbed.

Max laughed. “No way you’re getting sick in my rental. I already had to pay a TON for the one that got wrecked.”

Slowly, Max led Stella into the bathroom, where her sobs were drowned out by a chorus of Max telling her it was okay. As Stella threw up, Max held her hair back, reminiscing how she’d been in the same position as Stella once she’d broken up with Talia. Some random girl at the bar back home had stopped her from doing something potentially reckless with some greasy rando. Max thanked her mentally.

“Max, I’m sorry,” Stella cried between gags. “I was SO MAD at you.”

“I’m sorry, Stella,” Max said. “I shouldn’t have left you alone in there.”

“What? No,” Stella paused, surprised she even had anything left in her to throw up. “I trust Justin. I meant when you dated Warren. I liked him so much and I went out of my way to not be your friend because I was hurting. We could have been so close. I was so jealous, so angry. I was even afraid you guys were gonna get back together when you came here for Nathan. I was so mean. I cried in the bathroom when you said we should be friends. That meant so much to me, Max.”

Max stifled a laugh. Any other time, this would be touching, but right now, it just seemed funny. Max never thought of herself as a person who was capable of making other people jealous. She never thought she was going to feel anything other than average as well. So the thought that someone as pretty and smart as Stella thought Max was something special seemed hilarious.

So funny, in fact, that Max began to cry.

*                                                          *                                                          *

“I’m sorry, Max,” Stella repeated for the millionth time, Max smiled wryly as she loaded Stella into the back of a taxi. Max made eye contact with the driver, wondering if she should ride with them. But after a two-hour sob session, Max needed some time alone to clear her head.
“It’s okay, Stella. Be careful.”

“I’ll be fine,” Stella hiccupped. “Javi drives me all the time. Right?”

The large burly man in the front seat laughed. “Right. Let’s get you home. Warren’s probably waiting.”

“Ah, Warren,” Stella cooed. Max laughed as Stella dialed his number. He was probably going to answer, but Max couldn’t help but to giggle at him listening to a slurred voicemail.

Max quickly walked to her new rental car, made sure the doors were locked once she got in, and started on her drive “home.” The cool night air calmed her, washing away whatever traces of alcohol that had made her mind cloudy before. Slowly the street lights disappeared until the road was lit only by the light of her car. There was something calming about the darkness—it was like being in the middle of a tornado. The town hadn’t been this dark since the storm, but even then, plenty of things were on fire to keep things in view. Max would never forget the soft glow of flame around a bunch of rotting whale carcasses.

Max crawled into her bed, forgoing a shower until morning, recounting how weird this over and over again. Arcadia Bay was starting to feel like home again. This place only felt like that when Max was with Chloe. Did this mean she was really on the road to healing? Before, Max couldn’t imagine life without Chloe, but here she was, rekindling friendships, back here, living a normal life. It was nice. Even the parts with Nathan. This “normal” was really nice. Max laid in her bed, staring up at the ceiling, and hummed herself to sleep quietly.

Max was back in her regular vortex, standing surely in the eye of the storm as Arcadia Bay went up in ruins around her. She’d been in this place so many times, she’d taught herself not to be afraid of it anymore, but it didn’t make her any less annoyed. Why did she always come back here? If there was ANY unfinished business, it had to be business with Nathan, right? Was there something else besides him that was troubling her subconscious?

“Hi Max,” startled her out of her thoughts.

Max turned around to see Rachel Amber, looking exactly the way she did in her missing person’s picture.

“Oh, hi, Rachel, Max stuttered. She was preparing to be lectured, to be tormented, but Rachel only stood there non-threateningly, smiling, swaying to some music Max couldn’t hear, and looking like she had something important to say. “Are…uh…how…”

“I’m about as good as a dead person can be. Thanks for saving Kate, by the way, and bringing Jefferson to justice. Can’t believe I ever crushed on that creep. You and Chloe are my heroes. ‘Everyday,’” Rachel teased sweetly.

This was just like talking to Kristine, but Max didn’t feel uncomfortable and nervous. She felt safe with Rachel. Maybe this was why everyone fell in love with her. Maybe Rachel made people feel…safe.

“Oh…is Chloe here?”

“Always about Chloe,” Rachel teased.
Max couldn’t help but laugh. She felt the same way about Rachel.

“Yeah, she’s here,” Rachel continued. “Somewhere.”

“…can she…can I see her?”

Rachel tensed visibly and hesitated. Any ounce of confidence she had disappeared as she twiddled her thumbs and shifted her feet. “Max, I gotta be frank with—ha, Frank—with you. This…this place, it isn’t real. If you really wanted to see Chloe, Max, well…she’d like, just BE here.”

Max shuddered. She knew what that meant. Max closed her eyes, a solemn smile on her face. “I understand,” Max said. And just like that, the vortex began to melt away, and Max was standing on the ledge where the lighthouse stood, feeling the warmth of the far-away sunset on her face. Rachel was transparent now, fading away into the background, almost like she did when she went missing. Max wasn’t going to let her be lost again. “Rachel,” she said, tears filling her blue eyes. “Thank you. For everything. Everything you’ve done. Your sacrifice. Thank you.”

“Make me proud,” Rachel said, unintentionally welling up as well. “And say hi to Chloe for me.”

Max laughed, trying to wipe her tears. She moved them away from her mouth as she desperately tried to form words. “I will,” Max sobbed. “I promise I will, Rachel.”

Max awoke the next morning, reeking of bar smoke, sprawled out on her bed. She put her hand to her wet eyes and wiped her tears away. There was too much to do today; there would be plenty of time to cry later, and it was important that she got everything done. Max swiftly rose from her bed and trudged to the shower as if the ground was a swamp, normally Max could wear practically anything—but today, she really wanted to step it up. She wanted to make a good impression on Kristine. Kristine seemed to put a lot of faith into blind trust, but as a photographer—a female photographer, nonetheless—Max knew it was important to put the utmost effort into presentation. She wondered if she could do it all in just a few short hours. Max hadn’t curled her hair in forever and even though she knew she didn’t have Octavia’s skills, she was going to try anyway. Before she did anything with Kristine, though, she wanted to make sure Stella didn’t die on the way home. Max didn’t want to call and ask Warren because she KNEW he’d find a reason to keep her on the phone—and she knew Stella wouldn’t answer her personal phone while she was at work. Max hurried out of bed, her worry now much worse than before.

She stripped naked and hopped into the shower, letting the hot water soothe her cold skin. As she washed her hair, she felt her tattoo on the back of her neck, and thought about the night she got it. It was YEARS ago. After Chloe’s funeral, everyone had gathered at the Two Whales diner. While the adults commented on how cute the random breakfast was, Victoria and Dana had had their own plans in mind. Everyone left their phones in their dorms and they all gathered on the roof to drink and talk. Looking back on it now, it was pretty stupid of them all to be so reckless, but the combination of guilt and grief make it seem like a good idea at the time.

“I have a confession,” Kate had said. “I always thought that Chloe was…different.”

“Different as in weird, like Samuel?” Max had asked. Max was totally bullshitting. She knew what Kate meant. Kate had always been weirdly intuitive.

“No, like she had this weird aura around her. Hmm…I don’t know. Victoria, what was in that cup you gave me?”
“Like, this much rum,” Victoria said, holding up her fingers. Max had seen her pour the rum and coke. It was way more than she’d shown Kate. “You’re fine. Nathan’s not here to fuck this up for you. God, that was a shitty joke. I’m sorry. God, Kate, I’m sorry for everything. I’m sorry. How are you holding up, Max? God, sorry Kate. Shit, I should stop saying God, huh? That’s bad. Shit. Sorry.”

Max laughed. She contemplated telling everyone everything right then and there. “I could be better,” she finally said. It wasn’t time and she wasn’t ready.

“Y’know what we should do? We should get tattoos,” Dana slurred.

“That sounds like a terrible idea!” Kate shouted, spitting out the pound of rum Victoria had put into her drink.

“I don’t think it’s a bad idea,” Max had said. She smiled. She was sitting next to Warren, who had chosen not to drink, and was pretty much enjoying how sloppy all of them had gotten. “Fuck it, I’m eighteen, I can do anything. Shit! I can even get Daniel to draw it.”

“Warren,” Dana started. “Call Brooke and see if she’s in Daniel’s dorm.”

“Call her now,” Victoria demanded. “Quick, before the buzz wears off.”

And the rest was history. And it was a very, very beautiful tattoo.

Max thought a lot about that night, how she wanted to tell everyone the truth. She barely even knew if it was right to trust Nathan with something like this—and he’d gone through it himself, so she had no reason not to.

Max quickly finished showering. Thinking about Nathan while she was in there made her feel very strange.

Max carefully loaded herself into her car, feeling a little embarrassed by how much effort she’d put into how she looked. She wanted to look good, but maybe she went a bit overboard. She was wearing a very dark, very pretty navy blue dress. The top was haltered and meshed, careful to distort any cleavage—not that she felt she had very much. The back of the dress was long and the front draped flirtily just over her knees. She wore a pair of matching heeled shoes, a pair that Victoria had gotten her from a trip to New York. Max laughed at how well Victoria had come to know her.

“We can’t all be naturally model-height like me and Dana and—God, I know you miss her—Chloe. But you can fake it. But, if you are wearing heels, and me and Dana, AND Chloe…well…sorry shorty, you’re fucked.”

Max laughed again. Even though Victoria had taken her sweet time being a royal bitch to everyone before Chloe’s death, she was doing everything in her power to make up for it. Victoria was a good friend, as Max had trusted Taylor when she said so before, even if she was harsh and sometimes cold. She pulled out her camera, and took a quick selfie.

Max took a deep breath, primped her hair, then left her room.

It was going to be a long day.

*   *   *
Max arrived at the facility quickly, feeling just a bit of relief once she saw Stella’s car parked in its designated spot. Max breathed in sharply, suddenly feeling very anxious. She hoped that she wasn’t overdressed. It was a bad idea to even go inside the facility in a halter, but luckily, Max had brought a pretty sharp jacket to cover herself up with. She pulled on her jacket and buttoned it completely, she stepped out of the car and walked into the facility. She made small talk with one of the officers in the front, who soon left to tell Stella that she had a visitor. Max stood there waiting, absentmindedly wondering how lunch was going to go today, when she found herself observing the visitation area. There were a few duos; a prisoner and his mother, his girlfriend, his boyfriend, his somebody, his friend: and two or three families—including Arlo, who was happily showing his daughter the picture he’d taken with Max, his daughter hopped in her seat, excitedly reaching for the picture, not a single doubt that it was real. Max smiled and went to let herself get pat down, and soon joined Arlo and his daughter in the visitation room. She greeted them both kindly, stepping back from hugging Arlo once an officer gave her a dirty look. She hugged him anyway.

“This isn’t real! This can-NOT be real! Dad, is this real?”

Max smiled wryly. “It’s…real. You can always trust a polaroid. Your dad told me about you while I was here visiting a—a friend here.”

Were they friends? Were Max and Nathan ever going to really be friends?

“Do you have any advice for an aspiring photographer? Oh, my gosh, I didn’t even introduce myself. I’m Esperanza. Esperanza Penelope Moreno.”

“Nice to meet you,” Max said, holding out her hand, then switching for a hug. “If there’s any advice I can give, it’s always take the shot.” Max didn’t like to think about the source of the advice, but it WAS good advice.

Esperanza pulled away and nodded. “Oh, my gosh! Thank you! Could…could I trouble you for…for…”

Max smiled and reached into her bag, pulling out her camera. She went to wrap her arm around Esperanza and aim, but was interrupted by Esperanza’s hands hovering over the lens. “If it’s not too much trouble, I’d like to take it with mine,” Esperanza said. She excitedly reached into her bag and pulled out her own polaroid camera. It was very small, and pink, and Max knew the picture would be small, too.

Max thought for a moment, then smiled. “I’ll tell you what—we’ll both take a selfie together, then I’ll keep your picture, and you can keep mine.”

Esperanza’s whole face lit up and Max was afraid she’d gotten too excited. Esperanza took a deep breath and got herself photo-ready. “I love it. On three.”

After the photo exchange was done, Max waved and exited the visitation room, and went back to being the observer she was always good at being. Max watched as couples fought, as fathers and uncles met their children and nieces, until she caught the uncharacteristically wavy hair of a certain someone as he sat and spoke with his older sister. Max ducked and stood by the vending machines, hoping to blend in, not really knowing why she was hiding. It wasn’t doing anything, especially in such a gaudy outfit.

Kristine was smiling, holding Nathan’s hand. Max didn’t know her expressions—because she’d only seen her face in a picture—but Max could tell she was trying her damndest to keep it together. Her eyes were glazed over with tears that she was desperately trying to not let fall. Her nose was pink, presumably from crying sometime before meeting with Nathan, and her eyes were puffy, but not red.
—definitely because she reapplied makeup. Soon, it was all too much, and Kristine slowly started to cry. Nathan slowly brought his hands up and wiped her tears, only to be given a dirty look from a nearby officer. He walked forward to subdue Nathan—who clearly didn’t need any subduing—only to be stopped by a scary look from Kristine.

“Gary…Gary Myers, is that you?” she said sweetly.

“Uh, yes, Miss Prescott,” Gary said. Max assumed he’d worked security privately at Prescott Manor, a house that was only talked about and never seen except by the Prescotts themselves. “Miss—Kristine, Nathan is not allowed to—”

“How’s your wife, Gary?” Kristine interrupted.

Gary’s body tensed. “Um…she’s good…”

“Great. And your mistress?”

Gary fell silent.

Kristine forced a smile and wiped her own tears. “Gary, I haven’t seen my brother in a long, long time. I think a hug or SOMETHING—say, maybe even something as simple as wiping tears, which, I guess I don’t need anymore—is due. You let me hug my brother, I don’t tell your wife about Cassidy.” Max could tell from Kristine’s tone that she was probably going to tell Gary’s wife anyway. As she saw Kristine grin, Max realized that Kristine hadn’t been sure that Gary was still even seeing Cassidy, but his reaction confirmed her suspicion. She was clever.

Gary’s face was bright red, now. Kristine had been just loud enough for everyone to hear, and all eyes were on Myers. Gary held up a finger to scold her, but Kristine had already had her cellphone out, with her thumb ready to presumably dial Gary’s wife’s number. “Your call, Gary.”

Gary sheepishly resumed leaning against the nearby wall, while Max moved away from her snooping post only to bump into Stella, who repaid her with a smirk.

“What?” Max asked, feeling her face grow red.

“Afraid someone was gonna move in on your man?”

“STELLA!”

Stella giggled and fixed her glasses. “Kidding! I’m kidding!”

Max rolled her eyes and watched just for a moment as Kristine pulled Nathan into a tight embrace. Max couldn’t see his face, but she knew the face he was making. It was one she knew she’d seen before, way back during her first few months at Blackwell.

She’d been rushing to meet Kate for their weekly tea session, and she’d bumped into Nathan, sending her journal, a day’s worth of photos, film, and whatever else she had in her bag scattered across the ground in the hallway.

“Are you fucking kidding me, Max?” Nathan had said. “Would it kill you to pay attention? To ANYTHING?”

Max looked up at him angrily, crushing her instinct to snap back with a retort by biting her lip. She looked away from him, focused on the ground, and began to gather her things. She shook when Nathan kicked her journal, an angry indication that he wasn’t finished with her. She looked up at him
again. “Are you done?” she asked flatly.

That’s when he gave her the look. He looked angry and sad—angry at himself. He bent down and began to help gather her things in silence. He examined them all with shaking hands, carefully eyeing each and every item before scooting it closer to her so she could pick it up. Max paid attention only to the things scattered on “her side,” right up until he paused. Max figured he was in another mood and had lost interest in helping her. Max dared to look over, only to catch him with an eyebrow raised, as he looked at a page in her journal that had a picture of him drawn in it. Max, embarrassed, snatched it out of his hand, shoved it into her bag, when a now-blushing Nathan finished helping her get her stuff together. They stood up in unison, both unsure of what to say. She figured she at least owed him a “thank you,” even after he’d kicked her journal and took a peek in it. Before she could muster up the courage to speak, he spoke. “If you EVER bump into me again,” he began coarsely, “I’ll set your hair on fire. Watch where you’re going, Max Caulfield.”

Max sighed. It was one of her more pleasant memories with him—and all of her better memories with him were before she reunited with Chloe. Maybe he started to turn into a demon when Chloe was around because he thought Max had made the choice to save her. Max couldn’t blame him, though—living in so many realities must’ve made them all blur together at some point.

Max swallowed hard, shook her head to clear it, then looked over at Stella. “I wanted to make sure you were okay after last night,” she said.

“Aww, thank you, Max,” Stella smiled. “Why didn’t you just call?”

Max hesitated, and blushed. Stella looked really pretty in the light of the short hall they were standing in. “I wanted to be sure.”

“You’re a good friend, Max. I’m doing fine—Warren gave me a Gatorade-aspirin cocktail and I woke up hangover-free. Are you feeling okay? Things got pretty crazy for the both of us,” Stella said. She touched Max’s arm just long enough for Max to have to remind herself that Stella was not single. Max also made a mental note not to speak to Talia today, if she called. There was no need to let her dry spell make her do something stupid.

Max turned and kept her eyes on Kristine, who had been pulled into a tight hug from Nathan. “That’s his sister,” Max said softly. “I’m supposed to have lunch with her today. I thought if I…if I snooped, I’d be able to get some INSIGHT or something or—”

“Oh, Max, Kristine is super nice,” Stella chuckled. “You don’t have to be so scared all the time. Plus you look really good today. You can let THOSE—” Stella pointed to her chest, inciting a blush from Max, “be your introduction. Are you meeting here, or…”

Max checked her watch. “No, we’re meeting at a restaurant in a while. I look good? Not like mouth-breathing t-shirt-and-jeans Max?”

Stella rolled her eyes and laughed. “There was nothing wrong with t-shirt Max. Just be confident and collected and you’ll be fine, Max.”

* * *

Max was bobbing her leg. It was annoying. Normally it wouldn’t be so bad because normally she’d just be a little bit anxious—her normal amount of anxious. Normally she wouldn’t be downing water after water and wishing they were the shots of tequila she was taking last night. Max thought preparing for this was going to get easier as it got closer but here she was, more than a half-hour early, contributing to her horrible amount of anxiety.
As Max gulped her water, careful not to smear her lipstick, she hoped that this wasn’t going to be the horrible mess her anxiety was trying to make it. As Max worked through the quickness of her beating heart with slow breathing, she looked at the door to the restaurant just in time to see Kristine Prescott walk through the door.

Kristine had long, voluminous, dark chocolate hair and sparkling green eyes that made Max blush. Her smile lit up the room as she made eye contact with Max, who waved faintly and turned her attention back to her water. Kristine continued in, smiling at everyone as if they were all waiting for her to arrive.

“Hi, Max!” Kristine gushed, quietly taking her seat. “It’s Max, right? Not Maxine? That’s what Nathan said. How are you?”

“Yeah, Max is perfect. Nice to meet you. I’m…about as good as I can be,” Max spoke slowly. She was still in awe over Kristine.

Kristine was tall—not as tall as Nathan, but probably the same height as Chloe. She moved like a dancer, her lithe body having its own flow with the space around her. She was in a long, fitted, royal blue dress—like the dress Victoria was wearing the last time she saw Max. A gold, loose-fitting belt was around Kristine’s hips and her nail polished matched the blue of her dress. And now Kristine was sitting, her eyes sparkling with an expectation Max didn’t know if she could meet. “I am so glad I get to finally meet you and you look great,” Kristine smiled. She covered Max’s hands and smiled warmly. “Nathan told me a lot about you.”

Kristine was comfortable and kind, and Max didn’t know what to think of it. The cynic in her told her to be cautious of any sort of Prescott Charm, but there was something about Kristine that seemed so genuine. Kristine talked like they were old friends; like this meeting was a continuation of a meeting they had a long time ago. Kristine made Max feel safe and she hoped it wasn’t all just for show.

“Now that the food’s all ordered,” Kristine said, leaning over to grab her purse. Out she pulled a small calendar, a phone the size of a small tablet, and a pen. Kristine her long brown hair over her shoulder and clocked her pen. “We’ve got to set up a visitation schedule. I thought about maybe twice a month for three days, or once a month for five days.”

Max deliberated for just a moment then pointed to the calendar. “Once a month for four days, never on a weekend. Even better, Monday through Thursday. My job is too demanding for anything else. Plus, I’ve got another photography book coming out and I have to meet with my publisher…sorry, am I going too fast?”

“Not at all!” Kristine squealed. “I’ll make up a schedule each month and have it approved by you. Obviously we will be taking care of any sort of Prescott Charm, but there was something about Kristine that seemed so genuine. Kristine talked like they were old friends; like this meeting was a continuation of a meeting they had a long time ago. Kristine made Max feel safe and she hoped it wasn’t all just for show.

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“Furlough?”

Kristine sighed as the waiter set their food down. She moved her plate of pasta away, but waved her hand as if to tell Max that it was okay to eat her own entrée, a chicken-and-mashed-potatoes dish. Max squeezed lemon on her food while Kristine salted hers, then moved it back in front of her. She twirled her fork and took a bite of her food and wiped some marinara from the corner of her mouth before she spoke. “Let me preface this by saying my dad is…complicated. He’s not a ‘good dad’ by a long shot—but he is my dad, and most definitely the reason Natty’s—Nathan’s—mental state is so bad. Sean messed his head up with his high expectations and outright neglect.”
Max sipped her water, listening carefully. It didn’t sound like Kristine knew about the alternate realities. It comforted Max, in a weird way. It was her and Nathan’s secret. Well, Brooke and Daniel both knew, but that was different. Only Max knew about Nathan. He had shared everything with Rachel—who Max knew was a hard act to follow, and then he deemed only Max worthy of knowing the truth.

“Nathan’s up for parole in TWO YEARS, Max,” Kristine continued, her eyes pleading. “Dad has time left but…but…”

“He told me six months to a year,” Max interrupted.

Kristine sighed heavily and rubbed the bridge of her nose. “That man is a demon,” she mumbled to herself.

“What’s wrong?” Max asked. Kristine seemed super angry—like she knew Max had been wronged.

“My dad is an asshole, Max,” Kristine seethed, quickly spooling her fork and shoving her pasta into her mouth. “My dad is dying, yes—but with money, he’s got eighteen months as a low. I can’t believe he lied to you.”

Max rolled her eyes, careful not to let Kristine see. How could she not believe it? Lying was Sean’s one true talent and deceit was his pastime. And cruelty was the crown jewel that kept it all going. Max knew she shouldn’t dare say it out loud, but she believed Sean Prescott deserved this. A man full of that much evil was bound to be overtaken by it sooner or later. Max wondered why Kristine seemed to care about him so much.

“Anyway. We’re doing assisted suicide if at any point his health takes a turn for the worst. But we’re going to need to figure out where you and Nathan will stay while he is ‘free.’ Because we are a very affluent family, instead of only two or three days of furlough, we’re getting a month. David Madsen is mad about that, no doubt.”

That made Max angry. “Um, yeah, and appropriately so. Whether he intended to or not, Nathan killed David’s daughter. And now he gets to watch as the family who used to press to demonize her now use their wealth to get special treatment,” Max narrowed her eyes and continued sarcastically, “forgive me for thinking it’s okay to be angry about a Prescott’s unchecked privilege.”

Kristine choked on her food and reached for her water in between coughs. Max quietly ate her own dish, relishing in the bright redness of Kristine’s face. “M-Max, I’m so sorry, that was so horribly insensitive.”

Now Max felt bad. She cursed her short-term assertiveness. “It’s fine just…just don’t mention Chloe’s family, okay?”

“I won’t. I don’t think I even properly thanked you for this. I don’t know what you’re doing for Nathan, Max, but it’s working. He was smiling when he saw me—smiling. He never did that—not even when Rachel was around. He was so private; he tried to hide her away, to keep her his secret. But not you,” Kristine said. She had teared up. “He’s so happy to have you that he thinks other people should know about you, too.”

Now Max’s face was bright red. She set her fork and knife down on her plate and felt all traces of hunger leave her body. She didn’t know how to feel about Nathan. It wasn’t like he was forthcoming with how he felt or thought. And the idea of him having something good to say about her when she wasn’t around was comforting. It made it seem like she wasn’t just a placeholder for his attention. “Thank you for that, Kristine.”
Kristine winked, as her mouth was full of paste. She took a long time to swallow. “Max…look, I have an enormous bomb to drop on you. When Nathan gets furlough, he’s going to be staying at the Hilltop House. I can’t be there with him all the time and I know he’s not allowed to be by himself. We…I…”

“I’ll have to stay with him,” Max said, more so to herself than to Kristine. The Hilltop House raised all sorts of questions, but the biggest question was about Nathan’s mom: Why did he lie to Max about her fate? Was it a desperate cry for attention? No, he should have known by now that he HAD her attention. She wasn’t going anywhere. Even if his mother was “dead to him”—why would he detail her suicide so violently if it was supposed to be metaphorical? And didn’t he mention a note? Was the note still in his room?

“Max, don’t feel the need to—”

“Can we go there?” Max asked. “Can I…can I see the house before I decide?”

Kristine quickly slurped up a wayward noodle and covered the trail it left with a napkin. “Absolutely! We can go right after we eat! Oh, my god, Max. I’m sorry to get so excited. You’re the first person after Stella who’s willing to work with me after witnessing my dad’s cruelty firsthand. I…I just…thank you.”

“Sorry we got lost for a second back there,” Kristine said, half-jogging to meet Max at her own car.

Max wanted to respond, and she knew she should have, but she couldn’t get the words out. The Hilltop House was NOTHING like she had imagined. The house wasn’t the small, warm, cottage-like house she’d pictured. The house was enormous, ostentatiously so, and overshadowed the semi-nearby homes that sat on its left and right sides. There was a grand mass of flowers leading from the driveway to the front of the house, which was locked behind a gate. So even though Max made it to the driveway, it was made very clear that she was an outsider. At least, Max thought, her imagination served her well somewhere, because the house rose just slightly over its neighboring houses, making it a literal house on the top of the hill. “It’s…it…”

“Yeah, I know,” Kristine said. “It could use some work. But I promise you, the inside is MUCH more taken care of than the outside.”

Max drowned out Kristine’s tour while she followed her inside the house, only to lose her breath again. The inside was enormous, with dark wooden baseboards and mellow white walls. It had white marble floors with a white baby grand piano that greeted them in the foyer once they’d walked in. The staircase was wide, with marble steps, showing a very clear view of the upstairs.

Kristine removed her shoes while standing on the last step of the stairs, and Max copied, leaving her tall shoes next to Kristine’s. The floor had wine-red carpet and Max chuckled at the white walls with red trim—it reminded her of a red-velvet cupcake. On the walls were rows of paintings and portraits, and Nathan wasn’t smiling in a single one of them. When he was small, he feigned seriousness, but as he got older, there was a noticeable change in his eyes. He was angry, hateful, even. Kristine looked the same—but she definitely took after “their” mom. Sean had the same face shape as Nathan, with a patch of coiffed brown hair. His father had cold hazel eyes, while their mother, like Kristine, had sparkling green eyes. Nathan looked NOTHING like Mrs. Prescott.

“And there are some MORE bathrooms—Dad loves being able to pee everywhere, I guess. Maybe like a dog? I don’t know, whatever. And past eh bathroom, at the end of the hall is Nathan’s room, and this room at the opposite end, next to you, is the guest room. My room is in between, across from
the bathroom, next to Nathan’s. I actually need to grab my—”

“I have something I HAVE to do before I visit Nathan today,” Max blurted, having remembered it just now. “But is it okay if I look around for a bit? I want to get a feel of where I’m staying.” Kristine’s eyes lit up. “If I decide to stay here,” Max added quickly.

Kristine walked into her room without a second thought and Max walked past her and into Nathan’s room.

It was NOTHING like his dorm at Blackwell.

For one, the room was spotless—but that could have been from five years of maid services, so Max didn’t hold it against him. The room was painted a dark, calming blue, with white iridescent whales painted around it. There were bookcases filled to the brim with novels, and they looked worn as if they’d been read and marked in a hundred times each. There was a projector above the bed, much like his room in Blackwell, and a nice computer, which was probably due for an upgrade. The bed over took most of the room—and the room still had a decent amount of space—and next to the bed sat a nightstand with a cd player on it, probably with whale noises. In the back corner of the room was a door, which Max almost thought was the closet, had the closet not been embedded in a wall near the entrance door. Max went over to the corner door and opened it, only to see a bathroom, much different than the theme of the rest of the room. Max closed the door to the bathroom and turned her attention back to the nightstand, only to see Kristine standing in the doorway, looking up at the ceiling with tears in her eyes.

“I’m sorry,” Max said immediately. “God, I’m sorry, I’m so nosy.”

“It’s not you, Max,” Kristine said, wiping her eyes, only to make room for more tears to fall. “I remember the day it all changed. Don’t get me wrong, Max, Nathan has needed help for a long time, but when that woman ki... when she, um... when she died, it changed him.” Kristine crossed the room to the bed and bent down, putting her hands under the mattress. “I know he used to keep a picture of her under—” Kristine pulled a magazine out from under the mattress first, and on it was a nude woman in a very suggestive pose. “God, Nathan! You know what? I won’t even mention it. It’s my fault for prying. But it’s here.” Kristine turned to Max and handed her a picture of a woman. The woman had blonde hair, and blue eyes that matched Nathan’s perfectly. She could see Nathan in her.

“That’s Sophia Isley. She was my dad’s personal secretary and Nathan's very first therapist. She loved Nathan; been around since before Nathan was born. Mom HATED her guts—but dad kept her around because Nathan liked her so much. But then Dad finally fired her, so she killed herself in Nathan's bathroom. Nathan was obsessed with her and he never let it go. He always had a rocky relationship with Dad but that... that ruined everything. They went out of their way just to prove that hate.”

Max almost couldn’t believe that Kristine didn’t know the truth.

Almost.

So as Kristine cried, Max did the only thing that she, apparently, was good at.

She comforted her.

* * *

Max was on her way to her last destination before going to visit Nathan when she received an
incoming phone call from a number she recognized. Without thinking, she answered the call.

“Look, Max, I know you don’t want me calling you—”

“It’s fine, Talia,” Max answered. “Look, I unblocked you because I thought it was harsh. I don’t want to hear any apologies right now, thought. I’m on a trip away from home. We can talk some other time. But you hurt me, Talia, and I’m not ready to see you. I’m not even ready to forgive you.”

Max could tell Talia was crying on the other line. “I don’t know what else to say, Maxie, because I am sorry. I wish I could undo it all.”

“I know,” Max said. She didn’t want to have this conversation right now. “We can talk later. And I will call you.” Max hung up.

On her front seat was a bouquet of white lilies, and a pair of scissors. Max was trying hard to calm her breathing, as she parked her car, but maybe she needed to be a little scared. Nobody did anything worthwhile with a calm heart and a smile. Max reached over and carefully grabbed her scissors and dropped them into her flowers, making sure they weren’t visible from any angle. Max didn’t think there were rules where she was going, but it didn’t hurt to be careful.

Max got out of her car and walked through the dewy green grass, basking in the evening sunlight, and looked around on the ground. She stopped when she found what she was looking for, then smirked, for a blue butterfly was sitting atop the headstone for Chloe’s grave. “Show off,” Max chuckled, just before pulling her camera out to take a quick picture. Max put her camera away, and took a deep breath. She was here, now. This was Chloe’s grave, where she took her final rest.

Everything, for the first time, felt real.

Max breathed again. “Hi, Chloe. Oh, god, this is weird. You wouldn’t want that. You wouldn’t want me to be weird. But I AM weird. You were the first person to accept my ‘weird.’ So I’m gonna be weird, okay?” Max could have sworn the butterfly flapped its wings in confirmation, but she chalked it up to imagination. “I’m gonna try not to cry, okay? I thought you should know that I’m doing okay. Rachel was the one who gave me the idea to see you. It’s too much to explain, so I’m just going to pretend that you know what’s up in my head and make this seem like normal.

“I wanted to recount all the best memories of that week that we had. You saved me from Nathan and invited me back into your life despite my lack of contact for five years. You told me about the girl you loved, you called me out on my shit, too. Then, we danced. You were standing on your bed. And I took your picture. I still have that picture. Then there was…” Max began to cry, but a smile found its way onto her face. She wiped her face, but she let the tears keep falling. “There was that time you stole David’s keys and we made a LITERAL BOMB, then we got to splish splash in Blackwell’s pool. Then we had our real ninja moment—which I’m NEVER doing again. But my favorite memory,” Max paused, pulling out her scissors, “is in the alternate timeline, the one, well, where I saved William—at the price of crippling you. I…we went for a walk, and then we watched the sunset together during the golden hour, just like we’re doing now. Y-you said you were happy to be alive here with me. I was happy, too.

“I love you, and I miss you, Chloe,” Max went on, “sometimes so much, it gets hard to breathe. But I know, in my heart, I can’t keep holding onto you. I feel like I’ve stopped you from passing on, too. I have to let you go, Chloe.” Max used her scissors and with her opposite hand, pulled the blue patch of hair away from the rest of her hair. She cut it a little more than halfway through and held it tightly in her hand while she removed the protective plastic from her flowers. Max died her hair around the flowers, and bent down to place them on the grave. “You will always be my partner in crime, Chloe, and I’ll always be your partner in time.”
And the moment Max set her flowers down, the blue butterfly flew away.

Max sped into Stella’s office, apologizing for coming so close to the end of visiting hours. “I totally lost track of time,” she said, trying to catch her breath. “I had so much to get done today and—”

“Max,” Stella said. “It’s FINE. I held our session early because you said you had plans with Kristine. You can just bleed into our normal session time; David won’t get mad at me. Nathan's in the bathroom right now. Sit down, cool off.”

In her rush to explain herself, Max hadn’t even noticed that Nathan wasn’t in his usual spot on the couch. Following Stella’s suggestion, Max went and sat on the couch, pulling out her phone to have something to look at to pass the time. She put it away once she heard Nathan yelling.

“Stella!” Nathan suddenly shouted from the bathroom. He came out, unshackled, looking somewhat NORMAL, for once. “I just peed for twenty-six seconds. Twenty-six seconds!”

Stella rolled her eyes. “Why are you telling me this?”

Nathan shrugged. “I don’t know, I thought you’d be impressed. It was a long pee. MAX.”

Max sat there for a moment, waiting for him to continue speaking. He didn’t. “Was…was that supposed to be a greeting?”

Nathan glared at her. “I acknowledged you, didn’t I?” he plopped down on the opposite end of the couch, making the distance between them seem very big. “I mean, why are you even here? Me and Stella had our session already. That means visiting hours—”

“Nathan, we had our session early today, Max is on time,” Stella fibbed. Visiting hours were practically over, but Max was about to take up the chunk of time Nathan and Stella would usually use for their session.

Nathan crossed his arms and then closed his eyes, bringing a hand up to rub the bridge of his nose. “I have no concept of time in this place.”

Stella caught herself before she could let out a guffaw. “Anyway, I’ll be outside, monitoring. Nathan, remember what you promised.”

He blushed angrily. “Good-BYE, Stella,” he said.

Stella stuck her tongue out at him and he waved her off. They seemed close. He and Stella probably would have been good friends had Nathan's mental state not been turned into fresh steaming shit by his dad.

Once Stella was gone, Nathan sat on the floor between the couch and nearby table. He reached for the origami paper on it, and began folding.

Max followed suit and stood up, carefully placing her dress so it couldn’t be more revealing than it already was. She sat and began folding a butterfly, slowly, as she’d noticed Nathan was watching her.

“Nice outfit,” he said, focusing back on his folds. He’d said it with the same tone as the day she’d been wearing Rachel’s clothes.
Max glared at him. “If you don’t have anything nice to say—”

“I was being nice,” Nathan interrupted, looking at her. His cheeks were pink, and the hurt in his eyes was obvious. “I mean it. You look nice. That color is very pretty. Pretty on you.”

Now Max was blushing. “Thank you,” she said quietly.

They both folded in silence, when the both realized, simultaneously, that Nathan was no longer handcuffed. Nathan’s eyes darted over to Max’s hands, looking for a falter, looking for any indication—even the smallest twitch—that she was afraid. He sighed. Everyone was afraid of him. His folding got sloppy. Nobody liked him. He ripped his paper. This was so frustrating. God, this was so—

“Hey,” Max said softly. She was touching his hand now. “I bet it’s easier to fold without those handcuffs, right? Kate once taught me how to fold a kind of difficult rose. I can teach you, we just have to borrow some of Stella’s paperclips.”

He softened and nodded, and Max smiled to herself as she walked over to steal the box of paperclips. She wasn’t afraid of him, and he needed reassurance that she wasn’t afraid. Once she returned to her spot on the floor, she set the paperclips down, and got started right away. “Okay, so first you’re gonna fold the paper in half, then—” Max stopped when she felt Nathans icy-cold hand on hers. “Am I going too fast? Already?”

“Have you taken any photos lately?” he asked quietly.

“Yeah,” Max said, pointing. They’re in my bag.”

“Can I see them?” he asked excitedly. “Can I get them?”

Max thought for a moment about what was in her bag, nothing dangerous, though he may have a comment about the probably expired condoms she had in there. Oh well. “Yeah, they’re just kind of tossed in there, though.”

Max turned her back to him as he excitedly scrambled to get up and get to her bag. Max waited for him to come back with the photos, only to be unpleasantly surprised by his voice.

“Ribbed for her pleasure,” he laughed.

Immediately Max turned around, only to see Nathan holding her pictures, smirking. “Made you look.”

Max turned back around, only to see Nathan holding her pictures, smirking. “Made you look.”

Max turned back in a huff and crossed her arms. “Excuse me for wanting to be SAFE!”

Nathan laughed and joined her on the ground, this time a bit closer. “Oh, shut up, I’m just kidding. I bet I can map out your first time. With WARREN, no doubt. What was in like, Max? I bet he was REALLY fuckin’ sweaty. Breathing all heavy.” Nathan started gyrating his hips in a way that would have made Max blush, had ne not been sticking his tongue out, wiggling it around, and making the most obnoxious fake-kissing noises. “‘Unnnnnnn Max, dat feels soooooo good.’ Then you just lie there under him. Like a dork. Feeling nothing.”

Max couldn’t help but laugh. She swat Nathan playfully on the arm. “No, it wasn’t like that. I mean we were both nervous and super awkward, but it wasn’t bad. If anything, I got sweat on him. I was on top my first time.”

“You were on top! Ooh, Max, brave girl. My first time, I was on top sweating nonstop and gruntin...
like a gorilla.”

Max laughed out loud. “A gorilla! Come on, I’m sure it wasn’t that bad.”

Nathan stifled laughter and looked at Max’s pictures. He gave a slight smile when he saw the picture she’d taken of him, then set it down. “It was that bad. I was like fourteen, too, way too fucking young to be up in Bella West’s guts. She didn’t even take off her bra! I didn’t see boobs in person until I was sixteen, Max! And they were Victoria’s!”

Max lifted up, bringing herself even closer to him, steadied on her hands and knees. “YOU HAD SEX WITH VICTORIA?”

“NO!” Nathan shouted, looking up from the pictures. “God, no, ew, Max. She was changing in my room and I came in to ask her something. She cried. Shit, I did, too. It was weird.”

“Not even half as weird as this conversation,” Max added.

Nathan chuckled and handed the pictures back to her as she sat down, except for one—the selfie she’d taken that morning. “This one’s mine,” he said, and Max knew there was no arguing with him.

Max sighed and went back to folding. This time, Nathan followed her.

“You better take care of that picture. It’s a good one.”

Nathan smiled a sweet, toothless smile, and his face went red. “Yeah, it is. I’ll take care of it. Anyway. How was lunch with my sister? You two bond over how fucked up I am?”

Max glared at him. He was more like Chloe than either of them would ever dare to admit. “No. we ate, went to the Hilltop house, then talked about your mom.”

“Okay, no,” Nathan said sternly. “You talked about her mom. Melinda Prescott is NOT my mom.”

“I know,” Max said matter-of-factly. “Sophia Isley was. And Kristine doesn’t know.”

“Damn right,” Nathan spat. “And she never will.”

“Why?”

Nathan stopped folding completely and looked over at Max. There were tears in his eyes, but his voice didn’t waver, and the tears didn’t fall. “Because I want Kristine to be happy. Knowing the truth about our father would crush her. She doesn’t hate him like I do. I don’t want her to. I don’t wanna talk about my mom, Max. I don’t want to talk about her.”

“Hey, hey,” Max said. She touched his arm and he covered her hand with his own. “We don’t have to talk about anything you don’t want to talk about.”

Nathan sighed, loudly. “Max, are you REALLY up for this? Helping me?”

“Stop,” Max said, pointing her finger at him. “I already told you. I’m not going anywhere.”

Nathan smiled and squeezed her hand. “Me and Stella talked about a lot of stuff today.” He twiddled his thumbs.

“Oh?”

He took a deep breath. He promised Stella. He was a piece of shit, a screw-up, a killer, but Nathan
Prescott always kept his promises. “M-Max?”

“Yes, Nathan?” she asked, tilting her head to one side.

“I’m sorry about Chloe.”

Max froze and spoke before she even realized what she was saying. “I forgive you.” And since it came without a second thought, Max figured it had to be true.

And in silence, both of them went back to folding, wondering how things were gonna be while she visited him over the next year.
Brooke went through the checklist a third time, just to make sure Max had everything she needed for her trip.

“Jacket?”

“Check,” Max said.

“Laptop?”

“Check.”

“Tablet?”

“Oh, uh, duh.”

“Tablet pen?”

“Uh, let me…Uh, CHECK!”

Brooke frowned and lowered the list, then turned around so she could face Max. “Actually, it’s Brooke’s wrath, then shoes,” Brooke smirked.

Max went over to her and looked at the list over Brooke’s shoulder. “C’mon, Brooke, you know I have everything if you helped me pack. You just don’t want me to go.”

Brooke frowned and lowered the list, then turned around so she could face Max. “Of course I
don’t want you to go, Max. You’re gonna be gone for a while month.” And it was true. Max leaving for a couple days a month had become the new normal for the past year. It was easy to help her pick out a few outfits and two or three pairs of shoes. But they’d spent the last two weeks boxing up whole parts of Max’s room to the point where it held a bed and just a few outfits that Max deemed “too gaudy” for her trip. She was taking her whole life with her.

It made Brooke sad. What if Max somehow fell in love with Arcadia Bay again—forgot the horror there—and decided to make her life there permanent. Brooke could see that Max was truly changing things there. Her first few months, she’d made it seem like things were tough. Every visit was like starting over, because Nathan always got so angry when Max left to come back to Seattle.

But the last three months?

She was singing. Smiling, taking more selfies, even going to far as to bring Nathan gifts when she returned to visit him. He was getting better, and as selfish as it made her, Brooke feared Max would stay in Arcadia Bay for him. Brooke clutched the checklist to her chest and began to cry.

Max was practically in shock. What the hell was this about? “Brooke?” she started gently. “Are you…?”

“Max, if you move there,” Brooke sniffled, “promise to come back often and visit us, okay? You don’t have to call every day, just text me once in a while and tell me about your day, okay? I’ll buy you some really nice paper, too, because I know you like writing letters, and—”

“BROOKE!” Max shouted. She had been saying her name but Brooke was too hysterical to notice. “Brooke, I’m only going to be gone for a month. A month!”

“I know, but Max,” Brooke whined. “I see you. You dreaded going there like the first three months and then you totally changed. You started packing with a smile. You stopped dying that patch of hair! These visits have been good for you AND him—Nathan. I want you to be happy and you’re happy when you’re there.”

Max pulled Brooke into a hug. Max was happier—but not just because she was visiting Nathan, though that may have been a bigger part of it than Max cared to admit. Max was happy because going back to Arcadia Bay made her happy. Her memories of her hometown were no longer dimmed by that fateful October week with Chloe. Now those memories were warm and bright, and Max was so thankful to have them.

And Max had reconnected with all her old friends from Arcadia Bay. Brooke made it sound as though Max went to the correctional facility, visited Nathan, then sat in her hotel room doing nothing for the rest of the time she was there. Max was able to resume her precious tea-time with Kate—and Alyssa joined them. She watched movies and cooked for Stella and Warren, and joined Justin, Zach, and even Luke for the occasional drink at Justin’s bar.

But no matter how much fun she had, when Max got off the plane and returned to Seattle—home—she was happy to be spending time with Brooke and Daniel, working with Annie and her wife, and trying—though somewhat guarded—to reform a friendship with Talia. And when Max explained this all to Brooke, she stopped crying.

The next few moments passed in a comfortable silence, with Max finishing up the list herself while Brooke helped lug her stuff out the front door. Most of her stuff had been shipped to the Hilltop House a few days ago, and Max was just packing the few things she couldn’t do without before her trip. Max gave Brooke and Daniel and long goodbye, and after lugging her final suitcase to her car, she set off to visit a friend before getting to her flight much later in the day.
“Max! It’s good to see you,” Josh Tobler smiled, pulling her into a friendly half-hug. “Vic is in the nursery with the baby.” He pointed at the door, knowing full well that Max knew where everything in the house was, and continued on down the hallway, into the office.

Smiling, Max followed Josh to the nursery of his and Victoria’s beautiful house. Max tiptoed up the stairs, careful not to wake the baby and unleash Victoria’s wrath. Max opened the nursery door silently, and there was Victoria, sitting in a rocking chair next to the burgundy crib, cooing at baby Natalia. Max rapped on the door three times, and Victoria looked up at her with a smile. “Max!” she squealed. She turned back to the baby. “Natalia, look who’s here!”

Natalia turned her head, and as soon as she saw Max, she began gurgling and raising her hands, reaching for her. Max happily took Natalia from Victoria’s arm, and gently poked her soft, chubby cheeks. While Max was holding the baby, she looked around the room absentmindedly, kissing Natalia’s face and fine hair until she froze.

She looked at the wall across from the crib, and on it was an enormous frame that held only three pictures. There was a small pink square patch of background, and the first picture in the frame was a polaroid of Max, holding Natalia on the day she was born. On the far right side of the frame was the polaroid Max had taken of Taylor holding the baby. But in the middle was a picture that had been taken with Josh’s expensive digital camera. It was Nathan, holding Natalia when she was barely a week old. The love in his eyes made Max’s heart lurch. He was the gentlest Max had ever seen him, and Max felt her eyes fill with tears. “Is this new?” Max asked. She’d tried to hide the fact that she was crying, but the hitch in her breath betrayed her. She turned, and, forcing a smile, handed Natalia back to Victoria.

“Yeah,” Victoria smiled. She held Natalia close to her heart, almost as if it’d somehow reach Nathan. “Josh FINALLY got the last picture developed. That was such a beautiful moment, Max. He fell in love with her the moment he saw her. Even whispered ‘it’s you.’ He hugged Josh, told us he loved us. I was crying so much, Max.”

Max couldn’t hold it in anymore. “…” she started softly, “I wish he could have been there.”

Victoria said nothing; she only offered a sad half-smile. “Josh, can you come take Natalia for a minute?”

“Of course!” Josh said, lightly stepping in from the hallway. He gladly took his perfect little girl. “I’ll give you two a minute…looks like you need one.”

Victoria laughed and closed the nursery door behind him. She leaned against the door for a moment, allowing herself to cry. “I think about that day a lot, Max.”

It had been a weird mix of hectic calm, to say the least.

Max had been on call to take Victoria to the hospital because Josh couldn’t get out of work until her water broke. Taylor was SUPPOSED to be watching and taking care of Victoria, but it didn’t quite turn out that way.

Max had gone to the bathroom to relieve herself, only to return to see that she had received four missed calls from Taylor. The phone began ringing again before Max could even pick it up to call her back. “Hey, Taylor, what’s up? Is everything okay?”
“Max, please tell me Victoria is with you.”

“No…Brooke and Daniel are out shopping and I’m home alone. Taylor…what did you do?”

Taylor sighed, exasperated. “I swear, Max, I was in the bathroom for like five minutes. I had to go! When I came out her purse and keys AND she was gone. God, Josh is gonna kill me. The ONE time I’m on baby watch, I ruin everything.”

“Taylor, she’s forty weeks. She can’t have gotten far. It probably took her a full minute to stand up on her own,” Max assured her. Before she could comfort Taylor any further, she saw she had an incoming call. “Hold on, Taylor, Victoria’s calling me.” Max answered.

“Hey, Maxine,” Victoria asked calmly.

“Max, never Maxine. Where are you?”

“Driving myself to the hospital, Max never Maxine. My water broke,” Victoria said.

Max pinched the bridge of her nose. “Don’t you think it would have been a li—ttle wiser to wait —”

“For Taylor to drive me? Yes, but listen. I was also hungry and I knew Taylor wouldn’t stop at McDonald’s first.”

“YOU DON’T EVEN LIKE MCDONALD’S!”

“True, but I’ve never had a Big Mac before so maybe that’s why I don’t like it—I’ve missed out on their famous thing. Just meet me at the hospital, okay?”

Annoyed, Max hurriedly grabbed her purse, the sunglasses and hat she kept by the door, and her phone charger, all while making a phone call to Josh.

Max identified herself to the woman at the hospital’s front desk, narrowly escaping a bombardment of autographs and heading up to Victoria’s room. Max walked fast, pulling her hat down over her eyes and looking generally as un-Max-like as possible. She turned into Victoria’s room, dodging the knowing, sparkling eyes of an adoring fan. She let the door close behind her, hopefully warning everyone who wanted to meet her that this was a private visit. Max glanced around the room, noticing that she was the first one there. In the bed was a smiling Victoria, caressing her giant belly, her short hair was stuck to her sweaty forehead, but somehow, she was glowing.

“Maaax! Hi! That Big Mac was HORRIBLE but it was cold when I finally started eating it so maybe that’s my fault. Your hair is so long. I wonder if—ooooooh, FUCK—Natalia’s hair will ever get that long,” she said. “You called Josh?” Victoria paused to squeeze her eyes shut, trying to handle an oncoming contraction.

Max took off her hat and used her sunglasses as a makeshift headband. “Yes, I called him.” Seeing the naughty look in Victoria’s eyes, Max couldn’t help but laugh. They’d been keeping her on constant watch for the last two weeks—Victoria needed to go and cause and little trouble. She must’ve felt like a prisoner.

Victoria stretched both of her arms out, waving Max over, a melancholy smile on her face. “Why are you giving me that look?” Max asked.
Victoria scoffed and shook her hands a little more frantically now. Her eyes were filling with tears.

Immediately Max walked over, quickly, sitting on the corner of the bed near Victoria’s head. Max smiled to herself, fighting a blush when Victoria laid her head against Max’s stomach. “God, Max, I remember when my stomach was this flat. God, I was so HOT. Now… I’m a house.”

“No, you’re a mom,” Max corrected. “And you’re still pretty hot.”

“Oh, Max,” Victoria said. She wrapped her arms around Max, tightly. “You have got to work on containing your gay.”

This time, Max scoffed. “I did that for like, eighteen years, not my style.” Before Max could crack another joke, she felt her shirt getting warm. “Victoria, are you crying?”

“I’m so scared, Max,” she sobbed. “I’m so excited to meet her, finally. To hold her, to kiss her. But how do I get her to understand how much I love her? I have to teach her right from wrong, how to spell her name—her long, LONG name. I have to teach her not to let her privilege blind her, like I did. I have to teach how to make friends, how to self-soothe. She’s got to learn it all.”

Max breathed loftily and stroked Victoria’s hair. “Well… you don’t have to teach her all of that the first day.”

And Victoria laughed. She was in a fit of raucous, boisterous laughter. And she laughed so hard she cried, and Max was there for it all. She was there when Victoria calmed down. She was there when Taylor ran in and shouted every obscenity in the book, then was overwhelmed with a relief so great, she was reduced to tears. She was there when Josh rushed in, overflowing with kisses once he saw that his wife was safe and sound. She was there screaming “PUSH!” when Victoria delivered a perfect baby girl. She was there for the first breath, the first cry.

But Nathan wasn’t.

“He should have been there,” Max said.

Victoria closed her eyes and walked over to Max. “Did I ever tell you about the day he first saw her?”

Max wiped her tears, only for another to fall. “No.”

Victoria sighed and hugged herself, letting her tears flow freely. “It was such a great day, Max,” Victoria started. “The way he held her when he first saw her melted my fucking heart. As soon as I handed her to him, he just sat down, like he couldn’t walk anymore. It was so weirdly QUIET, too. Max, he just held her, kissed her precious little head. Then he said, ‘you are a perfect little girl.’ He hugged Josh so tightly I almost thought he was trying to hurt him. Josh said that Nathan thanked him when he hugged him. And then Nathan… he…”

Max said nothing. She waited.

Victoria caught her breath. “He cried when we left, Max. He NEVER cries, Max. He was so sad to see us go. It broke my heart. I miss him so much. I know he did wrong and he has to pay for that. But it’s so hard being so far from my best friend, Max.” She kept crying. “I don’t even know what to do. I have a husband, a baby, my dog—you!—but there’s this void in me, Max. I miss him so much.”
Max knew that nothing she could possibly say to Victoria would make her feel better. It was rare that Victoria was inconsolable. The last time she’d gotten like this was a few weeks before her wedding. She was pretty estranged from her parents, and Victoria had planned to let Nathan walk her down the aisle. It’d finally hit her that he wasn’t going to be there, and she was a wreck until she just sort of snapped out of it.

And Max knew she was the reason Victoria was so upset. Max was visiting Nathan all the time. She had the time and the money to do so—not that Victoria couldn’t afford it. She wasn’t able to travel after a certain point in her pregnancy, and now she had to live with being a small part of his life. And Max knew Victoria tried to be happy for her, when she knew Victoria wished she was out there helping Nathan, too. Max walked over and hugged Victoria, knowing it was the best she could give to comfort anybody. “Victoria,” Max said. “You’re a good friend.”

Max was finally on her plane now, waiting for take off. She could have kicked herself for taking a red eye—she knew she had too much to do once she returned to Arcadia Bay. As soon as she arrived, she was going to drive the forty minutes to the Hilltop House, and from there they were going to go straight to the correctional facility to pick up Nathan. She knew she’d have to get all her sleep on the plane, and she was afraid she might have been irritable. She didn’t want her possible bad mood to trigger anything from him—though she couldn’t have been worried. She knew him, now.

Max adjusted her seat and turned to her side, trying to make herself more comfortable. She had gotten a lot closer to Nathan than she wanted to admit. What started out as an annoying routine turned into an eager vacation. Nathan seemed excited to see her, too, but Max had a weird feeling about everything. Nathan had had his fair share of outbursts, but he had changed. He wasn’t all uptight and guarded—he almost seemed friendly. He’d smile when she’d walk in and he’d always have something on the tip of his tongue to talk about the moment she got there. The only thing is that when he talked about his mom—his real mom, not Melinda Prescott—it seemed like he was holding something back. There was some event, some secret that he didn’t want to share. Max couldn’t exactly blame him, but it made her feel pretty shitty that he didn’t totally trust her. But then again, Max didn’t know if she trusted him all the way, either. On the bright side, the situation far less bizarre than it was when they originally started visiting each other. Max hoped things wouldn’t be weird between them.

Max had been living with “roommates” ever since she started at Blackwell back when she was eighteen. Because she was around the girls in her dorm all the time, she learned how they lived. It was best to shower in the mornings because the bathroom was pretty empty. Never shower after Dana because she used up all the hot water. Remind Courtney to make sure she grabbed her toothbrush and make sure Brooke and Juliet kept their hair out of the drain. Max knew how Brooke and Daniel lived, and even Warren, but she had NO IDEA what it’d be like living with Nathan and Kristine. Would Kristine constantly be barging in without knocking because of her excitable personality? Exactly how loud did Nathan need his whale songs to be for him to get a good sleep? Did he learn to sleep without it? Would Max and Nathan be together every moment of the day? Did Kristine have constant activities planned?

These questions were all swirling in her mind along with another, perhaps BIGGER question: what the hell was she going to do about Talia? Talia had turned Max into “the other woman” and Max was, admittedly, still sore about it.

She remembered that day she’d unblocked Talia’s number and the short conversation they had. It was the most confident Max had been in months. It was hard for her to be assertive around Talia. She didn’t know whether it was hard because she was still in love with Talia or just because she had
been hurt so badly. It was kind of nice to be on talking terms, though. Even though, for now, Max
didn’t want Talia as a lover, she desperately missed having her as a friend. They had so much in
common and Max missed spending time with her, romantic or not. The most they’d done in the past
year was upgrade from texting to the occasional awkward phone call. It was almost funny how her
relationship contrasted her relationship with Nathan. But now was not the time to think about it. She
was going to have a long day—maybe even a long month—and she needed to get some sleep.

Max couldn’t rest even if she wanted to. Aside from the flashing lights of other passengers’
cellphones, the plane ride wasn’t very smooth. Once she found herself dozing off, a rattling from the
plane or a seatbelt announcement would wake her up again. Restless, Max stood up out of her
outside seat and went to use the bathroom.

Max couldn’t stand to be in there very long, exiting quickly after using the bathroom and
checking her phone. She slumped down into her seat, hoping to find something entertaining on her
laptop. As soon as Max logged in, she resisted rolling her eyes when an instant message popped up.
There were only two people who ever messaged her on her computer this late, and one of them was
blocked—Talia—for now. Max typed away a hasty response. She could have kicked herself—it
would have been better to hide her online status by not responding.

Flight is good, Warren. Late night?

Yup. Stell fell asleep during our movie. Lame! How are you feeling?

Tired. Gonna sleep.

Sweet dreams!

Max logged off. She didn’t like talking to Warren as much anymore. She loved what had become
of her relationship with Stella—they were as good of friends as she and Brooke, now. And Max was
much closer to Nathan as well. Max wasn’t an idiot—she knew that Warren was bothered by her
relationship with Nathan even though he had no right to be. Now Warren was trying to get their
relationship back to what it was before they ever dated and Max knew it’d never be like that again.
Conceited as it was. Max knew that Warren still had feelings for her—and she wasn’t going to lose
her friendship with Stella over it. What Warren didn’t know was that Max had talked to Stella about
it—and Stella had only confirmed what Max was thinking. Stella knew that Max had loved Warren.
They’d had a happy, healthy relationship while they were together, but the end was enough for Max
to be done with it, but for some reason, it wasn’t enough closure for him. But Stella, at the time, had
decided to stay with him, to try to continue their relationship. But she was getting tired, and she’d
expressed to Max that she was thinking of a way to break up with him.

Her phone beeped. It was a message from Stella.

He message you again?

…yeah. You okay?

Same old. You need to sleep!! :P

Okay MOM. See you…later?

Yessss. Good night!

And somewhere between sending the message and tiredly closing her computer, Max fell asleep.
Max was on her way to the Hilltop house now. She’d managed to get a good amount of sleep on the plane and felt pretty good about seeing Nathan today. Max was going to drop her car and a few things off at the Hilltop House, then ride with Kristine to pick up Nathan. She had just long enough to add a trip to the bathroom before heading out to pick up Nathan.

To say that Max was nervous was an understatement—and she felt stupid for being this nervous at all. Max and Nathan were friends, she thought. But they sort of HAD to be for this to work. They were in a controlled space doing controlled things. Would they still be friendly now that an outburst would only be quelled by Max alone? Would they still be friends when they were living constantly in the same space? When they were drunk? Nathan can't even drink, Max remembered, but he wasn’t the type to be stopped because of a few rules. What if they spend the entire time at each others’ throats because there was no threat of police interference to stop them? Or what if the lack made them go at each other some other way? Max shook the thought from her mind. What she needed now was to focus on being happy to see him.

Max parked her car and made the familiar trudge up the driveway. She pulled out the key that Kristine had given her during her last visit—a cute, mint-green key with “Maxie” engraved on it—and went through to the front door, where Kristine was waiting with a smile on her face.

“Good morning! How was your flight?”

Max swung her bag into Kristine’s eager, strong arms and smiled.

“Very good,” Max fibbed slightly. “A bit turbulent, but not anything I couldn’t handle.”

“Excellent!” Kristine chirped. “Are you hungry, or…”

“I probably will be later. I ate a little bit at the airport,” Max said. It wasn’t the best sandwich, but with how hungry she’d been when she got off the plane, it seemed like it was made by the gods themselves.

“Ooh, good. Maybe I can get Nathan to cook for us. He might do it because you’re here,” Kristine giggled.

Max was surprised. “Nathan knows how to cook?”

“He LOVES to cook, Max, oh my god,” Kristine gushed. “And he’s great at it. But he hates when I ask him to cook because it takes up so much time. I swear, Max, he’s like your favorite grandma when it comes to cooking.”

Max laughed. She was learning new things about Nathan every day. She liked to learn things about him but in this instance, it made her a little sad. She wanted to hear that he liked to cook from him. Max wanted Nathan to be the one to tell her a bunch of his little quirks, or rather, she wanted to learn them herself. She had no idea why she wanted to know him so badly, to feel like she was close to him. And she didn’t want to think about it.

Max quickly used the bathroom as Kristine put on her shoes. As Kristine locked up the house, Max nervously waited in Kristine’s car until it was time to pick Nathan up.

* * *

The ride to the facility had been pretty uneventful. Max’s car anxiety was pretty calm the whole ride over, which was a huge accomplishment. Her accident almost a year ago only came up when
she was turning. All she could see was the car crashing into her, then dark until she snapped out of it. The only other thing she had besides her anxiety was a very small, moon-shaped scar on her head where hair no longer grew. Nobody would notice it unless she shaved her head, but on days where she was doing her hair, sometimes she touched it, and she was triggered all over again. She touched the spot now, and it was just a bit tender because of the scar tissue; just like the doctor said it would be. She hoped that someday, it’d just be another memory.

The drive over to the facility was relatively short, with Max politely responding to Kristine’s talk about the numerous trips she had taken over the last year. No matter how much she traveled or what she said about her trips, Max still couldn’t figure out exactly what Kristine’s job was. At some point she attended a gala in Paris where she got a pair of designer shoes and next thing Max knew, she was in Africa building schools for the less fortunate. But right now, she was all fired up about her trip to Japan.

“I’m telling you, Maxie, there is NOTHING like Tokyo. All my trips are now Pre-Japan and Post-Japan,” Kristine spouted. Slowly, everything Kristine was saying just faded into the music of the radio, and Max looked out the window as all the scenery began to fade together.

Max was back in the junkyard, the day she and Chloe found Rachel’s body. But instead of finding Chloe sitting there crying and throwing up because of what she’d seen, it was Chloe sitting there, smiling, a blue butterfly balancing daintily on her fingers. Sitting next to her was Rachel, a blue jay resting on her long hair, the familiar feather earring matching Chloe’s beautiful blue.

Max felt a little awkward just staring at them, and she rubbed her arm with her hand, trying to make this all seem normal. Rachel had made it clear that this place wasn’t real, and that to get through it all, all she had to do was see Chloe. But she had seen Chloe—so that meant there was something else keeping them here. Max didn’t want to think about what it might have been, but she already knew what it was. And she knew that the both of them were about to bring it to light.

“Max! Get that bony white ass over here!” Chloe shouted, waving her over. She shook her hand with gusto, but for some reason, the butterfly never left.

“Hi, Max!” Rachel said proudly. “Come sit!”

Max, though somewhat nervously, came over to the two of them and sat down. Soon she felt a weird presence behind her, and something in her wanted it to be Nathan, but it wasn’t. Behind her was a doe, and she came and rested her head on Max’s. “Oh, hello,” Max said softly. “Is this normal?”

“Yeah,” Rachel said, as another bird landed on her head. “They’re our totems. They like to be near us for comfort. They sometimes get annoying, though.”

“Hell yeah they do,” Chloe chimed in. She waved a butterfly off of her nose and was suddenly caught up in boisterous laughter. “Rachel’s are the best. They are always getting caught in her hair and shit, it’s hilarious.”

Rachel waved her hand and got a bird off of her hair. “Yeah, but not nearly as funny as when Nathan comes along. Him trying to get anywhere with that giant whale is definitely something worth watching.”

Before Max could ask anything, Chloe was touching her hair. “God, I can’t believe you grew it out! I never thought you’d ever have it long.”
“What?” Max asked. And sure enough, her hair was long. Max had just figured that her hair was short, and that she was short, and that she looked just like she did when she was with them. It was weird that she was older than them, but she knew that they were both taller than she was. “I didn’t even realize.”

Rachel laughed. “Yeah, it’s different than usual. When you were closer to feeling guilty about everything, you looked as young as us. Now that you’ve moved on, you’re looking like an adult.”

Chloe got close to Max and cupped her chest. “And look at those things! Sorry Max, but I totally thought you’d be Max-Two-Backs for the rest of your life! But look at these things!”

“That thank you, Chloe!” Max shouted, her face red. “I has been FIVE YEARS!”

Before Chloe or Rachel could respond, they heard the familiar song of a whale.

“Ooh, that’s Nathan,” Chloe said. “Hopefully it’s not too hard for him to lug that thing behind him.”

“Right!” Rachel said suddenly. “Nathan said he had something important to tell you.”

But before Nathan could arrive, his music got louder and louder, and Max started to feel strange.

“I feel weird.”

“No, Max, it’s too early.”

“What are you talking about?” Max asked. But she found the answer soon enough. She looked at her arm and saw that she was slowly fading away.

Rachel grabbed Max’s hand and squeezed it. “Make sure you ask Nathan about his mom. We thought he told you already.”

“What happened to his mom?”

Chloe answered, but the whale songs were far too loud for Max to hear her.

“Max?” Kristine asked, gently shaking her awake. “We’re here.”

Max and Kristine got out of the car, and made their way to a friendly-looking guard who was waving them over.

“Good morning, I’m officer Daly, you ladies are here to pick up Nathan?” the officer asked. That much was pretty obvious. They were parked on the complete opposite side of the facility, and they were in front of a small door guarded by Daly.

He was far more polite than Max expected. Maybe they were glad to be rid of Nathan for a month. The thought made Max sad.

“Yes, here for Nathan,” Kristine answered eloquently, knowing that Max wouldn’t be able to answer.

A million thoughts raced through Max’s mind as she and Kristine followed officer Daly to an outside door. In just a few seconds, Nathan was going to be back. Were they going to send him out in his prison orange, making him look like some escaped fugitive? There had to be a policy against that, right? Some sort of prisoner protection act?
Officer Daly ushered them to the door to the building. “Before we bring him out, we have to go through a few rules. Mr. Prescott has already been briefed on these rules. He will still need to attend therapy sessions three times a week during normal times on the days of your choosing,” he began. “He will also need to do a phone call check-in with David Madsen, every day by three p.m. There is to be no alcohol or drug use during his stay; he will be given a routine breathalyzer as well as a urine-based drug test. He may not operate any firearms or weapons; get married or sign any legal documents—aside from any documents required for Sean Prescott’s death—without permission from David Madsen.

“He cannot associate with anyone who has a criminal record without Mr. Madsen’s permission, and he may only do so if it has to do with an open case. He also cannot operate any motor vehicles. He also may not return from furlough with anything he did not take out with him, usually clothing, jewelry, or books. Photos are okay as long as they are standalone with no frame. You will get a paper detailing all of this to keep as a reference. If you understand please respond ‘I understand’ and I will have an officer bring him out.”

“I understand,” they answered in unison.

“Alright,” Officer Daly continued, smiling. He pulled his shoulder radio to his mouth and spoke gently and clearly into it. “Officer Gibbons, please bring out inmate number 2-3-8-1-1-2-5.”

And not a minute later, there he was.

Nathan Prescott.

He came out in some very obvious furlough-issued clothes because the white shirt he was wearing was a size too small and his pants looked far too big. He was wearing a pair of white shoes, and by the smile on his face, he seemed excited. He had on no handcuffs and he was walking fast, with only Officer Gibbons’ grip reminding him not to get too excited.

Officer Gibbons handed Nathan over along with a standard manila folder. “Inside the folder is the information Br—Officer Daly covered with you,” she said, “along with any possessions Nathan arrived with. Report to the front thirty-one days from today so you can finish your sentence. Good luck.”

As soon as Officers Gibbons and Daly were gone, Nathan walked over and hugged Kristine, a deep laugh escaping him. “God, I never thought I’d be taller than you, Sissy! It’s been too long!”

“It has, Buggy, please let me breathe,” Kristine squeezed out. Laughing, she and Nathan parted ways, and he looked over at Max, who was standing there sheepishly. There was a split-second of confusion shared between the both of them, wondering if they should hug. Remembering some of their path visits, a hug suddenly seemed long overdue.

Nathan smiled very faintly, and opened his arms to Max, leaning into her. Max smiled and accepted his hug, leaning her head against his chest. He smelled like the soap she’d given him in a care package. It felt so odd to feel so close to him. It reminded her of the last visit she’d made to see him, almost five weeks ago.

Max had been in a crappy mood, her flight turbulent the entire way. And if that wasn’t bad enough, her flight had also been delayed two hours due to bad weather, so she had to move breakfast with Joyce and David to dinner with Joyce and David. Max stomped into the room, where Nathan had sat surprised on the couch. Stella had already left to the monitoring room. She threw her bag into
one of the chairs next to the couch and laid down on the floor. Nathan finished whatever he’d been folding and sat next to Max on the floor. “What’s the matter? More problems with Salty Gay?”

Max stifled laughter. That’s what Nathan called her relationship with Talia. The way he joked about it all made things seem just a little bit easier.

“No,” Max said. “My flight was bad and I’m tired. The only Salty Gay anywhere right now is me. All in favor of a nap, raise your hand.” They both raised their hands. Laughing, they each grabbed a pillow from the couch and laid down on the floor, their back to each other.

An hour later, Max woke up feeling much better, but stayed frozen on the floor. Nathan had rolled over in his sleep and was cuddling her. His left arm had been hung over her stomach and his right was resting under her neck. But she felt a very familiar poke in her backside, one that Max KNEW couldn’t be either of his hands. She scooted forward slightly, doing her best not to wake him up, but she would have no such luck. Nathan began to stir, and Max, not wanting to embarrass him, feigned sleep. Nathan began to rise, and after waking, he realized how close he was to her. He moved away from her quickly. “Really, Nathan? Really? You fucking idiot. You ruin everything.”

Now Max had pretended to be just waking up. She comforted him, making sure he was okay. Why was this story popping up in her head now? I was probably nothing. That always happens when a guy first wakes up, right? Max reasoned. Plus, Nathan was working through a five-year dry spell. It was only natural that he got a little…excited when pressed up against a girl. Max had suddenly become very aware of how long she and Nathan had been hugging when a giggle escaped Kristine.

“Ooh…should I leave you guys here for a minute?” she teased.

Nathan rolled his eyes and pulled away slowly, giving Kristine a nasty glare. “Eat a staple, Kristine,” he snapped.

Max chuckled. When things got weird, Max could always rely on Nathan to make things feel normal again. The three of them walked to the car, and Nathan was already whining once Max went to get into the front seat.

“Sit in the back with me?” he said. He’d try to make it sound like a question just to be polite, but Max knew it was just his way of masking a command—she’d learned that from Stella. He knew what he needed to do to get a positive answer from her. Max only looked at him, eyebrows raised, and waited.

“Please sit in the back with me?” he rephrased, catching himself before Max could say, “Want to try that again?”

This time, Kristine chimed in. “Um, I am NOT a chauffeur. Plus, Nathan, I brought a change of clothes and stuff for you.”

“So what, I can still change in the car. I know Max has seen a naked guy before, Kristine,” Nathan said back matter-of-factly.

Kristine looked at Max apologetically. Max smiled knowingly and slid into the back seat after Nathan. Kristine handed him his clothes, a pair of blue jeans, underwear, and a white t-shirt. In top of it all was a pair of socks and shoes. Max hadn’t thought at all about prison issued underwear. Max looked ahead when Nathan changed his shirt and looked out the window once he made his way to
the drawstring on his big furlough pants. Once he was finished changing, he slipped on his socks and shoes and let out an exaggerated sigh of relief. “God!” Nathan continued, lightly patting Max’s thigh with an open palm. “It’s like a cloud is hugging my ass.”

Max laughed out loud and Kristine sighed. “Nathan, really?”

“You wear their boxers made of sandpaper for four years, then you can talk, okay?” Nathan said. “I’m tired.” Nathan scooted so that his head was resting on Max’s lap. Before she could protest, Nathan gave her a look, and she was powerless against it. She didn’t know if he gave her that look on purpose to get what he wanted of if she just conceded when he gave it. Nathan poked Max on the nose and she chuckled, absentmindedly rubbing his head as he drifted off to sleep.

The trio arrived home some time later, Nathan feeling refreshed. Max watched to see Nathan’s reaction upon returning home, but his reaction was, surprisingly, underwhelming. He left his shoes at the bottom of the stairs, then stretched. “So much fucking space.”

“Are you hungry at all?” Kristine asked, just a bit too excitedly.

Nathan saw right through it. “Are you trying to get me to cook for you, Kristine?” A twinge of guilt flashed in her eyes. “Ha! I knew it. You thought I was gonna say yes just because MAX is here. That’s low, Kristine, even for you.”

Kristine dramatically put one hand over her forehead and the other over her heart. “But Buggy, you know how much I love your cooking!”

“No way,” Nathan said, waving his hand and shaking his head. “Do NOT start with the Buggy crap now, Kristine. You only get to call me that when you’re not full of shit.” Max noticed a hint of a smile, and Kristine was smiling, too.

Kristine threw herself at him, wrapping her arms around his neck and letting her body go limp, almost pulling him to the floor. Nathan let out a surprised “WHOA!” as he caught them both from crashing to the ground. “OH PLEASE FORGIVE MEEEEEEE!”


Kristine smiled and let him go, patting him on the head. “Thank you, Buggy.”

Max could only laugh. Their dynamic was so cute, and she hoped living with them would always be this fun. Despite wanting to stay and watch them more, Max felt she was past due for a shower. She quietly excused herself, making her way to her room. She stripped with the door slightly ajar, knowing that everyone who could get a glimpse of her was downstairs. Grabbing her shower caddy, she quickly put some replacement clothes on the bed, folded neatly. She went into the guest room bathroom and waited for the water to warm up before she got in. after a few moments, she let her hair down. She grabbed her shampoo out of her shower caddy and for just a moment, felt like she was back at Blackwell. She spent such a short time there, but her memories there seemed so vivid, with a nice gentle glow. As Max reminisced, she was suddenly interrupted by a frantic knock at her bathroom door. Max quickly made sure the shower curtain opaque but before Max could ask who it was, Nathan's desperate voice strained against the bathroom door.

“MAX!” he said. “I’m sorry to bug you, but can I pee in there?”

Max scoffed before she could stop herself. “I don’t have an entire bathroom in your OWN room
“MAX! MY MOM DIED IN THERE!” he shouted. “I don’t want to go in there!” His words were more frantic now. “Please Max, Kristine’s door is locked and the maid is cleaning the hall bathroom and I’m not going to make it down—”

“Fine!” Max shouted. She couldn’t see herself but she KNEW how red her face was right now. She heard Nathan shuffle in and quickly undo his pants followed by a loud, horselike pee and an “Ahh” of relief from him.

“Why—”

“Shhh, I’m counting.”

Max stifled her laughter and then continued washing herself, her eyes darting to the curtain every time Nathan so much as sniffed too loudly.

“Whoa,” Nathan breathed, flushing the toilet. “Thirty-two seconds! A crazy long pee. Thanks, Max. I’ve been holding that one since this morning.”

“Speaking of,” Max said between breaths. She was rinsing off her facewash suds. “Why did you wait so long? We got home almost, like, forty minutes ago.”

“I fucking Pavloved myself like an idiot,” Nathan said back. He was washing his hands now. He smelled the soap and let out a small “ooh.” Max couldn’t tell if it was a good or bad “ooh.”

“How so?”

He was drying his hands, now. Max heard him take another longer sniff. It was a good “ooh.” He went to the door, it sounded, and leaned against it. “Around now is when I’d usually have my session with Stella, right?”

“Right?”

“Yeah. At the prison, I never pissed alone. Guys would always follow me in and try to get me into trouble. So I’d wait until I was with Stella. I like Stella. She’s very nice to me.”

Aside from feeling bad for Nathan, Max was a little happy for him. Nathan had always made it seem as if Stella was his annoying older sister—and he thought he had one of those already. It was nice to hear he was fond of someone.

“Anyways, thanks for the pee, Max,” Nathan said, opening the door.

Before he could leave, Max screamed, and Nathan darted back into the bathroom. There was Max, shouting unintelligibly, wrapped up in the curtain, jabbing her finger at a sizable black fuzz in the corner. “Nathan! Nathan!”

His face went just a little pink when she shouted his name. “What? What is it?”

Max winced as the showerhead sprayed water over her face. She pushed her hair back and continued shouting. “That! That right there!” Max scooted back into the shower, allowing enough room for Nathan to step inside and only get his socks wet.

He grabbed a mound of toilet paper and replaced himself in the shower. “Max, it’s just a spider.”
Nathan pent down with the mound of paper.

“Did you KILL it?” she breathed nervously. “Is it dead?”

Nathan whipped around and held the dead spider in her face. “Gee, I don’t know, does it look dead, Max?”

Max wanted to swat his hand away but she couldn’t—if she took either of her hand off the shower curtain, he’d see everything. Overwhelmed, Max barely uttered “don’t” before she started to cry.

Immediately, Nathan changed his tone. He threw the spider away in a garbage can near the toilet. Nathan stepped back into the shower, arms open wide, and as if by some strange magnetism, Max rested her head on his chest.

“Max, it’s dead. I’m sorry. Stop crying,” Nathan said. His voice was soft and gentle, and though Max knew he was being genuine, the way he spoke lulled her into a false sense of security. It reminded him of the way Mr. Jefferson sounded in the dark room.

Max pulled away a bit more forcefully than she’d intended and wiped her tears. “I’m okay.”

Nathan didn’t buy it, but he didn’t want to push her. She was already upset because of him. The last thing he wanted to do was make things worse. “Okay,” he said, as nicely as he could, masking his hurt. “Enjoy your shower, Spider-Free.”

To his surprise, Max laughed. He felt a bit better. “Thank you, Nathan,” she smiled. He smiled back and left her to finish. Max finished rinsing the soap off of her body, then tied her hair up in a nice neat ponytail and took a towel off the rack across from the toilet. As she opened the bathroom door, she opened and readjusted her towel only to see Nathan sitting on her bed with a very satisfied look on his face.

Max closed her eyes in an attempt to hide her annoyance, but it was obvious in her voice. “Did you just see me naked, Nathan?”

Nathan grinned and looked up at the ceiling. “What a great day! Did you get another tattoo?”

“No, I have no,” Max lied. It was a very convincing lie, too—she almost believed it. She didn’t want him to know about the tattoo. She wasn’t even supposed to ever let him see it. “Any particular reason why you’re still in my room?”

“I took it upon myself to check for more spiders,” he said sarcastically. “I actually have something to ask you.”

“I took it upon myself to check for more spiders,” he said sarcastically. “I actually have something to ask you.”

Max sighed. “What?”

“I want to switch rooms. I don’t want to be in my old room. I’ll move all your stuff myself,” he said. “Even if it takes all—”

“Sure,” Max said.

Nathan was surprised. “Really?”

“Yeah,” Max said. “There’s too much history in there for you. I get it.” Max waddled to the door, the grip on her towel tighter than ever. “Carry my clothes?”
Smiling, Nathan grabbed the folded clothes and followed Max to his old room.

Once they were inside, maybe an attempt to get him back, she didn’t know, Max dug under his expensive old mattress and pulled out the magazines, along with the picture of his real mom, Sophia Isley. “You left these here.”

Nathan quickly put the picture of his mother in his back pocket, trying his best not to react to it. Once he saw the magazine, he grinned. “God DAMN this day just keeps getting better and better! Gonna re-break these in right now.” Nathan turned and swat Max on the butt with the magazine before turning toward the door, only to see Kristine standing there with her ear to her phone. Max was already embarrassed that she had to walk across the hallway in just a towel, and now Nathan was putting ideas in Kristine’s head.

She covered the receiver. “You guys, seriously. Always doing something weird when I come along.”

“What do you WANT Kristine?” Nathan asked, irked.

Kristine sighed. “Max has to get dressed. I’m talking to mom, we’re going to go with her to visit dad.”
**Family**

Chapter Summary

Max and Nathan try to stomach a visit to Prescott Manor.

Chapter Notes

Thank you guys for being so patient with this chapter, it comes in at 15,868 words long!! I can't believe my hand didn't fall off! There will be important update-notes posted on my blog caulscott-garbage.tumblr.com. You don't have to follow, but be sure to check the blog periodically for important updates!! Enjoy!!

CHAPTER [FAMILY]

“I’m not going,” Nathan said for the millionth time. “I don’t want to see that old bastard!”

“Nathan, please,” Max heard Kristine beg. “Please don’t make any more difficult than it already—”

“I’M making this difficult?” Nathan screeched, very obviously hurt over what she said. “You know what? Leave me alone, Kristine.”

Max could hear a slight defensive tone perk up in Kristine’s voice. That must have been something that he said constantly that irked her. Kristine didn’t seem the type to let anything bother her for more than a few minutes. Even with Max, the first time she met, she only cried for a moment or two then was back to happy-go-lucky Kristine.

“You do not get to say that to me,” Kristine raged through clenched teeth. “I have tried so hard to—”

“I SAID LEAVE ME ALONE!”

Max heard Nathan's stomping, and then the slam of a door. Max lotioned herself, trying to act like she didn’t hear Kristine crying in her own room. She pulled on her undergarments and sat on the bed for a moment, waiting for the lotion to soak in. She didn’t normally wear a lot of fancy lotions, but this was a hundred-dollar lotion that Victoria had gotten Max on her last trip to Paris before Natalia was born. Plus, Max wanted to put a little effort into smelling good. She didn’t really know why.

Eventually, Max got dressed, then opened her door so that it would be easier for the housekeepers to move her stuff from the guest room. She settled on a pair of brand-new, dark blue jeans and a shirt that she’d always thought looked good on her. It was a simple, black and white horizontal striped shirt, made of a gentle, flowy material. The line in the back of her shirt went just low enough for her to show a little bit of skin (and her tattoo if she wanted to put work into putting her hair up) but was high enough so that she could still wear a bra.

Staying in Nathan's room was bizarre. The aesthetic of the room was oddly comforting: the dark-ish blue walls, the shelves of books, the projector hanging overhead, emitting a quiet hum. But the room
seemed kind of…empty. If it could be described in a color, it’d be gray. Not only was there a weird aura of death near the bathroom, it looked as if Nathan hadn’t stepped into the room at all when they arrived. Max had assumed that he had come in and was overwhelmed by the sight of the room and the memories he’d had here, but the room was just as Max had left it when she visited Kristine over a year ago. She came to the house every once in a while to help carry some of her things upstairs, but she hadn’t been in this room since that day—she thought it was intrusive. And now suddenly, it was her room.

As Max relaxed, the sudden sight of Nathan in her doorframe surprised her. He almost looked as though he wasn’t sure he wanted to go in or not, so she tried to help him figure that out. “Something on your mind?” she asked. Then if he really didn’t want to answer or talk to her, he could just leave. He threw his arms up in frustration, still trying to figure out what to say. “Was…was I bad back there? Is Kristine’s crying because I did something bad?”

Max didn’t really know a good way to explain how neither of them, technically, were in the right or in the wrong. Kristine should have known, given their tumultuous relationship, that Nathan wasn’t going to be willing to see Sean Prescott after being out of jail for only two hours. But Nathan needed to remember to practice his calming techniques, and stay away from hurtful words—which Max suspected hurt Kristine more than Nathan realized. “She should have briefed you on your dad,” Max started softly, “but I don’t think you should have told her to leave you alone. She’s put a lot of work into scheduling me and getting everything squared for furlough. Because of Kristine, you don’t have to have a police escort everywhere you go. As long as you’re with me or Kristine and you’re on the straight and narrow, you won’t get in trouble for it. Kristine really wore David down for that one. She wanted you to feel normal once you were free.”

Nathan clenched his fists in an effort to calm down, but it wasn’t working. He began to pace the room as frustrated, shallow breaths escaped his throat. “But I’m not wrong to be mad in the first place, right? It’s okay that I’m angry, right?”

“Yes,” Max said confidently.

Nathan let out an exasperated shout, slamming the door to the room in anger, making it obvious that he wanted them to be alone. “How the hell can I not be angry, Max?”

Before Max could respond, Nathan was holding her by her arms, tightly. “Nathan, are you going to be okay?”

“He fucked up my head, Max. He dragged me through timeline after timeline and ruined me,” Nathan said. He squeezed tighter.

Max was a little bit scared, but she’d seen him get like this before. This was how most of them started—his breakdowns. She had learned from Stella what to do when he got like this. “Nathan, you’re hurting me.” Max could hear Stella’s voice now. Let him know that he is hurting you, kindly, but firmly. “Would you please let me go?” ASK, do NOT command, not until you absolutely need to. It always pays to ask. After that, you talk. Keep him going for as long as you can until it dissipates.

“Right. I’m sorry,” Nathan realized, noticing just how tightly he was holding her. But he was just so…ANGRY. He let Max go, slowly, and she rubbed the sore skin he’d grabbed. “I’m sorry. I just…I just can’t fucking believe she’d DO something like this. I HATE him, and Sissy—Kristine—knows it. And how can I not?” he said.

He was doing a good job of keeping his voice calm, though Max would’ve let him yell if he needed to. “If you need to talk, I’m here for you,” Max said calmly. She outstretched her hand, and he took
it, allowing her to guide him to the bed. They sat down next to each other, somewhat awkwardly, until Max spoke. “I have an idea of what he’s done, but all I know is what you showed me in the videos. We haven’t really had a chance to just sit and talk about it.”

Nathan sat down for only a moment then shot up again, rage present. He turned to Max, the hurt look on his face tearing into her heart. “I feel so betrayed, Max,” his voice cracked. “But I shouldn’t, right? Kristine knows me and that bastard have a bad relationship. But shit,” he covered his eyes. “I shouldn’t have told her to leave me alone. She hates when I do that ‘cause I know it hurts her feelings. But my dad, he…he…”

“What did he do?”

“He ruined my fucking head, Max,” Nathan said, his voice somewhat hoarse. “He BROKE me. He used me to get rich and to screw a bunch of people over and all for money. We’ve been through so many timelines and realities, sometimes I don’t even know which one I’m in. There’s a reality where me and Vic are married and it’s weird and gross and it doesn’t fit. Sometimes I’ll wake up in Stella’s office and nothing feels real; nothing matters. Sometimes it feels like all reality is broken.”

Nathan turned to Max. His eyes looked sad, but he seemed oddly appreciative. “But then I see you. You come in and it all matters again. Things are real again.”

Max didn’t know what to say.

“As soon as I see you or you text Stella or SOMEONE gives me SOMETHING that proves you are real and that this is all real, I feel better. Normal, maybe. REAL.” He sat down.

Max spoke finally, despite the lump in her throat. “I’m…I’m glad I can be here for you. I’m glad it helps.”

Nathan made another sound of frustration, but somehow, he seemed less angry. “I’ll go apologize to Kristine. I hurt her feelings. That was wrong. I’ll go with you guys because I DO miss my mom, but I don’t want to see him, Max. Promise you won’t—”

“I won’t make you do anything you don’t want to do,” Max blurted, unable to stop herself before she spoke. “I won’t even make you get out of the car.”

Nathan offered a half-smile and gently squeezed Max’s knee. “Thank you, Max. For this. For everything.” And before Max could respond, Nathan was gone, already knocking on Kristine’s door.

Max quickly scrambled to get up and close the door behind him, nearly slamming it in a housekeeper’s face. She apologized profusely, but closed the door shortly thereafter. She quickly walked to her bed, surprised by her frantic heartbeat. She sat down with a thud and put her hand to her heart. Max was convinced it was going to fly out of her chest if her hand wasn’t there. Why was she so nervous anyway? He just touched your leg, Max, she thought. It’s not like he kissed you. Why was she thinking about that! Now there was another lump in her throat. Why was it suddenly so dry?

Before Max could stand up, her door was thrown open, and there was Nathan, standing there with a ridiculous grin on his face. He was wearing one of his old red jackets, the sleeves barely past his elbow on the way to his wrist. “Look at this shit, Max! Can you believe I used to fit this thing?” Noticing the troubled look on her face, Nathan paused. “Shit, sorry. I didn’t knock.”

“It’s…it’s fine,” Max managed. She could barely force that out.

Nathan gave her a confused look, then, noticing the blush on her cheeks and her surprised expression, smirked. He leaned in the doorway, almost looking smug, had it not been for his
comically small jacket. “Did I catch you in the middle of something personal?”

Max caught on quickly and let out a disgusted scoff. Her throat seemed less dry and her heartbeat felt just a bit slower. “That is NONE of your business, Nathan!”

Nathan wasn’t convinced. “Okay. Well. Once you’re done with ‘business,’ please meet Kristine and I downstairs. She’s gonna drive to dad’s.”

To make a show and hopefully clear her suspicion, Max grabbed her purse and pushed past him. She turned at the last moment, and flicked him on the forehead. “Keep your head out of the gutter, Nathan.”

Max walked away too quickly for him to touch her back, and she worried for just a second that she’d made him angry. But once she heard his chuckle, and the familiar follow of his footsteps, she decided that maybe, for once, she shouldn’t worry so much.

“I changed my mind,” Nathan said again. “I’m not going in.”

Kristine rolled her eyes. She was driving, alone in the front seat. Max was sitting in the back seat, where Nathan had sort of been sitting as well. He moved back to the back every time he decided he wasn’t going in.

It was wearing Kristine out. “How about this, princess—we get your keys from mom, and then you can leave whenever you like AND I don’t have to keep hearing about it! How about that?”

Nathan sank into his seat, turning so that he could rest his head on Max’s lap. It was his spot now, at least, he thought it was. “You guys kept my car?”

Kristine turned left onto a narrow road. “Um, obviously. Fixed your broken tail light, too.”

Nathan turned so that his head was away from Max’s body. She was secretly thankful for it, because there was no doubt he’d be able to feel how fast her heart was beating through her stomach. It was odd, now, how comfortable they’d gotten with each other. In a funny way, it reminded her of her reunion with Chloe. There was the obvious difference—she and Chloe had a week; she and Nathan had a year. But maybe it wasn’t really like that. She’d known Chloe since she was a little kid—and she’d known Nathan since eighteen, and their relationship back then was the opposite of friendly. Getting to know him within a year was actually sort of impressive. Maybe the only reason the sudden closeness was so odd to her was because Nathan just didn’t seem like the cozy type.

A year ago, Max thought Nathan to have a pretty cold personality—and that was based mostly on how they’d been back at Blackwell. But he was so different than she thought he was. He still had a VERY hot temper, but she knew what to do when he got angry now. He was a very affectionate person, usually trying to hug her for a greeting—which she, shamefully, often opted to decline. He tried to lie down on her lap every change he got and often tried to rest his hand on her leg. Max didn’t realize that he’d helped her change a little bit, too.

For one, she felt a bit more confident. He’d helped her cope with what happened to Talia, and gave her the courage to start talking to her again. Max was helping Nathan mentally, but it felt like he was making her a better person. She wondered to herself if he realized it.

“Alright, Princess, we’re here,” Kristine scoffed.

Within seconds, Max scanned the house and took it in. It was insanely big, but about as simple as a
mansion could get. The house was painted brown with a gorgeous white trim, with a long walkway through a small flower garden.

Nathan was up and out of the car before Kristine could even get her seatbelt off. Max quickly followed Nathan out of the car, careful not to trip on her way out. Max almost wondered what he was so excited to get out of the car for, but her question was answered quickly once she found Nathan on the grass in front of the house, rubbing the stomach of an ungodly enormous St. Bernard.

“Max!” he shouted, waving his hand. “Max, look!”

As Max walked over, Nathan scooped the dog up in both of his strong arms and slowly walked over to her.

“Hi, puppy,” Max said cutely, quickly dodging a slobbery kiss.

“This is Sergeant,” Nathan breathed. “He’s my boy!”

“Nathan! Put him down! He’s too old for that,” they both heard.

Nathan put Sergeant down and bolted to the door, where a very pretty woman with the same long, dark chocolate curls as Kristine stood. Max lost her breath at how breathtakingly beautiful Melinda Prescott was. Her green eyes sparkled with warmth, and she was in a floor-length, verdant green maxi-dress with a bunch of rings on her toes.

She stood there with open arms, inviting a very quiet Nathan over to her. Her eyes sparkled with tears as Nathan embraced her tightly. “I missed you, Lovebug, my precious little Buggy.”

Nathan sniffed and pulled away from her for a moment, revealing tears of his own. “I missed you, too, Mommy.”

Melinda laughed a warm, hearty laugh. “You have tears, too? No. Tears are my thing. And you are so tall! How did you get so big?”

“I just grew,” Nathan said, stepping aside. He seemed embarrassed, almost as if he didn’t want anyone to know that he cared about Melinda.

“You are Max,” Melinda said suddenly, reaching out her arms.

Somewhat reluctantly, Max stepped forward and hugged Melinda. She had an odd animosity toward her not only because she was a Prescott, but because she wasn’t around when the trial went down. Melinda practically vanished, returning to Arcadia Ba once Nathan was in prison. She could have done something to help Nathan, but now, it all seemed too little too late. “it’s so nice to meet you for real,” Melinda continued. She pulled away from Max, then gestured toward the open front door. “Shall we have some tea?”

“Hold mine,” Kristine said. “I’m gonna scope out dad’s mood. See if he even wants to see us today.”

Max and Nathan walked into the house behind an eager Kristine and a nervous Melinda.

The house seemed even bigger on the inside. There was an enormous, grand staircase taking up most of the foyer with two staircases to the left and right of the staircase. Downstairs was an open space to the left where couches and tables sat decorated. Max guessed this was where they’d be spending most of the day. To the right were three doors, one labeled “Serg,” and the other two labeled “loft.”

Melinda seemed too tired to give a tour, opting to sit what Max mentally nicknamed the “Tea
Kristine disappeared up the left staircase so that meant Sean was staying somewhere upstairs. Max followed Melinda to the Tea Room, with Nathan slowly coming along, closing the front door once Sergeant got in.

Max sat on the couch across from Melinda and, much to her surprise, Nathan joined her. He didn’t sit how he did normally—head on her lap or hand on her thigh—he did his best to sit as far away as possible. Max wondered why he didn’t just sit in one of the million couches in the room.

As if by magic, an older man came in with tea, a wide selection on the rolling table he brought in. Once he was gone, Nathan prepared his tea with three lumps of sugar, a spoonful of honey, and half a squeeze of lemon, before sipping and deciding it needed more homey.

Max squeezed a bit of lemon into her tea, and took a sip, only to nearly spill her tea once Nathan retched. “Is there a problem?” Max asked, turning to look at him.

“You barely added anything to your tea,” Nathan commented. “You never do.”

“That’s right, and I don’t put anything into my coffee, either,” Max said matter-of-factly, taking a sip of her tea.

“Okay, well coffee is disgusting, so forget about that,” Nathan started. “But your tea must take like… peppermint water.”

“And yours is sugar water,” Max laughed. “And there’s no such thing as disgusting coffee, you just haven’t had a good coffee yet. I went to this AMAZING coffee place the first time I went to Italy. I’ll take you there once you get out.” It sounded weird when she said it out loud. He was out now, but he wasn’t OUT-out. He was free for the next thirty days, then it was back to jail for the remainder of his sentence. It made things feel bittersweet.

“No, I’ll take you to Italy once I’m out,” Nathan corrected. He sipped his tea loudly, proud of himself.

Max ignored him and kept sipping her tea. “Okay, once you’re out, we’ll take each other. I’ll pay for your ticket…”

“…and I’ll pay for yours,” Nathan said. “I’m sitting your ass in coach. Or in cargo!”

Max and Nathan laughed together, only to stop when Melinda joined in. “My, my,” she said, sipping her tea, “you two sure have gotten close.”

Nathan smirked at her and sipped more tea. It tasted sour for some reason. “Well, that’s what happens when someone visits me more than once a year.”

Melinda’s eyes dropped into her tea. She said nothing.

The silence wasn’t there for long. “Nathan!” Max scolded. “That is not okay. Stella talked to you about this. If something bothers you, you don’t get to be passive aggressive and hurtful. You need to be honest. And—”

“And I have to apologize,” Nathan sighed. Nathan set his tea on the table, as did Max. “Mom, I wish you would visit me more. I’m sorry I hurt your feelings.”

Melinda was very obviously taken aback. Nathan rarely apologized when he did something wrong,
and he NEVER, ever talked about his feelings. It was very different, but it made Melinda very happy. “I’m sorry, Nathan. When the media came for you, I disappeared. I wanted nothing to do with the drama, but I didn’t realize I’d abandoned you. But now that I’m back, I will visit you more.”

Nathan barely got out a smile, then Kristine came walking down the stairs. She walked to the tea room, looking rather melancholy. “Dad really wants to see you, Nathan. You, too, Max.”

“ME?” Max blurted. “Why would he want to see me?”

Him wanting to see Nathan was expected. Sean wanted to mend their relationship before he died. That probably wasn’t going to happen, seeing as Nathan hated Sean. They’d both be stubbornly holding on to their wants in their graves, and Max couldn’t blame them. Sean Prescott’s desire to fix things with Nathan was almost admirable—but waiting until his oncoming death seemed too little too late. And Nathan had a right to be angry. Max just hoped his anger wouldn’t stop him from recovering.

Secretly, one of Max’s biggest fears was that Nathan’s anger would consume him.

“I dunno,” Kristine said, sounding bored. “Anyways, I told him Nathan didn’t want to see him. He’s expecting at least ONE of you to go up there. I’m gonna go play with Sergeant.”

Nathan sighed and quickly downed his tea. He stood up and walked right over to the stairs, then stopped to contemplate. None of the girls said anything, for fear that he’d get angry and have to spend the rest of the day calming down.

Nathan sighed and looked over at them, at Max in particular. They shared a silent conversation, one only they were privy to. Nathan looked away from her some long time later, sighed, then slowly made his way up the first few stairs. Kristine shrugged as she watched them, then pulled Sergeant into the room labeled “Serg” to play with him.

“Wait, Nathan,” Melinda said suddenly.

Max groaned internally. She was going to wreck this entire thing! But then, Max noticed something on the floor. A picture. A picture of Sophia Isley.

Melinda picked the picture up off the ground, careful to hide her distaste from Nathan. She gently put the picture in his hands, then pulled him down to kiss him on the forehead. Smiling, Nathan hugged Melinda before disappearing upstairs.

Max and Melinda sat in silence until they heard the door to Sean Prescott’s office open and close.

“Ugh,” Melinda grimaced. “I hate that woman.”

Max subtly rolled her eyes and glared into her tea. Abandoning her son right when things got bad didn’t exactly make her mother of the year.

Max was startled out of her thoughts by Melinda’s sudden raucous laughter. “Don’t you think I didn’t catch that eye roll, Maxine Caulfield. I have Attitude Vision. Believe it or not, Kristine could be a nightmare. But I got rid of that. I’m sure Nathan or Kristine has told you about Sophia?”

“Theyir version,” Max answered, opting not to apologize.

“Good, now you get to hear mine,” Melinda smiled. “Kristine doesn’t know the half of it, and out of respect for Nathan's privacy, I keep the details to myself. I want him to be ready to tell her, not blindsided by my sudden reveal.”
Max suddenly felt her heart grow warm. “That’s very admirable of you, Mrs.—”

“Just Melinda is fine. Mrs. Prescott is Nathan's grandma. Can you believe that’s what she had the kids call her? This uptight family. I was relieved when the old bat bit the dust. Sean, too.”

Max couldn’t help but laugh. There was something so real and human about Melinda. Max could see Kristine’s personality in there.

Melinda let Max calm, then went on more seriously. “As I’m sure, Nathan told you, I did not give birth to him—but I AM his mother. I don’t hate Sophia Isley for—sorry to be crude—fucking my husband. I hate her for what she did to Nathan.”

Max finished her tea and set her glass down. “What all happened?”

Melinda sighed and set her drink down. “Between Kristine and Nathan, I had another son. His name was Falon. Falon Jameson Prescott. Unfortunately, I miscarried at six months, so we had to bury our first son before we ever got to know him. Sean really wanted a son, but even more so, he wanted me to feel happy again. He went above and beyond to be there for me, to make me feel beautiful again, but I was so distraught, I couldn’t meet him halfway.

“When it came time that we could try again for a baby, I just couldn’t do it. I hurt him. He wasn’t angry, no, but I made myself believe that he was. I cheated on him first. I wanted something short and discreet. I couldn’t bear to lie with the man I’d let down, so I convinced myself that it was better to just break his heart. He was hurt deeply once he found out about my affair, and so he began sleeping with Sophia. I always knew she had a crush on him, and them getting together hurt more than I could say. We began the process of separation, slowly and quietly. We kept up the guise of family so things wouldn’t be hard to Kristine.

“I ended my affair shortly thereafter, focusing all my time on my daughter. One day, Sean called me into our old bedroom—we’d been sleeping apart for months. He was looking very distraught. Being in there with him was so bizarre. It was like I was finally seeing our failed marriage up close. He told me that Sophia was pregnant with a boy, and that she was going to keep the baby. They’d long since stopped sleeping together, but this got to me. It hurt far worse than him sleeping with her. When I started to cry, I realized I was still in love with him. Sean touched my hand, and he said, ‘I wanted a son. But not like this. I wanted him with YOU. I wanted a son with the love of my life. But when we didn’t have one…when Falon died, I was content with my two beautiful girls.’ I was so overcome, I kissed him, and he held me just like he did when we first met back in college. We…” Melinda looked up at Max.

Melinda was blushing, fiercely. Max giggled.

“I’ll spare you the details of what happened that night. Either way, Sean and I got back together. Sophia was ten years younger than Sean at the time, and she wasn’t ready to be a mother. I begrudgingly agreed that I would adopt the baby and he’d be raised as my son. It was hard at first, but as time went on and Sophia’s belly grew, she became sort of like a friend to me, even though I had some feelings of animosity that I needed to work through.

“The day Nathan was born was one of the happiest days of my life. Sean and I met at the hospital while Kristine was with my mother. She was little enough that she wouldn’t remember anything. Sophia had a rough labor, and I talked her through every second of it. Eventually, the time to push came, and I was the first to hold Nathan when he was born. The things I hated that she had looked beautiful on him; the dirty blonde hair, those perfect blue eyes. I fell in love with him. He looked up at me and smiled, and I was in love.
“We wanted Nathan to bond with Sophia, but she wasn’t having it. All responsibility fell to me—not that I minded, he was my son—but she treated him like some dirty object while also trying to seduce my husband. Sean had made it clear that he wasn’t interested in her romantically anymore. She made advances only to be rebuffed, and it made her angry. Sean wanted to fire her, but she wouldn’t have it. She threatened to go public with our scandal, and Sean told her to go head. She had no legal right to Nathan since I adopted him. Eventually, she ‘surprised’ Sean one night while I was out of town for work by throwing on one of his shirts and crawling into our bed. He threw her out then and there, and two days later, Nathan found her body in his bathroom.

“I still hold a pretty nasty grudge. Nathan knew she was his mother from the start—we never hid that from him. He opted not to tell Kristine. Sophia shot herself in his bathroom just to spite us; just to hurt him. He found her in there when he was fifteen, and he screamed out ‘Mom.’ It gave me the chills. To this day, I still don’t know if he was calling out to me or crying for her. And I hated her. She had no idea how traumatic that was for him. She left a note, though. Nathan said that she wrote that Kristine and him ‘lit up her life.’ What bullshit. There was one time Nathan was messing around when he was only six. We were at Tori’s—Victoria’s house. He tried to ride her dog like a horse. He fell ad tore open his head. I found him and screamed for Sean. I knew it would be too dangerous to move him, and I know Sean wouldn’t be as hysterical as I was and would be able to call an ambulance. Then Sophia comes out and holds him to her chest, cooing ‘mommy loves you,’ and pulling some fake tears out of her ass. She knew if Nathan died, Sean could get rid of her, and she made that clear. I’d tell Nathan the truth about her, that she was just some scum, but he’s been crushed enough. I know that him seeing her dead cause his mental break and set him on that path. I want my son to heal, to be happy. He deserves that, at least.”

Max couldn’t believe what she was hearing. How did this family function with all these secrets and lies? All they every did was mess them up. And if Melinda thought Sophia’s death was what mess him up, that mean that Sean never told her about Nathan’s time manipulation.

Before Max could launch into the long story about the truth—most likely against her better judgement—Nathan came running down the stairs, a downright jovial look on his face. “Max,” he said once he’d reached the tea room. “He wants to see you.”

Max gulped and smoothed out her shirt as best she could. Very, very slowly, she made her way to
the grand staircase, wondering what Sean was going to ask her about on her way up. Why did he even want to see her, anyway? Hadn’t she made it clear she wanted nothing to do with him after he’d practically stalked her to her hotel room a year ago?

Max walked until she was finally upstairs, kicking herself for thinking that placing both feet on each step would suddenly make it too late for her to see him. She didn’t know why she was so afraid. She shouldn’t have been, especially with the story Melinda had told her. She never expected that Sean Prescott could be humanized. He seemed like some cold-unfeeling reptile ninety-nine percent of the time anyway. Plus, if he really wanted to hurt her, he wouldn’t do it with his family home, right? Witnesses caused problems, right?

RIGHT?

Forgoing knocking, Max opened the door to Sean’s study, carefully taking in the room as she entered. Sean was at his desk, looking down at some papers, wearing glasses that made his eyes seem enormous. A few papers were spread across the floor, but they were placed so carefully, Max felt a swell of relief. That meant Nathan hadn’t swept the desk in anger—he’d managed to stay calm through his entire visit with Sean.

“Ah, Maxine Caulfield,” he said suddenly, startling her. “Good to see you. Please, take a seat.” He gestured to one of the chairs on the opposite side of his desk. Max took a seat, trying to work through the lump in her throat. Sean Prescott looked…good. He wasn’t the disheveled, unkempt, panicking father he’d been when he came to her hotel that night a year ago. He was dressed in a plaid, blue and white button-up shirt with his sleeves rolled up to his elbows. His hair was coiffed nicely as well. He looked like he always did, except for one thing—he rolled away from the desk only to reveal that he was sitting in a wheelchair. He was able to move comfortable, and he was able to readjust his legs with ease, so Max knew he could still walk with the use of a cane—but only a little bit. Max tried to be normal, to be polite and treat him like a person by looking him in the eye, but the wheelchair was so surprising. Max wondered just exactly what he was dying from.

“It’s Lou Gehrig’s disease, Maxine,” Sean explained suddenly. “First it starts with the muscles, and eventually my lungs will be too weak for me to be able to breath. For me, it’s been a pretty slow killer, but my goodness, is it a killer.” Max gave him a look, and he chuckled. “I cannot read minds, Maxine, but when I get the look you gave me from a bunch of kids every day, it’s easy to figure out your question.”

Max was surprised. “You work with kids?”

“No,” Sean said flatly. “Melinda does. She works in pediatric medicine. I am trying to convince her to take some time off of work, seeing as my health has become rather poor, but she is married to the job before she is married to me. So I accompany her, when I have the energy.”

“Oh,” Max said. “That sounds…interesting.”

“It’s absolutely phenomenal, the things my wife does. I’ve seen her save people. She’s wonderful.”

“I bet,” Max said. “So…how was your visit with Nathan?”

Sean Prescott let out a loud, boisterous laugh. He placed his reading glasses on the desk, then rolled his wheelchair to sit a bit closer to Max. “I supposed I could say it went as expected.”

“As expected?” That sounded like bad news.”

Sean Prescott laughed again. “At some point, he told me that he couldn’t wait to spit on my grave
once I’m six feet under.”

_Ouch_, Max thought.

“But then he apologized. I asked him to speak at my funeral but he said he’d rather…excuse me…
drink his own liquid excrement than do that. He is being very…odd. But I don’t want to talk about
my visit with him. I want to know about your visits. How is he doing with you?”

“Well, Mr.—”

“Please, call me Sean.”

“I’m not calling you that,” Max snapped, annoyed at his interruption.

“Well then, what would you like to call me?”

Max spoke before she even realized what she was saying. “Look, if it were my choice, I’d just call
you an asshole, but somehow, even that seems too nice. You used Nathan and his powers to keep
yourself rich and didn’t get him proper counseling when his mental state began to deteriorate. Stella
and I are working our asses off doing our best to fix what you did but, understandably, it’s really
fucking hard, you asshole.”

Sean Prescott said nothing. He just stared at her, and it _burned._

“Oh, shit. God, I’m sorry. I just…I meant…I meant that…”

“He told you about his powers?” Sean asked blankly. “He _told_ you about them? All on his own?”

“Yes, but—”

“And you _believed_ him? Just like that?”

“Well I had to go to the dark room, first, so that I could—”

“HE HAD YOU GO TO THE DARK ROOM?” Sean boomed. He leaned too far forward in his
chair as he yelled, but fortunately, Max was there the catch him. She helped him back to his chair as
he coughed, gasping for air. Sean kept jabbing his finger at his desk, and Max quickly tried to figure
out what he needed from it. The top of the desk had nothing of interest on it, so Max dove into the
drawers. Finally, she dug deep enough and pulled out an inhaler, which she quickly uncapped and
handed to Sean. He breathed in as he pressed the button on the lower part of the inhaler, his
coughing slowly beginning to calm. Sean’s breathing began to regulate, and he leaned back in his
chair, storm calmed, for now.

Max, on the other hand, was still freaking out. Her heart was beating out of her chest, and her throat
felt drier than the Sahara. Her adrenaline was coming down now, and she felt a little sick, but most of
all, she was _embarrassed_. She hadn’t meant to unload onto Sean what she really thought of him—he
probably had the power to separate her and Nathan, and she didn’t want that. She wanted to be there
for him.

“Forgive me,” Sean Prescott breathed. Max was happy to see that he was okay. “You surprised me,
Maxine.”

“For the love of god, it’s _Max! Never_ Maxine!”

Sean chuckled. Was he doing that on purpose? Was this funny to him? “My apologies, Max-Never-
Maxine.” That joke would have been funny had Sean not been like, the hundredth middle-aged man to make it. But it didn’t really matter. Making jokes probably softened the blow of dying. Max rolled her eyes once he wasn’t looking.

“My asthma hasn’t acted up since Nathan was in elementary school. Kristine used too…we can discuss it later,” Sean said, suddenly remembering the trigger of his attack. “Why did Nathan have you go to the dark room, Maxi—Max?”

“To prove he was telling the truth,” Max said, gathering herself. She thought she’d be ready for this conversation, but she wasn’t. There was no way to prepare for it, so Max resolved to wait until a later time, fully aware that she may not get her chance. Plus, it would have been weird to talk to Sean Prescott about Nathan’s powers without him around. Max slowly made her way to the door to the office. She placed her hand on the handle and sighed when Sean began to stir. She turned to face him, trying to hide her exasperation. This room felt like it was getting smaller and smaller.

“And you believed him, just like that,” Sean said, speaking more to himself than to her. “Why, Maxine?”

Max ignored it this time. She turned away and cleared her throat, closing her eyes. She couldn’t believe she was about to do this. “Because,” she began. “I used to have them, too.” Max didn’t want to turn to look back at him—she didn’t want to see his face of guilt. She knew exactly what it looked like: wide eyes, dry mouth, maybe clutching in disbelief. But she couldn’t help herself. She had to see his reaction. A lot was going through Sean’s mind: Unbeknownst to him, all Max had gotten from her powers was a deceased friend and some pretty serious PTSD—but what Sean saw was a woman with powers, nearly as successful as he was, who had no damaging long-term effects from overuse. Nathan, though? His was a LIST. Not only was there the obvious jail time, there was also the sacrificing of Rachel, going through his own death in the timeline where Mr. Jefferson killed him, the lingering pain of his dead birth mother and her suicide, the anxiety that came with waiting for Max to make the “right” decision, and, to wrap it all up, a pretty fucked up psyche. Noticing the difference between Max and Nathan should have been enough shock to give him a heart attack, but luckily, it wasn’t.

Sean Prescott just sat there, unmoving, staring past Max toward the door. She took this as her cue to leave the room. Max traveled a little further down the hallway, because, unsurprisingly, she had begun to cry. She hated feeling like this and thinking about everything that had happened. She no longer felt guilty over choosing to sacrifice Chloe, but there was something else eating away at her: fear. It suddenly felt like everything she’d done wasn’t enough—and what had she really done, anyway? Max turned into a room, thankful that it was a bathroom so that she didn’t have to think up a reason as to why she was there. She closed the door behind her, and sat against it, holding her head in her hands.

What was she even doing here? Nathan didn’t really need her, did he? Half the time, when he was having a rough day, all she ever really did was reiterate something he’d already learned from Stela. Plus, it really should have been Victoria here, but she was busy enough with a baby and a marriage and running The Chase Space from a state away.

Before Max could really drown in her self-doubt, there was a knock at the door. Max rubbed her tears away, hoping her face wasn’t red, and stupidly answered, “Come in.” Max was greeted with surprises when it was Kristine at the door. For some reason, she expected it to be Nathan. She didn’t know why.

Noticing Max’s very poor attempt at wiping her tears, Kristine offered a sad smile. “rough visit?” she asked.
Max chuckled and allowed Kristine to close the door behind them. They leaned against the bathroom door together. “The visit went fine, except for the asthma scare—but I found his inhaler and Sean is fine.”

Kristine laughed. “Trust me, Max, my dad is a BABY when it comes to his asthma, so I’m sure he’s fine. Why were you crying, then, Max?”

Against her will, Max teared up again. “I just…feel super out of place—and not just you know, here. I feel like I don’t really have a reason to be here, aside from wanting to help Nathan. Shouldn’t I be here for me, too?”

Kristine smiled and readjusted next to her. “I felt the same way about myself when I saw how Nathan was with you,” she admitted. “I should have been here for him. I should have taken time off of work to see him more often, but then again, I also felt like I was too close to the family, you know? My past judgements of him as his sister makes things hard, especially with how crazy our family is. But the way he is with you, Max, is vastly different from how he is with anyone else. I know it feels like you’re out of place but…you’re not. You have friends here—family here. You’re here because you want to be, Max. You don’t need to keep searching for a reason.”

Kristine smiled and put her hand on Max’s shoulder, a smile on her face. Before Max could respond, the door opened and hit both of them on their backs.

“What the hell? Nathan asked. “The girls scooted away from the door, and Nathan entered. “Ladies, the tea party is downstairs.”

Max couldn’t do anything to hide her blush, now. Nathan looked DIFFERENT. His hair wasn’t his normal unkempt wave that he’d had since she’d first seen him in jail. It was cut, gelled neatly, and tapered to perfection. “Y-your hair,” was all Max could say. Her heartbeat quickened and her face was hot. She couldn’t hide it from him, no matter how bad she wanted to.

“Does it look good?” Nathan smirked. “In jail, they tried to shave me BALKD. No fucking thanks. So are you guys gonna move so I can see Mom’s handiwork or are you just gonna sit here and swoon?”

Kristine scooted away from the door, as did Max, and waved him in. “Welcome to our club.”

Nathan squished in and admired himself in the mirror. “Holy shit,” he started, turning toward Max, “no wonder you were blushing so much. I look amazing.”

Max blushed harder and gave him a dirty look. She tried to think of something witty to say back, but she couldn’t. He was right. Nathan was already attractive, but there was something about his haircut that made him a cut above the rest. He didn’t look as tired, and already, he was smiling more. Max liked it. She liked this happy Nathan. She liked all Nathans, even the one who embarrassed her.

Nathan took a seat on the toilet, while Max leaned against the counter and Kristine took a seat by the door.

“So, what were we talking about? Me?” Nathan asked.

“Amongst other things,” Kristine giggled. “You are so full of yourself.”

Nathan laughed. “I’m not. Plus, I was right. So, there.”

As Kristine loaded into her complaint, Max felt Nathan’s familiar fingers tickling her waist. He always tried to touch her when he felt like they weren’t close enough. It was comforting, knowing
that he liked to be close to her. But, this time, to her surprise, he began pulling her toward him. “What are you doing?” she interrupted Kristine.

Nathan gave her a puzzled look. Was she mad? He didn’t like it when she was mad. It made him upset when she got mad, especially when it was his fault that she was mad. “I’m pulling you closer?” he asked innocently.

“Are we not close enough right now?”

Nathan squinted at her and continued to pull her closer, somewhat gently. “Obviously not, Max. Plus, now you can have the best seat in the house,” he said, patting his inner thigh.

I am NOT going to be sitting on your lap,” Max said firmly. If a new haircut was enough to make her face noticeably red, she couldn’t imagine what sitting on his lap might do to her.

“Don’t you trust me? I won’t do anything weird. Have I EVER done anything weird?”

He was making her feel weird. Why did he want her to sit there so badly? Why now? Why today? Why… when Kristine was here?

Oh, SHIT.

Kristine.

Max looked up at her apologetically, not even realizing she’d interrupted her. Sometimes, when she and Nathan were together, it was like there was nobody else in the room. Max didn’t want to make a habit of ignoring everyone in favor of Nathan, but she genuinely couldn’t help it. He brought out something in her that only he was allowed to see, and Max felt good when he saw it in her. She felt like she was becoming a better person with Nathan around—not because she was doing something good, but because he went out of his way to make her feel good. He was in a pretty dark time, what with serving jail time for murder and dealing with the death of his father, but still he tried to smile when he visited her, and offer a hug when he was feeling really good.

Kristine only chuckled, resolving that her prattle wasn’t important enough to repeat. “You guys sure are close.”

Max blushed, but Nathan smiled. He pulled her into a hug that suspiciously resulted in her ending up on his lap. “Yeah,” Nathan said. “I even know Max’s favorite drink!”

“What?” Max asked, turning into him as much as she could. He looked really proud of himself, and Max began to think about how cute it was. But when did she…she paused. She DID tell him that. They had been in Stella’s office and she’d had a hard week at work—a couple tried to stiff her on their wedding photos and one of her more popular books had a misprint and had to be reshipped to all the people who had ordered it. Max knew his favorite drink, too—beer—but he’d also expressed that he wouldn’t return to drinking once he was out permanently. Something about having an “addictive personality” was the main thing keeping him away. “Oh, wow, I sure did,” Max said finally, noticing how quickly the room had gone silent.

“Yeah, you did,” Nathan said. The two of them beamed at each other just a bit more, and it was like Kristine wasn’t there again. Nathan had his right arm loosely slung around Max’s waist, and she was resting on his right knee. If she turned anymore, she would have been all the way in his lap.

“So what is it?” Kristine asked, effectively refilling the sudden silence and reminding them both of her presence.
Nathan sat up straight, and as best he could, imitated Max’s voice. “It’s lemon rum and coke.”

Max raised an eyebrow.

“Lemon rum and vanilla coke,” Nathan corrected. Max smiled at him and he leaned in, quietly. It was too fast for her to react, and before she knew it, Nathan was giving her a raspberry, slobbering all over her cheek.

She pulled away to glare at him but was only met with a sheepish grin. He knew what looks were her weaknesses. “Ooh, fun,” she said, wiping her face. “Some got in my mouth.”

“Oh, please, it’s not a big deal,” Nathan rationalized. “You and Stella would share Starbucks straws with me all the time. It’s no different than that.”

Ma wiped Nathan’s slobber onto his pants, then stood up. “As much as I’d love to continue our bathroom meeting, I’m sure Sean and Melinda are wondering where we all are,” she said.

“Probably. I want to visit with Dad a bit more, Kristine said.

Nathan laughed. “Well, I DON’T. So Max and I are going to get the hell out of here,” Nathan said confidently.

Kristine crossed her arms and moved to the side so Max could open the bathroom door. “How so? I’M driving. I’ve got the keys. You go when the driver goes.”

“Oh, and Max is gonna be my driver,” Nathan said, producing the keys to her truck from his pocket. “I guilted dad into giving them to me.’

Kristine was visibly angry, but Nathan knew exactly what to say to calm it. “We’re going to pick up ingredients so that I can cook diner. You do want me to cook tonight, don’t you?”

Kristine sighed in defeat. She knew she couldn’t resist his cooking, and he knew, too. “I’ll go talk to mom and dad. Give me a little head’s up next time, please? You know they hate it when we blow them off.”

Nathan walked over to Kristine and gave her a big bear hug. “Thank you, Sissy.” It sounded genuine.

“Yeah, yeah. Now leave before I change my mind.”

*      *      *

At the store, Max stood by the basket, sighing and tapping her foot in utter annoyance while Nathan still stood comparing two practically identical heads of romaine lettuce. She couldn’t understand why just picking one wasn’t a simple activity. They’d been standing there for almost twenty minutes, and Nathan wouldn’t let her go off and find the rest of the things on the mental list he’d made on her own. He was super particular about brands, not to mention the drive over was a disaster.

Not only did Nathan have a license, he was also the worst direction-giver in all of mankind. It took the two of them nearly an hour to navigate and get to the one Smith’s that was close-ish to the Hilltop House. There were plenty of Walmarts (which Nathan thought was too cheap) and Albertsons (which Nathan thought was too expensive), but Nathan was married to the idea of shopping at Smith’s, so here they were. Max had kept up with giving him the silent treatment until he finally asked her opinion on something.
“Max?”

“What, Nathan?” she snapped. She really didn’t want to sound so mean, but she couldn’t help it. All this running around made her crazy—she’d gotten her fill of that back when Chloe was still alive. Nathan was the WORST backseat driver Max had ever met! He was always saying “left” when he meant “right” and “That way, idiot!” when he meant left.

Nathan was taken aback by her curtness. He read her body language: pursed lips, narrowed eyes, furrowed brow—all classic signs of anger. He didn’t like when she was angry, and hated it even MORE when she was angry at him. They just stared at each other, both saying nothing, both always, always having so much to say. Max sighed and glared at him a little harder. He hated when she did that. She went to readjust the ponytail in her hair as she waited for him to speak, because she was not going to be the one to break this silence. As she lifted her arms, her shirt went up just a bit with it, and Nathan couldn’t help but to think about what was under that shirt.

Another thing Nathan hated. God, at this point, the “Hate List” was just about infinite. He felt bad when he treated Max like an object, a body just to look at. She deserved more than that. As weird as it felt to finally realize and think it, Max was his friend, now, and he needed to think of her as one. Even so, after five years of no intimate female contact, the shrinking of Max’s waist and noticeable widening of her hips and bust sure was nice to look at. “Coffee and dessert,” Nathan finally said, once he could snap back into reality. Her hair was fixed now, and there would be no more distractions.

“What?” Max asked, somewhat kinder now. She pulled a pen and a mangled set of sticky notes out of her bag. “You want me to get them? Do you have specific brand names and sizes, Mr. Picky? Or are you just shouting out whatever’s on your mind, now?”

“Kristine likes coffee with dessert. You know coffee better than I do, so you get it.”

“Aaand dessert?” Max asked, keeping her notes out.

But Nathan couldn’t answer her. He didn’t even really hear her question, because he was far too busy examining her face. She wore a chapstick with a nice, flattering pink shine, and teeny blue stud earrings. Max was so pretty. She was so pretty and nice. Nathan looked at her eyebrows, just brown, furrowed and tight over long eyelashes. He looked at her eyes for just a moment, but it seemed like forever. They were a perfect, beautiful blue—the same as Chloe’s hair. They had that same gentle glow, too.

As Nathan gave himself over to distraction—counting her freckles—Max just stood there. He liked her freckles; he thought they were kind of cute. Victoria used to tease him and say he had a “thing” for freckles, but Nathan was convincing himself that it wasn’t true. Bella West, his first, had had freckles, but hers were different. Max’s freckles were…different. Nathan found Max’s freckles flattering; Bella’s were just…there.

And now, they were too close. Max was in his face, her warm hand on his forehead, a look of worry in her eyes. She could have kissed him, if she wanted. Or headbutted him. Nathan found himself laughing. That’d be really funny. He figured he deserved it with how obnoxious he’d been with directions.

“Are you feeling okay?” Max asked innocently.

Coming to, Nathan swat her hand away and hurriedly continued looking at the lettuce. “I’m fine,” he murmured. “You’re making dessert tonight. Dinner’s gonna take me too long to do it myself. You can even buy cookies or some shit from the bakery. Just get something good.”
Max put away her notepad and gave him a look. “I CAN bake, you know.” It was only a slight exaggeration. She learned how to make brownies from scratch from her mom, then chocolate chip cookies from Joyce. That was a fun day—Max and Chloe had gone against Joyce and tried to go ahead and bake them before she got home from work. They trashed Chloe’s tiny kitchen, but Joyce was so overjoyed to see some food ready when she got home, she resigned to yell at them later. She’d make them clean up, too—she knew they were good for it. Joyce tasted the cookies and wanted to vomit, but the whole situation suddenly seemed funny. Her destroyed kitchen, these two excited girls with their rank, practically poisonous cookies couldn’t make her mad. And the look of heartbreak on their faces was too much to be angry at as well.

“Whatever, just get the stuff. Pretty please?” Nathan asked sweetly, batting his eyelashes.

Max rolled her eyes and turned on her heel while responding, “Fine.”

“Thank you, Max!” Nathan called over his shoulder. “Love you.”

Her back was to him, and she could hear the regret in his voice almost immediately. He didn’t mean that, she thought. It was probably a reflex or something. Max tried not to think about it. It was an accident. There was no other reason for it.

Max walked away from the produce section, heading to the left and then an immediate right to the coffee and breakfast section. She picked out a sweeter roast that Nathan would hopefully not complain about. After picking a blend she knew she would like, she headed to the candy and snack aisle to pick out some chocolate to melt for the brownies. As she shopped, she realized her arms were almost full, and she still needed eggs, sugar, vanilla, and flour for dessert. Max waddled down the aisle, embarrassed, trying to ignore the other snickering shoppers motioning at her. She had just dropped her Ghirardelli dark chocolate when a familiar hand caught it before it touched the ground.

“Jesus, Max, why didn’t you grab a basket?” Nathan asked, taking the items she was carrying and setting them in the normal-sized basket he’d grabbed.

“I didn’t think about it,” Max said truthfully. “I just need to grab a few more things.”

“Already did. Sugar, eggs, vanilla, and flour,” he said, pointing as he spoke. “I figured you’d need them.”

Max looked at the basket. Inside, there were tomatoes, lasagna pasta, ground beef, a carton of heavy cream, a bunch of different types of cheeses, and one of the heads of lettuce she’d been looking at earlier. “What exactly are we having tonight?” Max asked. She couldn’t figure it out even if she wanted to.

“It’s kind of a made-up recipe…lasagna soup,” Nathan said. “It’s exactly what it sounds like, but I promise it’s really good. Well, only if I make it.”

Max rolled her eyes and playfully hit his arm. An older woman came by the two of them and smiled in their direction.

“Ah, I remember when I was young,” she began. “Such a beautiful couple. I wish I would have spent more time with my Robert before he passed,” she said warmly.

To Max’s surprise, Nathan spoke before she could. “Sorry for your loss,” he said. “And don’t worry, the two of us will be spending our lives together. Or rather, the three of us.” He bent down a bit and pat Max’s stomach.

She was MORTIFIED. Nathan humoring this grandma was cute at first, but now? Not so much.
What if this lady knew who she was? What if she leaked it to the press that she was having a kid? That’d be a vast amount of clearing-up to do once that came out. And didn’t this old lady know who Nathan was? Was he allowed to be making kids during furlough? Max knew it was just a joke, but if it got back to David or Stella, there would be hell to pay.

The old woman only smiled once more. “Congratulations on starting your family, she said, just before turning her basket and walking away.

Once the woman was safely out of earshot, Max turned to Nathan and pinched his arm, hard. He only laughed and brushed it off. “Nathan, why did you do that?” Max hissed. He just kept laughing. “It’s not funny, Nathan! Why would you say that? What if it gets back to David Madsen or, or Stella?”

“What, are you that ashamed of me?” Nathan asked nonchalantly.

Max gave him a hurt look and softened her tone. “No, no, of course I’m not ashamed of you. I just don’t want you getting in trouble, okay?”

Nathan smiled at her. “I was just kidding, Max. Plus, it won’t get back to David. Don’t you think it’s weird that nobody knows who we are? Why do you think I picked this SPECIFIC Smiths?”

Now that Max was thinking about it, this place was weird. Nobody came rushing up to him, asking about his prison stay. Nobody was giving the side-eye or hounding HER about her latest photography project. It was they were just normal people.

It was nice.

“Okay.” Max said, smiling now. “If we’re playing pretend, then we have to have backstories. Tragic backstories.”

Nathan laughed out loud. “I think our backstories are tragic enough. We’ll play pretend some other time. Kristine is probably wrapping up her visit now. We should head home.”

Max frowned, wanting to have some fun, but she understood. If they took too long, Kristine might have thought that they were running away. Max chuckled. As mean as it sounded, it was exactly the type of thing Kristine would do.

*                                                          *                                                          *

“I’m sooooooooo hungry!” Kristine whined.

Nathan rolled his eyes and put down his chopping knife and gently pat Max’s hip. She moved over to the side, holding her bowl of homemade brownie batter. She was standing in front of the towel drawer, and Nathan's eyes were tearing up from the onions he’d been chopping.

“You know, you COULD get off your ass and help us,” Nathan said.

“Um, that’s not how a restaurant works!” Kristine said.

“And bitching doesn’t get the food out faster!” he called out to her. Kristine rolled her eyes and stood up from the couch, which was in the living room across from the kitchen. Nathan knew he was being a little mean, but he knew what Kristine could and couldn’t handle. He really liked cooking, but Kristine’s near constant complaints and impatience always annoyed him. He wanted her to go away so that he could be alone with Max. It wasn’t so he could do something weird or anything like that; it was because he felt most like himself when he was alone with her. When he was with Kristine, he
couldn’t talk about Sophia Isley. When he was with Victoria, he couldn’t talk about Rachel Amber. With Max, the only person he couldn’t talk about was mark Jefferson, but that was okay, ‘cause he didn’t want to talk about that prick anyway.

Nathan turned and finished chopping while Max took it upon herself to stir the boiling soup while also preheating the oven. She and Nathan worked so well in the kitchen together. Even when they were in each other’s way, a pat or a shuffle was usually enough to fix things. Soon, most of the preparations were done. Max popped her brownies into the oven while Nathan leaned against an uncluttered countertop as the soup simmered. Soon, he’d have to add the ricotta as garnish. For moment they stood there in a nice silence, offering small smiles as they waited for the food to finish.

“So…” Nathan said as Max awkwardly turned to chop a tomato for the salad. “Tell me more about Talia.”

Max stifled laughter as Nathan joined her. “Do you really want to about Talia and I or are you just trying to learn about the dynamics of girl-on-girl intimacy?”

Nathan snickered. “Well, we can’t talk about MY sex life, so we have to talk about yours. Or, here, we’ll talk about mine real quick: I was getting to know myself very well during the last five years. Your turn.”

Max only gave a sour smile. “I’ll give you a few details. Contrary to what you see in porn, we don’t usually wear six-inch heels or keep our fingernails nine inches long. Next subject.”

“I already told you what I wanted to talk about,” Nathan reminded her. “Tell me about Talia.”

Max took a deep breath and began to speak, realizing she’d never told Nathan the entire story.

Talia Hajali was a very popular, very successful even organizer. Her specialty was charity events, and Max wanted to host one, but she didn’t know where to start. Eventually and fortunately, Max was put in contact with Talia, and the two of them hit it off instantly. Talia had tons of experience and was six years older than Max—who was now twenty-four years old. Talia was nearly six feet tall, with long black hair that fell to her waist when it was down, but it was usually kept in a tight, neat bun that sat atop her head. She had soulful brown eyes, smooth brown skin, plump, always-glossed lips, and a teeny green nose piercing in her left nostril.

“Shit, she sounds pretty hot,” Nathan said.

Max closed her eyes and sighed, reminiscing. “She was—is—drop-dead gorgeous, Nathan.” She pulled her cellphone out of her pocket to show him a picture she had of Talia. She expected an eye roll once Nathan saw her phone but instead, she was greeted with a smirk.

The background on Max’s phone was a picture of Nathan, Stella, and her, all packed in on Stella’s comfy recliner in her office. Max sat there in the office to work on editing wedding photos, then she’d called Stella over to show her something. Nathan took it upon himself to grab Max’s phone off the table, sandwich himself in between them, then snap a picture. Stella was laughing, her eyes squeezed close. Max was in midspeak, eyes in the middle of a roll that they looked like they’d be in forever. Nathan's lips were puckered, his eyes were half-open, and his non-camera hand was flashing a peace sign. It was a fun picture.

Max braced herself for his asinine remark, but he didn’t have one to give. He let his smirk subside, and waited for Max to pull up the picture. She only had one picture of Talia. She deleted all the
others, but this one she liked too much to just let go. She and Talia had gone to some party at a hotel that one of Talia’s rich, old friends was hosting. Talia had gotten tired of schmoozing, so she went out to the balcony to get some fresh air and clear her head. Max had already disappeared to the balcony sometime before, unbeknownst to Talia. Max called her name, then she’d taken a picture the moment Talia had turned around and smiled at her.

“This picture would look great at The Chase Space. It reminds me of this old picture I took of Victoria,” Nathan smiled to himself. He put his hand over his heart, trying to hold back tears. “We went to the beach and she kissed my hand. I miss her so much, Max. Look, dinner’s pretty much ready now. There’s somewhere I want to take you when we’re finished eating. You can finish telling me all about Talia then.”

“God I’m STUFFED,” Kristine smiled. All that was left on her salad plate was half of her third brownie. “Buggy, Max, you guys really did it tonight.”

“Yeah, so tomorrow, everyone’s on their own,” Nathan ordered.

Max couldn’t believe what a great chef Nathan was. He knew just what to add when the flavor seemed bland and just what to do when it looked like the food wasn’t going to turn out right. The first few bites of everything tasted amazing, but soon, everything blended together as Max’s anxiety got worse. Where was Nathan going to take her? Was he going to try to do something weird? Was he going to show her something weird? And what were they going to tell Kristine?

“Hey, Sissy,” Nathan continued, “me and Max are gonna go see a movie tonight.”

“Ooh, with one? Which Avengers are we on? Avengers Five: Thor Goes for a Walk,” Kristine giggled.

“No, they’re showing the director’s cut of Bladerunner, remastered. We’re going to see that.”

Max winced. Why that movie? Why now? He could have picked ANY fake movie, and he had to pick the last one she’d watched with Chloe? Before she killed Chloe?

“Okay, losers, have fun. I’ll take care of the dishes,” Kristine winked, standing and preparing to clear the table.

“Good, ‘cause the sink’s FULL of them. Max, meet me at the car in ten.”

* * *

“What the f**k are you doing?”

Max glowered at him from the driver’s seat. Her purse was next to her and she was holding her phone, playing some game she always played when she got bored. “I’m driving to the thing!” she reminded him. “Your place!”

“You have a better chance of getting stuck in a well. Now scoot that bony ass over and let me drive.”

“You realize this is illegal, right?” Max complained as she scooted into the passenger seat. “If David or—”

Nathan slammed his door and started up his car. He held up his hand just as Max began to protest and quickly put on his seatbelt. “Happy now?”
Max pouted and put on her own seatbelt, then sank down into her seat. “We could get into huge—”

“How much longer do I have to keep my eyes closed?” Max asked, annoyed. She felt the car finally slow to a stop. They’d been driving for at least thirty minutes, and Nathan made her cover her eyes for the last five.

Nathan put his truck in park and took off his seatbelt. He slipped on his own jacket and took his old red one out of the car with him. In his haste to get away and to the spot, he’d forgotten to tell Max to grab a jacket, and the icy October air was no joke. “Just a little longer.” He guided Max off of the truck, slightly lifting her shirt and touching her bare hip as he helped her down.

“Jesus, Nathan!” she shouted, swatting his hands away from her as she made her way to the ground.

Ellie Alice and me…
Nathan rested his hand on her thigh as she gazed up at the sky, still breathless from all the stars.

*C’mon, c’mon and trade me seats*

*Cause I can’t sit facing backwards*

*She reads a dying magazine*

*And I’m so nervous I can’t sleep…*

“It’s called ‘Ellie Alice.’ It’s by Local Natives. Their album came out a few years back,” Max said finally.

Nathan scoffed. “No wonder I’ve never heard it. And *Local Natives*. Isn’t that name a little redundant?”

Max rolled her eyes.

*On the other side, will I be reminded?*

*Pain in youth…*

“I knew Talia had been married when we first started dating. With the way she talked about it, I thought she had been divorced for a long time,” Max said. “I should have known that I was ‘the other woman.’ She kept saying how things with Brandon—her husband—just went bad one day. She and I dated for such a short time, but it was so passionate, Nathan, and it felt so right and happened so fast. I’d get teased by my assistant, Annie, for coming into work in last night’s clothes or Talia’s shirt and my bottoms. It was so fun and I was so in love with her and…and…”

“And then the shit hit the fan,” Nathan said, squeezing her leg and offering an apologetic look.

*Counting up the cards for the time rewinded*

*Pain in youth…*

Max laughed and turned to him. Tactless as he was, he *was* doing a good job of making it hurt a little less. “Exactly that. We booked a super nice hotel, and after…anyway, she just said it. Blurted it out!”

“What’d she say?”

“I remember her EXACT words were ‘I can’t wait to leave my husband for you.’ I was out of that bed like it was on *fire*, Nathan. I gathered my clothes while she kept stuttering and saying, ‘wait. That’s not what I meant.’ Found out later that she and her husband were separated, but he believed they were on the road to reconciliation. It got out that she was cheating on him, and she was ruined. I was crushed. And now she and I are back on talking terms and it’s all so messy and confusing.”

*And they’ll be combing the beach*

*But we move like shadows in the far*

*I scratch the ink off the receipts*

*Does she know that I’m already gone?*

“It’s not,” Nathan said coolly. “It’s not that hard to figure it out. You just gotta answer one question: you still love her?”
I don't know why I was nervous

I only want to deserve it...

“I...I feel like I could love her, again,” Max said. “But not while I’m still angry.”

“Boom, there’s your answer. Sort through your anger, then figure out what to do with the feelings you have leftover,” Nathan said brightly.

Max chuckled and put her hand over his, resting on her thigh. “You make it sound so easy. Tell me, is it always this easy for you, rich boy?”

Nathan scoffed. “Used to be.” He looked away.

The two of them sat in silence for a while longer, gazing up at the sky, enjoying each other’s company. Eventually, the wind picked up, and they laid down in the bed of the truck, side-by-side, waiting for it to pass. Suddenly, Max could feel Nathan's hand shaking on her thigh. He was swallowing loudly, and Max KNEW he was doing whatever he could to not look at her—they’d been friend for long enough that she could read him now. He always got fidgety when he wasn’t sure of what he wanted to do. He shot up suddenly and faced the end of the truck, holding his knees close to his chest.

“Nathan,” Max said calmly. It was hard to get him to talk when he got like this. Usually when he was deciding whether or not to say something, he had a very pressing reason to keep things to himself. He never conceded and told Stella, but he usually told Max. The only thing he’d refused to tell Max he’d drugged and took that picture of Chloe. She’d asked him that six months ago and he’d completely shut her down.

Max sat up and scooted closer to him, resting her hand on his back. “Is there something you want to tell me?” she asked gently. She didn’t want to push him if he didn’t want to tell her. That’d be months of progress down the drain.

His hands were shaking and cold, with his blue veins almost glowing under pale skin. “Max, it’s my fault my mom killed herself.”

“What?” Max blurted. “Nathan, you didn’t kill Sophia Isley. SHE chose to—”

“No, it’s my fault. I killed my mom,” Nathan repeated, convinced.

Max didn’t know what to say. Did Nathan really shoot his mom? “Why do you think that?” Max asked.

Nathan closed his eyes slowly and tried to will the tears to disappear. No such luck. He fucking hated crying. Not because he thought it was dumb, but because it was really goddamn inconvenient. Red nose, wet eyes, and a bunch of snot on his sleeves? Barf. Plus, he didn’t like when Max worried about him. In fact, he fucking hated it. She always gave him that look; it was like he zoomed in on her every time she gave it to him. Her eyes always looked so sad. Hadn’t he done enough to her? More tears came. Fuck.

But Max was here, now. Crying sucked and being worried about sucked, but at least he didn’t have to do it alone. “Are you crying?” Max asked. She rubbed her thumb over his cheek and wiped the tears away.

“Ew, Max, what the fuck, don’t wipe my fuckin tears,” Nathan said. Oh, great job, asshole, he thought.
Max just laughed and ignored it, then returned to a stern look. “Tell me about your Mom, Nathan,” she said confidently.

Nathan faced away from her again. “My mom gave me a letter sometime before she died.”

“Was it her note?”

“No, god, no, sorry,” he said. “It was a different one. She told me to give it to my dad. I thought it was her letter of resignation. Melinda was a good mom. She did her best to be nice to Sophia, but I know how she really felt about her. I knew my mom—Melinda—was trying to get her out of my life. I thought that if dad never saw the letter, Sophia would go and talk everything out with Melinda and my dad. But she killed herself instead. So I went back and read the letter to my dad. It was an apology letter. She was apologizing for ‘actively pursuing’ him and for neglecting me. Then she told him t-to meet her somewhere,” Nathan forced through his tears. He really didn’t want Max to see him now. He wiped his eyes on his sleeve, but he knew it wasn’t enough. He was really sobbing now. “But he never showed. He never showed because he didn’t know. Because I took the letter. It’s my fault. It’s my fault she died, Max.”

“Oh, Nathan,” she whispered, stopping her own tears. She couldn’t cry, not now. She had to be strong now. “That’s not your fault.”

“NOT MY—” Nathan swung around to yell at her, to berate her for being so damn stupid, but he couldn’t.

Max cupped his face with her hands and stared so hard into his eyes it burned. “Listen to me, Nathan. What Sophia did is not your fault.”

“But I—”

“Listen,” Max said, more firmly this time. “Sophia needed help that was beyond your mother and father. She needed more than what you or your dad were able to give. If she’d…if your father had gone and met her, it wouldn’t have made a difference. She had her mind made up.”

“Max—”

“You’ve got to let it go, Nathan. It’s not your fault. If it’s really so bad and you want to take it on as ‘your fault,’ accept your guilt as your punishment and move on,” she persisted.

“But I can’t,” Nathan said, tearing once more. “I still feel so guilty. And you’re hurting my face.”

Max quickly released his face. She didn’t even realize the iron grip she’d had on him. While Nathan rubbed his cheeks, Max couldn’t help but laugh.

Nathan rubbed his sore cheeks. “Is something about this funny to you?”

Max had to finish laughing before she could respond. “Yes, actually.”

Nathan scooted back toward her and put his hand on her thigh. “How so?”

I was just thinking about how similar we were, that’s all.”

“Similar?” Nathan raised an eyebrow. “How so?” he prodded.

“I was in your shoes sometime last year,” Max explained. “But things are a little different. I killed Chloe. I accept that. I can’t let that go. But I was panicking and crying and constantly feeling guilty
about sacrificing her. I mean, it was for the greater good, right? I saved Arcadia Bay from the storm, right? But I also neglected Chloe for five years. Five years, Nathan.”

“Is a point coming up soon?”

“It’d be here already if you hadn’t interrupted me,” Max said while smiling sweetly.

Nathan rolled his eyes, but nodded. “…sorry. Continue. Quickly, please?”

“As I was SAYING,” Max went on. “I didn’t get the closure I needed until I visited her grave and TALKED to her. I was able to really let her go once I told her how sorry I was. I talked about my favorite times with her, cut my hair, then left her to rest in peace.”

“Bullshit!” Nathan laughed, hoping up on his knees. “Your hair is super long right now, okay? Cut it? Cut it my ASS.”

Max glared at him, closed her eyes, and sighed. “You are so much like Chloe it’s almost funny. Almost. Funny.”

Nathan pouted and sat back down, hand on her thigh, of course. “Mmm…whatever. Now would you finish your story, please?”

Max was surprised he didn’t deny it. “That was all. I visited her and I felt better. The end.”

Nathan sighed. “I don’t even know where she is,” he said.

“Then we’ll find her and go from there,” Max said. “It isn’t always so difficult.”

Nathan smiled faintly and returned his gaze to the sky. “Yeah, maybe not.” It hadn’t been so hard, not with Max around. Waking up felt more purposeful, and his body hadn’t been rejecting his medication since she’d been visiting him. Well…aside from that time in the prison infirmary. “Let’s head out.”

“Wait,” Max said. She was stern, and Nathan didn’t dare look at her. “I want to know why you took that picture of Chloe. I want to know why you drugged her.”

“I knew this was coming,” Nathan mumbled.

“Good, so you know that I’m not going to drop it this time,” Max replied, determined.

Nathan spun around and sat across from her, cross-legged. He didn’t like sitting like this because he couldn’t rest his hand on her, but that was for the best. It forced him to focus on what she was saying, not how she was moving or how blue her eyes were, or how much he liked her freckles. Before she could speak, he held up a speak sign.

“Looking to recreate my phone background?”

He rolled his eyes. “Cute. No, I have two conditions. One, you have to promise not to hate me. Two, you have to tell me why you just stood there and let Warren Graham kick my ass!”


Nathan winced, and he hoped she couldn’t see it through the darkness. Slowly, he held up a third finger. He chuckled. He knew Max could see it when she rolled her eyes.

“Fine, I’ll go first,” she said. She took a deep breath, then crossed her own legs, sitting across from
him, smiling. “I’ve replayed that moment more times than I can count, Nathan. And I feel bad for letting you get beat up. But I let it happen because you would have had that gun you were waving around like a maniac if I haven’t done it. Warren kicked it out of your hand, Chloe picked it up. That’s why I let it happen. And trust me, Nathan, I don’t feel good about it.”

Nathan leaned in and gave her a look. “I don’t follow,” he said.

“I let him beat you up so you wouldn’t have a gun!” Max shouted. “At the time, we still that you ki…that you did all the stuff that Mr. Jefferson did, so we thought it would be better that you didn’t have a gun, okay?”

Nathan tried to stifle his laughter, but couldn’t. “Lucky me, drugged by Jefferson instead of shot. Thanks, Max,” Nathan said, quickly kissing the tip of her nose. “That was thoughtful of you. I still wonder where he buried me in that timeline. I bet it was RIGHT next to where he would’ve buried —”

“Okay, anyway,” Max interrupted. “Now it’s your turn.” She prayed she wasn’t blushing right now. Why did he do that? Why did he kiss her nose? Did he even realize that he did it? “Why did you do that to Chloe?”

Nathan swallowed hard. “Promise you won’t hate me,” Nathan said again.

“I already—” Max stopped herself. Stella had warned her about this. Sometimes he needed a little more reassurance. “I won’t hate you, Nathan.”

Nathan took a deep breath and he told Max the entire story about Chloe.

They were in a bar just a few streets south of the Two Whales Diner. They both knew that the other would be there, and they knew exactly what they wanted from each other as well. Nathan's hands were shaking. He couldn’t believe he was going to fucking do this. Getting a girl back to his dorm was easy enough, but this? This was much more than difficult. Chloe had been eying him from the bar for almost ten minutes now, and it was time to shit our get off the pot.

But luckily, he’d get to stay on the pot for a moment longer. Chloe approached him, her blonde roots poking out from a pixie cut that made her look, for lack of a better word, hot. She was dressed in her usual style—hobo-chic—and gave a smile that made him blush. “So,” she began, approaching him. “Are you gonna stroke it by yourself all night long or are you gonna let someone else have a turn?”

His face was on fire. “What?”

Chloe rolled her eyes, set down her beer, then gestured to the pool stick he was holding onto for dear life. He smirked, and made sure to lay it on thick. “Sorry,” Nathan said. “And no. I’d love to see how you handle my shaft.”

Chloe laughed out loud.

As did Max. “You really said that to her? She LAUGHED?”

“Dude, I wanted to get her back to my room,” Nathan said. “But I probably would have said it anyway. I can be a pretty big dickhead sometimes.”
“Oh, trust me, I know.”

“As I was SAYING,” he pressed on, copying her.

They’d gone three rounds of pool before Nathan could convince her to come to his room. Now they were sitting on his bed, with Nathan's eyes darting back and forth nervously as Chloe downed the beer he’d spiked. Soon her jacket was off, and she was planting sloppy kisses on him like there was no tomorrow. Her hand found its way to the buckle of his belt, which she undid, one-handed, expertly.

“OH MY GOD,” Max interrupted again.

Nathan gave her a dirty look. “How am I supposed to finish the story if you keep butting in?” he growled.

“I’m SORRY, it’s just…Chloe never told me that part,” Max explained.

Nathan softened and he almost looked sort of sad. “She told you about this?”

“Well definitely not all of it! She wisely left out the part where the two of you got busy,” Max blurted.

Nathan smirked. “What, can’t say ‘sex’ without blushing?”

She blushed. “It wasn’t that she couldn’t say it; it was that she didn’t want to say it around him. She also wished she could have learned how to do the one-handed belt buckle thing. That was impressive.

He smirked again and continued. “She didn’t tell you because it didn’t happen. That’s not my cup of tea.”

“You mean to tell me you wouldn’t ge…have…um…”

“No. No I would not. She smelled like weed and cigarettes, plus she came on a little strong. Not interested.”

“Why not? Chloe’s cute, she’s funny, she’s adventurous and brave, she’s smart…” Max stopped herself before she could go on. “Why not?”

“What, did you want me to?” Nathan asked.

Max stayed silent. There was no safe way to answer that.

“Anyway. She figured out I drugged her, pulled her jacket on, and tried to leave. Then she just laid on the ground in a cold sweat just cursing, loudly. And I watched her and thought about Mark Jefferson told me. He always said he liked to have control. That taking pictures made him like the boss or some other bullshit like that. He always said that taking pictures and that ‘the occasional kill’ made him feel powerful.

“Except I didn’t fucking feel powerful at all. Looking at her like that just made me feel scared. Scared and sick, and like a fucking idiot. So my brilliantly fucked-up brain decided it would be a good idea to take a picture, so it could remind me how fucking shitty it all felt. A second later, my
balls were on FIRE and my lamp was broken and she was gone. So that’s why,” Nathan said.

“So…you did it because you were curious?”

Nathan paused to look at her. There was something about the way she was looking at him that made him feel uneasy. She didn’t sound surprised, not even angry. She just looked…curious. Surprised, even.

“Yeah,” his voice cracked.

Max thought for a moment, then looked at him. “Thank you for telling me. Now can we go talk somewhere like INSIDE the car where it’s not cold as hell?”

“What, that’s it?” Nathan asked.

Max bundled up and looked at him. “Yeah. What you did was…gross. And scary, and wrong. But, you know, you’ve changed since then. I’ve seen you grow. I know you’re not that person anymore. I just wanted to know why.”

“So you don’t hate me?” Nathan asked.

“Of course I don’t,” Max chuckled. “Now. Warm car?”

Nathan hopped off the bed of the truck and turned to offer his hand. “Let’s go, Tiny Tim.”

Max pouted and took his hand. “I HAVE grown, you know.”

Nathan scoffed and yanked her toward him. “Sure you did.” He pulled her off of the truck and held her wedding style for just a moment, then set her down.

She headed to the car, and waited by the passenger door. Instead of going to the driver’s seat, he met her by her door. “Is there something else keeping us out in the cold?”

Nathan sighed and opened the door. “There is.” He leaned in past her and opened the glove compartment. Inside was the picture of Chloe. He pulled it out and looked at it. “When…whenever I started to feel like…like he really groomed me, I’d look at the picture. And…and if I was still scared…if I still felt sick…if I felt the same, I’d know that he didn’t. That he didn’t get to me as much as I thought. I wanted to look at it again…and…and I don’t feel good. Looking at it.”

Max touched the picture and looked up at him. “Why are you pulling this out now?”

He smiled. It was a beautiful smile, one Max wished she would have taken a picture of. “I don’t need it anymore.” He patted her arm and smiled. “Come on, let’s go.”

Max smiled and climbed into the car, and Nathan climbed in after her. She smiled again and scooted into the driver’s seat. Before they went, though, Max was surprised by a sudden flash. She looked over and there was Nathan, shaking a polaroid, and holding her classic yellow camera.

“I used to fucking hate this thing,” Nathan said, looking at the picture.

Max took the car out of park, but held her foot on the brake. She reached for the picture, but Nathan held it up too high for her to reach it, sticking his hand out the window where he knew she wouldn’t go. “And how do you feel about the camera now?”

Nathan pulled his hand back into the car, and smiled once the picture had developed. “It’s not so bad,” he said. Opting not to let her see it, he stuck it in his back pocket. He replaced his hand on her
thigh, then they took off, headed back to the Hilltop House.
“Home sweet home,” Max said confidently, slowing the car to a stop as she pulled into the driveway. She looked over at Nathan, who was fast asleep, his face smashed up against the window. His seatbelt was dangerously pressed against his neck, but Max could hear him breathing, so she decided to let him just sleep. She hated waking him because...because he seemed so peaceful when he slept. Everything was calm and quiet and he only needed to worry about his dreams and not the world around him. Right now, it was like they were the only two people in the world, and she loved when she felt like that with him, but she was so thankful that he was asleep right now. It was hard for her to take time to think when she was wrapped up in thinking of him.

Max couldn’t get over the inconsistencies with Nathan’s and Melinda’s stories about Sophia Isley. Nathan said that he’d gotten a letter from Sophia to give to his dad. Was this before or after Sophia had thrown on one of Sean’s shirts, then killed herself two days later? Max gasped. It had to have been before all of this. Sophia must have been confident that Sean was still in love with her, that he would meet her—and when he didn’t, it pissed her off. So then she took matters into her own hands and tried to seduce him. Since Nathan still blamed himself, that meant that he had NO IDEA that Sophia met with his dad before her death. Was Max supposed to be the one to tell Nathan the truth? Would he even feel absolved?

And then there was the picture of Chloe. Max was surprised he even told her THAT much about that night. She had been expecting him to tell her to fuck off and mind her own damn business, just like when she’d asked him what happened that night six months ago. He’d changed a lot since then, but Max was the only one who saw the remarkable changes. He was socializing more, he was happier, and he rarely had a bad day unless there was some huge, unexpected event that was triggering to him. Max never thought she’d ever be nice to Nathan Prescott, let alone sleeping in his bedroom.

She felt herself blush. She’d completely forgotten about staying in his room—and that he’d seen her with her towel open this morning. She didn’t really care all that much that he’d seen her naked,
which sort of surprised her. *It's not really that much to see,* she thought. She’d definitely grown from high school, but sometimes it didn’t feel like very much. She was more afraid that he’d seen her newest tattoo. It was four months old, with the ink still dark, and probably the best work she’d ever gotten. It was on the left side of her body on her ribs. It was the thick, black outline of a whale. The eyes of the whale were blue—the same blue as Nathan's eyes—and its face was near the center of her body while the tail flicked up to the left. Inside the outline was watercolored with soft streaks of red and blue. It was the biggest tattoo she’d gotten so far, but small enough that Max could lie and tell Nathan that he’d just imagined it on her. Even after four months, Max couldn’t exactly place why she’d even gotten the tattoo. Of course the whale reminded her of Nathan—and it was for Nathan—but why did she get it if she was seeing him every day? Was she afraid of losing him?

Before Max could not-answer her own question, Nathan began to stir. He stretched his arms to the roof of the car and opened his eyes wearily, looking over at her with those perfect blues. “Your face is red,” he said, concerned. “You cold?”

Max shut off the car and put her hands on her cheeks. “I guess so,” she lied. She hoped she hadn’t been mumbling while she was thinking. She did it all the time without realizing and she usually left it to Victoria or Talia to point out.

“Are we gonna be in the car all night or can we like…go into the goddamn house?” Nathan inquired.

“Aww, is the widdle rich boy cold?” Max cooed, reaching over and pinching his cheek.

“Eat a diiiiiiick,” he chuckled. He pressed her hand against his cheek and covered it with his own. “I’m cold.”

Max rolled her eyes and pulled her hand away. She grabbed her bag off of the floor by Nathan's feet, opened her door, then hopped out of the car. She turned and rested her elbows on the seat. “You’re always cold.”

Nathan scooted toward her, expecting her to move out of his way, and becoming puzzled when she didn’t. Instead, Max rested her elbows on his thighs, looking up at him, knowing he couldn’t move until she wanted him to. Max would have never admitted it back when they were at Blackwell, but there was something so attractive about Nathan it was scary. Of course she always thought he was good looking—he and Kristine hit the gene-pool lottery. There was this weird, mysterious aura surrounding him that drew her to him; it made her want to be close to him, to know him. She gazed up at him, curiosity overflowing from her eyes, having so many questions to ask that he hadn’t the time to answer.

God dammit, why was she like this? Why was she doing this? Max really was one of those girls who had no idea what kind of effect she had on people. The way she was looking up at him was downright criminal. He couldn’t tear his eyes away from those soulful blue eyes, her cute freckles, or the slight hint of a smile on her lips. And now that his eyes were there, focused on her lips, it felt like his brain shut off and he couldn’t think. He felt himself leaning toward her, all against his better judgement, then stopped suddenly, confident that she didn’t notice. Her lips twitched, itching to do something with him, and he prayed it wasn’t what he thought it was going to be.

FUCK. Was she mad that he didn’t kiss her? Why would she want him to anyway? Did he even really want to, or was he just feeling like that because it was the heat of the moment? What if she was going to ask how he felt about her? He liked her, of course he did. He liked to spend time with her, to make sure she was happy, to be close to her, but he felt like his friendliness and concern for her bordered on obsession…or something else entirely. He didn’t want to think about that.

Finally, she parted her lips, and he waited eagerly for what she was about to do or say.
“Nathan, what’s your favorite color?”

What. The. Fuck. That was it? He was dumbfounded; wasn’t that the ONE thing about him that seemed…obvious? “Gee,” he started sarcastically. “I have a red car, you’re wearing my old red jacket and I’m wearing a new red jacket.”

“Ah,” Max said, nodding. “Purple, got it,” she played along. She turned and headed up the driveway, knowing that he’d follow. “What about your favorite food?”

“I don’t know! Potatoes? Mac and cheese? Why are you asking me this shit?” Nathan whined, following her, of course.

Max didn’t turn to him. She unlocked the front door with his keys, then tossed them back to him. He caught them sloppily, then glared at her, waiting for her response. She sighed. “I don’t know…we’ve been friends for over a year now and we don’t know very much about each other. But we do have at least one thing in common; mac and cheese is on my list of favorite foods, too. My favorite color is blue.”

“Why does it even matter, Max?” he hissed, stuffing his keys and his cold hands into his pockets. He followed her up the stairs, thankful that she couldn’t see how intently he was staring at her right now. Every sway of her hip and bounce of curls in her hair all looked so…nice. The way Max moved was so pretty. It’s like she put a lot of effort into looking cute all the time. He walked her up to his old room, and he watched her enter while he resolved to lean in the doorway, just long enough to finish their conversation. He crossed his arms and smirked as she peeled herself out of his jacket.

“You don’t have to know my favorite color for us to be close, Max,” he said. He thought they were already close, what with sharing drinks and spending so much alone-time together.

Max turned to him, crossing his arms to mimic him. He didn’t seem to notice. “What’s Victoria’s favorite color, Nathan? What’s Rachel’s?”


“Nice,” Max said. She placed her hand firmly on the middle of his chest and did her best to ignore his crazy heartbeat. “And now you know mine is blue,” she said, pushing him out of the room and slowly closing the door.

Nathan chuckled, then turned on his heel to head back to the guest room. “Blue,” he grinned.

Max shot up from her bed, drenched with sweat, her breath coming in short, hectic bursts. She tried to will her breath to return to a quiet calm. She couldn’t remember anything about the dream she’d had, but it had to have been crazy enough to wake her, which was worrisome. She slowly rolled back down into the bed, looking up at the ceiling, trying to calm her beating heart. As she felt herself return to normal, she closed her tired eyes, and soon dreamt that someone was coming into the room.

But it wasn’t a dream.

“Max?” she heard Nathan whisper groggily. “Are you awake?”

Max slammed her eyes shut, rolled over onto her side, and covered her head with her pillow. “Look, I’ll switch rooms again, but for fuck’s sake, can it PLEASE be in the morning?”

Nathan scoffed and barged in, closing the door behind him. “Go back to sleep, Max,” he grumbled.
Max shot up and tried to find him in the darkness. He was at the foot of the bed, lying an enormous blanket down on the floor. Their eyes met and Nathan quickly went to the ground, covering himself with the second blanket he’d brought with him. Max crawled to the end of the bed and pulled the blanket off of him, looking at him upside down. “Should I turn on your whale songs, or something?”

He scoffed again and recovered his head, muffling his speech underneath the thickness of the blanket. “Go to SLEEP, Max,” he said, a little more firmly this time.

Max was pissed off. She yanked his comforter off of his head and held his face still, forcing him to look up at her. Her hair fell and formed a curtain around them. Why was he acting like this? What was he doing in here? “You keep changing things around, totally uprooting parts of my life—and I bend to whatever your will is, because I care about you and your health. The least you could to, to meet me halfway, is give me an explanation.”

But Nathan said nothing. He shook her hands off of his face and gave her a really nasty look, then replaced the comforter over his head. Max rolled her eyes and flopped down in the bed, angrily gripping her pillow. If Nathan hadn’t been there, she would have screamed into it. The silence in the room was deafening, now. She knew he wasn’t asleep; he was just lying there under the blanket, waiting for her to go to sleep first, but she WOULDN’T. She was dog tired, but she was willing to stay up all night if she had to just to spite him, just to remind him that he wasn’t always going to get his way. This was the one thing he hadn’t improved on—compromise. Everything always had to be done his way, and that got to be tiring.

Max heard him shuffle a bit, so she shuffled as well. I’m awake, she thought at him. And I’m not going to sleep any time soon.

“I thought it’d be easier to sleep in there,” Nathan rasped quietly. He knew she was listening. If there was one thing that changed about Max, it was that she didn’t walk away from anything unless she absolutely had to. He liked that about her. “I haven’t been here in a long time, Max. This was my home, even more than dad’s fucking stadium Prescott Manor. But the ceiling in the guest room didn’t feel like it was mine. That’s what it was like this morning. I didn’t want to be in here, but then I couldn’t find what I was looking for in the guest room, either. None of these rooms feel like mine.”

Now Max felt bad. Maybe she had been a little hard on him.

“I know I make things…hard,” Nathan continued, speaking carefully. “And I’ll work on it, I promise, but god, Max, not tonight. I… I just… I really don’t want to be alone right now. It’s like being back in my fucking cell. But when I’m with you…you make things feel real. And the house feels like it’s my home when you’re here.”

Max crawled back over to the foot of the bed and looked down at him. “Do you want to sleep up here?”

Nathan blinked at her pointedly, then found himself in a fit of uncontrollable laughter. He couldn’t breathe, and he covered his face.

It took Max a moment before she realized why it was all so funny, and she swat him on the arm. “You are such a pervert! I meant that it’s a big bed, and there’s room for… jeez, just forget it,” Max pouted. She returned herself to her pillow and scowled as she crossed her arms. It was a California King! He didn’t have to sleep on the floor. The bed was big enough that they wouldn’t disturb each other if he was up here, right? Right?

It got quiet for a moment, so Max soaked up her embarrassment and did her best to try to sleep. She’d deal with him in the morning.
But before she couldn’t really doze off, she heard him speak. “G’night, Max,” he breathed sleepily.

Max shot up again, somehow quieter this time, and carefully crawled to the end of the bed. She crept over the edge and looked at him. He was knocked out, peacefully, as always. She slowly brought her hand over to the edge of the bed somewhat reluctantly, and reached for him. She crawled, with her fingers, across his forehead, ready to pull them away in case he woke up and startled her with a “What the fuck are you doing?”

Luckily for her, he stayed asleep. She hoped she wasn’t just annoying him, or that he was faking sleep to humor her. He continued to sleep soundly, and she smiled. She returned herself to her pillow, whispering just before she drifted off to sleep, “Good night, Nathan.”

*                                                          *                                                          *

Max awoke, rubbing her tired eyes. She crawled over to the end of the bed and pouted once she saw that Nathan wasn’t there. She shouldn’t have been surprised—he’d been sleeping on her floor for a WEEK now and she’d outslept him every single day since it started. He had to have been feeling awful, sleeping on the floor the whole time. Max didn’t dare ask him again if he wanted to sleep in his bed with her; she was afraid it’d come off as…weird, or something. All of his sleeping things were gone, as usual. They were lucky Kristine hadn’t caught them—but would it really have been such a big deal if she had? They weren’t doing anything wrong, right? Nathan just didn’t want to be alone, and wasn’t the whole reason Max even came here in the first place to be there for him? Whatever.

Max left the bed and lifted her shirt up over her head, ready for a much-needed shower. Just then, there was a hasty knock at the door, and, much to her horror, it opened.

“Hey, Max, sorry to just barge in, but I have a favor to ask,” Kristine said quickly, closing the door without turning to face her. And when she did turn around, she was met with an embarrassed, bare-chested Max, who was having trouble getting her shirt back down. “Oh my god! I’m sorry!” Kristine gasped, covering her eyes.

“It’s…fine,” Max said, still struggling. “Can you help me? I think something is caught on my hair.”

“Of course!” Kristine shouted accidentally, scrambling over to help Max. Once her shirt was down, Kristine continued. “God, sorry about that. I promise I won’t barge in next time. Work needs me to come in for a meeting and I need you to pick up Nathan.”

“Sure,” Max said. “Did he visit Melinda or something?”

Kristine laughed. “No, he knows he’d never live it down if I was the one to take him to visit mom. He’d do it secretly. He’s at the facility with Stella. He was super angry with me this morning.”

“Oh,” Max said. She gestured toward the bathroom and Kristine followed her inside. “Is everything okay?” She reached for her toothbrush once they were inside.

Kristine closed the lid to the toilet, then sat on it. “Yeah, I think so. He was a MESS this morning—he looked like he’d run a freaking marathon when I came into the guest room to wake him. His blankets were all bunched up in the middle of the bed and he was drenched, I mean totally fucking soaked with sweat, clutching a pillow for dear life. He was pissed cause I didn’t wake you up to go with him to Stella, but you guys got in from Event Horizon so late last night, I figured it was best to just let you sleep.”

Max felt kind of uneasy. She and Nathan had stayed out late at Nathan’s favorite spot three times
over the past week. They’d been talking and really getting to know each other, trying to make up for lost time. Sooner or later, Kristine was going to realize that all the old movies they told her they were going to see weren’t being played anywhere and they’d either have to come clean or come up with something to tell her. Shitty as it sounded, Max knew she’d lie about just about anything to make sure Nathan's favorite spot stayed his.

“Well, hopefully he’ll be happy when I pick him up. I’ll get ready to go now,” Max smiled.

Kristine jumped up and momentarily held Max’s hand. “Thank you, thank you, thank you, Max! I owe you!” she said enthusiastically. “I’ll see you later.”

Kristine ran out of the room, leaving Max to finish getting ready. Once Kristine was gone, Max closed and locked her door, then went to check her phone in case there were messages from Stella. In the week that Max had been staying at the Hilltop House, Stella and Warren had called it quits and broke up. From what Max had heard from Stella, it was all pretty much a clean break, and totally amicable—Stella and Warren still talked practically every day. Stella had slowly been moving out of their apartment over the past year, so he wasn’t surprised when he came home to all of Stella’s stuff in boxes, and the “we need to talk” talk.

Max grabbed her phone off of her charger and she had two messages. The first was from Stella. The second message was from an unknown number, along with a picture attachment. Max rolled her eyes. Hadn’t she had enough mystery messages from unknown numbers in a lifetime? Ignoring it for now, Max went to her message from Stella and opened it. Her eyebrows raised once she read it:

MAX HOLY SHIT MAX I SLEPT WITH SOMEONE!!! <3<3<3

Max texted back immediately:

--Someone I know? :3c

YES!! Is that bad?

--Don’t think so. Did you get a place?

I did! Warren helped me look lol. I gotta talk to u about something, nothing serious. U picking Nathan up?

--Sure am!

Cool! See u soon!

Max took a deep breath as she went to open her unknown sender’s message, then smiled. It was a selfie of Nathan, eyes looking angry, while Stella was squished next to him, holding up a peace sign.

Kris got me a new phone…prepare 4 spam

Max smiled and set her phone down and finished brushing her teeth. She made a decision to forgo the shower, at least until she returned with Nathan. She pulled on yesterday’s pants and kept her pajama shirt on as she quickly shuffled to slip on Nathan’s old jacket. She put her phone in her back pocket, slipped on her favorite pair of chucks, then hurried down the stairs to the kitchen, where Nathan had left his keys. Max practically ran out of the house and filled her lungs with the fresh, sweet air of outside. She looked up at the perfect blue sky, almost glowing against a few fluffy white clouds. She hunched over and rested her hands on her knees, trying to slow her rapid breath. It was a little inconvenient to have a panic attack right now, but it really had been a long time coming. Max hated being alone in the house when Kristine and Nathan were gone.
Nathan had only two other sessions with Stella so far, and each one was tougher than the last—and not for him. Kristine was always the one to pick him up, and Max insisted she go alone because it was really the only time she got to be alone with her brother. Nathan and Max were basically inseparable. Nathan wasn’t good at spending time by himself anymore, so he made sure that Max was pretty much within thigh-grasping length at all times. And Nathan was a good guest. He stayed quiet, usually reading or playing on his DS when Max was on the computer editing photos and he sometimes slept on her lap while she read or even helped her stay focused when on conference calls with her editor and agent for her second photography book. Max knew Kristine wasn’t bothered by how much time she and Nathan spent together—if anything, Kristine was thankful she could leave him with someone who wasn’t family, guilt-free—but Max wanted to make sure and Nathan and Kristine were visiting with each other, not just living in the same house again.

Max took a deep breath and made her way to Nathan's truck. With shaking hands, she pulled a stick of gum out of her purse, then hoisted herself into the seat. Max held her breath and closed her eyes, chewing the gum, trying to focus on anything but her beating heart. She knew the tears were going to come soon, like they did with every attack, but maybe she could at least make it harder for them to fall. She focused on the taste of the gum, a sweet mint, nice and cool on her tongue.

It reminded her of the previous night, out at the spot. She was laughing, head thrown back, stomach burning from flexing her muscles for so long. “God, you sound just like him!” she cackled.

“Well, that’s what he sounded like,” Nathan tried to say, finding himself laughing partway through his sentence. “Then boom: from then on, he was Warren Gayram. I fucking hated him in high school. He was annoying as shit.”

“Oh, come on,” Max said softly, grabbing a half-full water bottle off of the roof of the truck, where she was sitting. She sipped to try to moisten her mouth. She handed the bottle to him and continued on as Nathan gulped the water down. “Warren’s not bad. He can be kind of clingy, but I really think that’s part of his charm. He’s super thoughtful and sweet, and so, so understanding and easy to talk to. He was kind of an awkward kisser, though, but he TOTALLY made up for it.”

Nathan turned to look at her. She was looking up at the sky, the edge of the galaxy, and blushing. “Aww,” Nathan teased. “Miss having him as your boy toy?”

“Hell no,” Max said. She climbed down from the roof of the car with his help and joined him in the bed of the truck. He pulled her closer to him, like he always did, and rested his hand on her thigh like the space was made for him. She rested her head on his shoulder, rubbing his cold, bare arm with her warm hands. “I loved Warren. I really did. But we wanted different things. He wanted marriage! A family! The whole domestic thing, and we were only nineteen. There was too much I still wanted to do—selfish as it was. So we broke up. Then I started missing him and we pretty much only got back together for a short time because…because it was easy. He knew everything about me and I knew everything about him. But sometimes, familiarity isn’t enough to sustain a relationship. He was a house, not a home. But I was home for him.”

Nathan chuckled and gripped her leg slightly, trying to will his heart to calm. “A house?”

Max sighed, exasperated. “It’s like…a house is nice. It’s where you live. It’s safe, it’s comfy, and it seems perfect, right?”

“Right?”

“Right,” Max continued. “But like…it’s just a place to live. If a hurricane blew through your house,
you’d be pissed, but you can always find a new house. But when you lose your home, it breaks your heart. And I broke his heart.”

“But isn’t he happy with Stella?” Nathan asked, confused.

“Ah,” Max said, raising her eyebrows and tilting her head onto his shoulder. “No. They’re just houses to each other. At some point their relationship just became…safe. Safe and easy to do.” She pulled herself to the foot of the bed of the truck, then turned to face him. “they broke up, anyway. It was amicable, though.”

“Look at Max Caulfield,” Nathan said in the exact same tone he would have said it back when they were in high school. He held both of her hands and pulled her so that she was closer to him, so close, he could feel the wind blowing her long hair onto his face. She looked at him innocently, her blue eyes full of wonder, and moved her hair out of her mouth. He had something more to say, she could tell, but ended up overtaken by laughter.

“What?” she asked. She ran a hand through her hair, pushing it back and out of her face.

The gum had finally lost its flavor, and Max felt her heartbeat accelerate again. She opened Nathan's jacket a bit, letting the fresh air hit her chest, hoping that it would slow her frantic heart. She looked over to the other window, suddenly feeling very sad. Why was this happening to her? Why now? She glanced at the seat and there was Nathan’s other red jacket—the new one that actually fit him—and she pulled it into her lap. Gradually she brought it closer to her face, wishing Nathan was there with her.

“It’s nothing,” Nathan said.

Max pouted and leaned back, resting her weight on her hands. “You’re so faux-cryptic,” she mused. It didn’t really mean anything, but she knew it’d annoy him.

“Fo-what?”

“Faux-cryptic.”


Max raised her eyebrows and grinned. “What does what mean?”

“Fo-whateverthefuck!”

Now Max was laughing. “It doesn’t mean anything. I made it up.”

Nathan rolled his eyes, understanding what he was getting at. “If you must know EVERYTHING, I was laughing because your hair was in your mouth, but then you fixed it.”

“Yeah, it gets pretty wild,” Max smiled, running her hand through it again.

“Why do you have it so long, anyway? You kept it short back in high school,” Nathan said. Not that he was complaining. Max could have been bald for all he cared, as long as she was here.

“After the funeral I just kind of stopped getting it cut, you know? And I might have let go of my Final Fantasy obsession…well, most of it,” Max explained.
“Final Fantasy obsession?”

“Yeah. It’s a series of games where you—”

“I know what the fuck Final Fantasy is, Max. I’m just trying to wrap my head around what the fuck it had to do with a haircut,” Nathan said.

Max covered her face in embarrassment. After a moment, she uncovered it, revealing a smile that made Nathan’s heart skip a beat. She pointed to her face and laughed. “Okay, I want you to THINK, Nathan. In one of the Final Fantasy games, isn’t there a timid girl with short brown hair who looks a little bit like me?”

Nathan thought for a moment, then burst into laughter. He held his stomach and fell backward, barely able to breathe. “Are you serious?”

“Yup,” Max laughed. Seeing how Nathan reacted made her face burn but it wasn’t all embarrassment. “Now I wish I hadn’t told you.”

“You’re SERIOUS!” Nathan screamed, rolling around on the floor in the bed of the truck.

“Yup. Drink it aaaaall in. Whatever, Yuna is cool. And she’ll always be cool,” Max laughed. She stretched her legs next to his and he pushed himself up, resting on his elbows. “I tried to cosplayer from the second game but…but it didn’t work out.”

“What happened?”

Max blushed, but powered through it. “Well, I didn’t realize I had to style my hair to really get her look, and I also didn’t have the T-and-A to fill out the costume. Then again, I was like fifteen and I know my mom was secretly relieved when I ended up going as Spider-Man.”

“Spider-Girl?”

“No, Spider-Man,” Max laughed. “It was cold that Halloween, so I was glad I didn’t have my buttcheeks out.”

Nathan smiled and came forward toward her, resting his hand on her shoulder. “Well, lucky you, you’ve got the butt for it now!”

Max rolled her eyes and tried to be mad at him, really, she did, but she could tell he was trying not to laugh, and he knew she was doing the same. Eventually she gave herself over to laughter. He seemed so sincere. As they laughed his hand inched closer to her neck, and she immediately swat it away.

“What’s wrong?” Nathan asked.

“Your hands are so cold!” she said. Max scooted over next to him and took both of his hands in her own. She noticed that his jacket was nowhere to be found. “You must be frozen, come here.”

Nathan awkwardly got closer to her, trying to hid how much he was blushing. Max didn’t notice, or rather, she pretended not to. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders, pressing her body against him, sharing her warmth.

“How are you so COLD all the time?” Max asked absentmindedly, resting her head on his shoulder. He rested his head on hers. He squirmed again, freeing the hand closest to her and resting it on her
Max pulled the jacket away from her face, not realizing how intently she was focused on it. It smelled like him, but the scent was cold and stagnant, only barely sticking to the jacket because Nathan had spent so much time not-wearing it the previous night. She knew that her anxiety wasn’t gone, but she needed to pick up Nathan, because she was sure he was getting impatient.

Nathan stood tapping his foot expectantly, unlocking his phone, ready to send Max another slew of messages. Where the hell was she? He wanted to go home. He hated being back at the facility after tasting freedom. He’d still have an entire year to get beat up by other inmates after his furlough, so he was determined to spend as little time as possible on prison grounds. Couldn’t he and Stella just do their sessions at his house? That way, Max could always join them as soon as she woke up! They were good enough friends for that now, right? Stella could even come up to the spot with them… maybe not. Nathan liked Stella, he really did, but she liked to gossip. The Spot would be filled with people in no time! But would Stella even care to hear about it in the first place? Would she have any real interest in his personal life?

“Hey, Stella?” Nathan started. He turned and tapped her shoulder.

Stella was finishing a message on her phone, holding up a finger. Nathan was very patient this time.

“Yes?” Stella answered, shoving her phone into her back pocket.

“Are we friends? Like real friends?” he asked carefully.

“Real friends?”

“Like…like friends who can do things…like go to the movies together,” Nathan explained.

“Of course we are,” Stella smiled. “I know I’m your therapist and that makes things a little weird at times but outside of the office, yes, we are real friends.”

“Okay, good,” Nathan smiled. He didn’t want to ask her to make a house-visit anymore. It seemed weird doing it right after confirmation. Maybe he could make himself see his sessions with Stella as just…visits. Visits with lots of questions and the occasional breakdown. That would be nice. It was already sort of nice. But it was even better when Max was there. He felt more…more comfortable when she was there. Nathan knew he was guarded with…with everything. The last person he was open with aside from Rachel was Mark Jefferson, and that ended with him killing Rachel and Chloe—and, understandably, it put up a guard in him. He didn’t want to open up if it meant he was going to be manipulated. He was a guy who liked to be in control, and he didn’t feel like he was in control when he was with Max, much like how it was when he was with Mark Jefferson. He trusted Max with everything, but it didn’t stop him from being scared. Nothing was going to stop the doubt, and that made him more scared than he’d ever admit. People came into his life to hurt him.

But that didn’t always happen, he thought. Max, Stella, and Victoria hadn’t ever manipulated him. They were nice to him. “they were nice because they care about me,” he said quietly to himself, quizzically. “People who care won’t hurt you.”

“That’s right,” Stella said warmly, putting her hand on his shoulder. “People who care about you will never hurt you.”

She was grinning that insufferable, shit-eating grin she always grinned when he applied her advice
and counseling. He’d totally forgotten that she was even there; he was so wrapped up in his own thoughts. “But how can you tell?”

“Tell what?”

“Who really cares,” Nathan said. This was so bizarre, he’d never talked to her like this outside of a session before. “I thought Mr. Jefferson really cared. How do you tell when it’s real?”

Stella smiled wryly and put her hand on his shoulder. “that’s the hard part, Nathan. Sometimes you can’t really tell when it’s not real. That’s what you have to trust your gut for. Sometimes, it knows when a situation is bad before you do. Otherwise, you have to rely on faith. Like with Max, and Rachel, and even me. Remember how it was when we first started counseling? When Max first visit? How was it with Mr. Jefferson? Did it feel the same way?”

“I mean…fuck, I don’t know. I was scared. I felt sick. But not with Max. Well, shit, I was scared. I was really fucking scared. But…but it was a good scared,” Nathan said. He sighed and rested his head on Stella’s shoulder. “I wish she was here.”

Stella chuckled and pointed straight ahead. “Speak of the devil and the devil shall appear,” she smiled.

“What?”

Stella rolled her eyes and jabbed her finger at the air a bit harder, enough for his eyes to follow it and meet eyes with Max, who had just pulled up in his truck. “Max is here. You did a great job today, Nathan. Remember to trust your gut.”

Max hopped out of Nathan’s truck, looking a little shaky. She had to keep her composure in front of Nathan, though. She had a good idea of what Stella needed to talk to her about. Max threw the keys to Nathan and walked past him to Stella. He hid his hurt when she didn’t acknowledge him, and he grumpily stomped past and waited by the door. Max forced a friendly smile when Stella excitedly raised her eyebrows.

“Is everything all set up for tonight?” Max asked slowly, meticulously saying each word to hide her anxiety.

“Yes! Everyone’s called to confirm. You can get him there, right?”

“I better,” Max said. Stella laughed, but Max hadn’t meant for it to be a joke. Tears burned in her eyes and she held them back until Stella hugged her goodbye. She turned toward Nathan and forced another smile, but he wasn’t buying it.

“What’s wrong?” he asked once she was close.

Max tensed up and tried to lie. “Nothing.”


How did he know? How could he tell?

Max squeezed her eyes shut and her tears began to fall. “Th-this m-morning, I was—I wasn’t feeling —” but she didn’t finish.

Nathan pulled Max to him and pressed her head into his chest. “Jesus, Max, your heartbeat is wild,” he said softly. She’d never heard him sound this upset before. “What the hell happened?”
“I don’t know, I don’t know,” Max said quickly. She was breathing loudly and heavily and so fast and it was all so embarrassing. Fuck, she should have showered this morning. Her hair probably smelled like dirt. Oh shit, she wasn’t wearing a bra, either. This was horrible. Horrible and embarrassing. A lump formed in her throat as she buried her face in his chest. “I can’t,” she began. “I can’t.”

“Hey, it’s okay,” he said, squeezing her tighter, as if it was even possible. “It’s okay. Everything’s gonna be okay. I’m here. I’m here with you. It’s okay.”

Max closed her eyes and took him in, He was…here He was here and he was real and he wanted her to feel better. She pressed her ear to his chest and listened to his heartbeat. She focused on breathing to its rhythm. She couldn’t believe how good he felt against her, like she was meant to always be this close to him. And he smelled so, so good. He was here, and he was here for her.

And soon, Max opened her eyes. Her tears were gone and her heartbeat had slowed. Nathan had his head on hers, and she knew he was pouting. “I’m sorry, Max,” he started. “I wish there was more I could do. But I’m here for you.”

Slowly, Max pulled away, and she looked up at him, smiling. Nathan was just…he was so…

“Stop staring at me like that,” he snapped.

Max chuckled, then moved him to the side so that she could open the door. She hoisted herself into the driver’s seat and then closed the door behind her, gesturing for him to go around. He moped the whole way, then made a show of yanking open his door, then plopping down into his seat. He polled on his jacket, which was balled up in the front seat, then rested his head on Max’s shoulder. His hand was in its usual place on her thigh, and his other hand was in his lap.

“Hey Nathan,” Max asked, “are you up for drinks tonight?”

“…you want to get a drink with me?” Nathan asked. That was a very scary request. He hadn’t been drunk in a LONG time. He didn’t want to drink ever again. And now Max wanted to get a drink with him? Was she flirting with him? Max was just so nice all the time; he really couldn’t tell. And wasn’t the jail going to test his pee for drugs and other shit once he was doomed to go back to prison? He didn’t want to drink tonight. He didn’t want to drink ever. He’d made that choice the night he’d helped Mr. Jefferson take poor Kate Marsh to—

“It’s going to be the whole little gang,” Max said. “You know, me, Stella, Warren, Kate and Luke. Justin and Zach are coming, too, and Alyssa.”

Oh, fuck, this was not good. This was the opposite of good. Was there something worse than bad?

Nathan knew what he’d done to them all.

He never really had issues with Stella during school, but he more than made up for it, acting like a nightmare when he found out she’d be his therapist. He’d had plenty of therapists before her—before prison—that either ended up quitting because of how unwilling he was to work with them or they got fired by his dad when they’d get him to put his guard down. But Stella stuck around. She’d lived through sessions where he’d destroy her office just out of spite, and she’d say nothing, clean up, then use the rest of the session to try and do her job. Eventually, Nathan got tired of constantly giving Stella shit for trying to help him, and he admired how determined she was to help him get better.

But they didn’t all get happy endings.

There was Luke who…who never got along with Nathan because Nathan was, well, a jackass. And
he did not like Warren, at all, and he had no reason for it. Well, maybe there was a reason, but he wasn’t going to think about it all that much. He was always hanging around in the background, always in the way. But because Max…because her week with Chloe didn’t technically happen in Warren’s reality, Nathan couldn’t be mad that Warren beat him up because it didn’t happen. But that was personal. And what about Kate?

Oh, fuck.

KATE.

Even though Nathan’s fight with Warren didn’t happen, the thing with Kate DID. He remembered how shaky his hands were when that Hipster Wannabe Prick was handing him the roofies.

*                                                          *                                                          *

“You remember what I said, Nathan?” Jefferson asked.

“I’m not a fucking idiot, Mark,” Nathan scathed. “Drop one and a half in her drink. It’s not rocket science, asshole.”

Mark Jefferson laughed heartily. Nathan was so funny, this fake-hard act would have been convincing to anyone else, but not him. Jefferson had INVENTED acting, and soon, he’d groom Nathan to be just as good at it as he was. “Good. And if she wakes up, tell her she passed out—”

“Tell her I’m taking her to the hospital, and give her the water you gave me. Easy as pie. We done here? It’s my fucking party and, you know, I’m expected to be there,” Nathan sneered.

Mark Jefferson pat Nathan’s shoulder, then turned around to put on some gloves. “Great job. You’re doing a great job, Nathan.” A little compliment to keep Nathan loyal never hurt. Plus, when Nathan smiled, Mark Jefferson knew he still had him.

Nathan got to the arty all right, regrettably dodging a sloppy kiss from a drunken Dana, and turning it onto Victoria’s cheek once she came up and greeted him.

“Hello, best friend, took you long enough!” she giggled. Her face was red, and she was drunk. He usually didn’t mind when she was drunk, but that was only because he was usually drunk with her.

“Hey, gorgeous,” he said, greeting her with a kiss on the cheek. She leaned in for a hug, but he backed away once she got too close. He couldn’t have anyone messing this up. Not even Victoria.

“You seen Kate anywhere?”

“I literally do not fucking know why you invited her,” Victoria sneered. “She’s so shy. But she’s on the couch trying to be nice to Logan. It would be cute if she could say something mean or slap him or, or something. Why did you invite her again?”

To get creepshots for my friend Mr. Jefferson, Nathan thought. He snickered. “I just think she’s cute, Vic, that’s all.”

“Not too cute, I hope,” Victoria said. “Listen, if you’re planning on plucking THAT flower, make sure you’re a little smarter than Dana and Logan were about it.”

Nathan nodded and pinched her cheek. Victoria had such cute cheeks. He knew she hated when he did that, but she still let him do it. “Noted. Come by my dorm around three ‘kay? I’ll humor you and flirt with Courtney ‘cause Zach is going to be there. He wants to party. You down?”
Victoria giggled into her drink and turned on her heel, joining Taylor and Courtney. “Have I ever not been down?”

Nathan waved her off and turned to see Kate Marsh, sitting awkwardly next to Logan, whose disgusting hand was inching up her shimmery nude pantyhose. Poor Kate was too nice to say anything about it, but Nathan wasn’t. He walked over to the bar, where some random freshman was keeping watch, and he got a beer for himself, and some wine for Kate. Church people liked wine, right? It was the only sin that was allowed.

“Hey Logan,” Nathan shouted, once he was near the couch again. “How about you go dance with your baby mama?” It was just loud enough for the other girls glaring at Kate with jealousy to turn their eyes onto Logan, with disgust. If looks could kill, Nathan would be dead, but Kate’s smiling face was enough to bring him back to life. Logan stood and went to find some other girl to prey on, and Nathan slid in and took his spot, drinks in hand. “Thirsty?” he continued, handing her the special drink. “It’s red wine.”

“I don’t really…you know…drink,” Kate said softly, “or come to things like this. I don’t even know why I’m here.”

She suddenly made him feel like he was really, really bad at flirting. “But you’re here,” he pressed. He tried to hand her the drink again, but she waved her hand, trying to blow him off. “C’mon, it’s not poison.” He took a swig of his beer and gulped it down, then touched his lips to the edge of her cup, feigning a sip. “It’s gonna be real awkward for you if you’re planning on just watching me drink these.”

Kate laughed and covered her mouth with her hand. She was shy, but she was cute—and he wasn’t allowed to get attached. Jefferson had strict rules about the victims. Don’t ever be too available. Don’t ever touch them. Don’t let them touch you. But Kate…

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“Is…that bad?” he asked. He nervously gulped his drink. He really wasn’t supposed to be drinking, but he couldn’t help it. If he got any more nervous, he’d ruin everything—and Mr. Jefferson would hate him. He wouldn’t have that. But Kate…

“No, it’s just,” Kate paused, leaning closer, “not like you.”

Oh, shit, this was bad. Her face was completely red now, and she had a dangerously hungry look in her eye. We shouldn’t, he thought, but her lips were on his before he could say it. This was wrong. This was so fucking wrong. It was so bad and wrong but it felt so fucking right. He parted his lips, kissing her for real. He thought about his dreams. He imagined his own restaurant, or taking pictures of mountains and people and animals in black and white. He didn’t think about his father or Mr. Jefferson, and he especially didn’t think about Rachel. Nathan only thought about innocent Kate
Marsh, and how she melted away the bad in him with every kiss, and how much he fucking loved her for it.

Nathan snapped back to reality some long time later, once he realized Kate wasn’t moving. A crowd had formed and he heard people laughing. Logan, maybe Victoria.

“Yes, good job, Kate, just fucking pass out right in the middle of round two,” Victoria laughed.

He’d practically been making out with a corpse and he had no idea how long he’d been doing so. He pulled away quickly, pressing his hand onto her rips, praying to anyone who’d listen that he hadn’t killed her. He calmed once he felt her heartbeat, and he very quickly, very quietly picked her up and tried to make it look like she wasn’t passed out. He heard Victoria laugh again, and judging by the bright light in his face, she was filming him. That was fucking no-no number two: never, ever allow anyone to place you anywhere with the victim, or things could get sloppy.

He was fucking enraged. Kate was passed the fuck out. Who knew how many other guys she’d kissed while he was…incapacitated? And how much of it had Victoria caught on camera? Nathan reached up and grabbed at Victoria’s phone, only to have her move her hand away. She quickly typed something, and Nathan slung Kate’s arm over his shoulder and pushed through the crowd to try to get to Victoria.

“Victoria! Victoria Chase!” he screamed, limping after her. “What the fuck did you just do!”

“Nooooooooothing,” Victoria smiled. “Just uploaded Kate’s hot video to the net.”

Nathan’s eyes widened. “Are you fucking insane? He’s gonna have my ass if he sees that!”

“Chill, you’ve done much worse, and your dad always forgives you,” Victoria laughed.

Nathan grabbed her wrist, hard. “I’m not fucking talking about my dad!”

“Don’t fucking touch me!” Victoria screamed, pounding her fist into his chest. Her eyes were filled with tears. Oh, Christ. He did not fucking need this tonight. “We were supposed to have fun tonight and then you go and invite her so you can fuck her because Rachel isn’t here for you to follow around like she fucking farts oxygen! Fuck you ignoring my calls and texts! Fuck this friendship and fuck you, Nathan Prescott!”

Before Nathan could defend himself, Victoria was already crying to Taylor’s open arms. Instead of staying and making things worse, Nathan scooped up Kate and got the hell out of there. Nobody spoke to him as he ran out—or maybe, they did their best not to notice him—as he helped Kate into his truck. Now he was scared. How long had they been kissing? Was he still on schedule? Wait, would him being on video help with an alibi? Fuck, how much did he drink? He swerved out onto the road and sped to the barn, checking to make sure Kate was still breathing along the way. She was lying there with her skirt hiked up on her thigh, and Nathan suddenly felt sick. He couldn’t get sick now! He was like TWO MINUTES away from the barn—he couldn’t…he couldn’t. But Kate…

Nathan swerved off the road and into the dirt, with no cars and no light for miles. He needed to be alone right now. But he couldn’t because Kate was here. He opened the car door and fell out onto the ground, emptying his stomach the moment he landed. The world was too loud. Everything was spinning. Why did he do this? Why?

Because he had to. It would make Mark Jefferson proud of him. That’s all he wanted. Someone to be proud of him. He knew Vic had real love for him and Courtney was often interested in trying to get him out of his pants (rather unsuccessfully) but it wasn’t enough. They weren’t Mark Jefferson. They
didn’t love him like Mark did, right?

RIGHT?

Nathan wiped his mouth on his sleeve and slowly made his way back to his car. This was NOT the time to be having a fucking meltdown. He shouldn’t have kissed Kate. What he needed to be doing was driving to the barn and getting the praise he deserved. Kate would just have to be a casualty. He slipped into the driver’s seat and, against his will, turned to look at Kate. She was lying there, very, very still, with her hand slung over the edge of the seat. On her wrist was a bracelet with her name on it, along with a tiny golden cross. With the way she was lying, Nathan could almost see up her skirt—and he didn’t want to. He didn’t want to! He wriggled out of his jacket and threw it over her legs, very proud of himself.

It was short lived, as were most good things in his life, for a set of flashing red and blue lights and a deafening siren drained it all out of him. He must have been swerving more than he thought. But cops were no problem. Mark Jefferson said that the best way to avoid police officers was to act nice and natural. Cops were a normal part of the job, but Nathan knew Jefferson would lose his goddamn mind if he fucked up something so simple.

“Good evening, sir, I noticed you were swerving a bit back there,” the officer said. “Everything okay?”

Great, this guy didn’t know who the fuck he was. This would be even harder. “Yeah, sorry man,” Nathan said casually. “Kate got cold, so I took off my jacket to cover her. I know I should have pulled over, but she was cranky so I—”

The officer chuckled. That was a good sign. Mark Jefferson said it was a sign of trust. “All right, just pull over next time, kid. Take care.” And with that, he was off.

Nathan exhaled sharply, and once those flashing lights were out of sight, he was off.

He was waiting, STILL. Mark Jefferson didn’t let him come in until everything was done—he said it messed with his focus. It wasn’t fair. Nathan was doing all the work here! There was no reason for him to have to sit parked a block away and just wait! His phone had died and he was not prepared to be alone with his thoughts. That was a dangerous place to be—alone. There was too much to think about—

Nathan was startled by a knock on his window, and it was none other than Mark Jefferson. He had an enormous grin on his face and was holding Kate in his skinny arms. She looked pale. Oh, god, was she fucking dead? Was Jefferson gonna make him dispose of the body? He didn’t want to do that again. Once with Rachel was enough. Nathan leaned over and pushed open his door, and Mark Jefferson gently laid Kate onto the seat of the car. Again, Nathan covered her up with his jacket, and awaited further instruction.


Nathan smiled and looked away in embarrassment. He did a good job.

“Now,” Mr. Jefferson said, snapping Nathan out of it. He handed Nathan two water bottles—one with its normal lid and one with a blue lid. “You remember what to do?”

Nathan frowned. Why did Mark Jefferson always do this? Of course he knew! He hadn’t fucked this
up, yet! The clear one was for him, and the blue one was just in case Kate woke up. Nathan rolled his eyes and leaned over Kate to grab the bottles. He gulped a sip of his water, pulled the door closed, then flipped Mark Jefferson off as he pulled away.

Nathan sped down the road as Kate slowly began to stir. That was normal—as long as she didn’t wake up. Nathan slowly came to a stop as he pulled over, knowing that a shaky car was a recipe for disaster. As Nathan watched her move around in his front seat, he felt his heart skip a beat, and not in the normal fun way like it was when they were kissing earlier. He had realized, in horror, that sweet Kate Marsh was no longer wearing the pantyhose she’d had on earlier. Nathan felt fucking sick—WORSE than sick. It was for PICTURES. He was doing this for PICTURES only! Mark Jefferson said that—but this? This meant he was doing something much, much worse—and Nathan was helping him.

Nathan couldn’t get out of that fucking truck fast enough, falling onto the shoulder of the road and pushing himself away from the car with the heel of his loafers. He hung his head in his hands, failing to regulate his breathing as he broke down into a guttural sob. This was bad and it was wrong and he was doing wrong. He was helping Mr. Jefferson hurt people—and not in a way he consented to. It was all fucked up. This had to stop. It had to stop. But before Nathan could get himself together, he saw that Kate was out of the car. She was bent down in front of him, looking sick, chugging water from the bottle with the blue lid. “Sorry,” she gurgled, catching her breath. “I was just so thirsty, I didn’t mean to drink all your water.”

Nathan just stared at her, dumbfounded. How long had she been sitting there? “I-it’s your water,” he managed. “Mine is in the car.”

“I know,” Kate said, scooting next to him. “I drank that one, too.” She continued gulping down the water Mark Jefferson had left for her, completely unassuming. “I feel horrible. Where are we?”

Nathan couldn’t answer. Well, he could have, but he didn’t. Every time he opened his mouth, only laughter came out. With how much shit Mark Jefferson probably put in that bottle, Kate wasn’t going to remember this at all. And for some reason, it was funny. And even though he was laughing, it made Nathan feel like shit. He was shit. And not even Kate’s kisses could purify him.

“I’m sorry,” Nathan said, unable to catch his breath. He was laughing and crying at the same time, and it made him feel so fucking dumb. “I’m so sorry, Kate. I’m so fucking sorry.”

Kate laid her head on Nathan's shoulder, eyes closed, bottle emptied. She stuck her hand in her pocket and out popped her pantyhose. “Oh, so that’s where I put those little guys.”

Nathan was relieved. “Those little guys?” Not totally, but enough. “You took those off?”

“I did,” Kate said. “I got so hot and sweaty at the party, I went to the bathroom then took them off. And then…and you’re sorry? S-sorry for wha?”

“For…for everything. For everything that’s about to fucking happen to you. I’m sorry.”

“Nawwww, don’t be sorry,” she said. “You’re not bad. Not so bad. Naw. Nawso bad.” And then, there was the normal deafening silence. Nathan quickly wiped his tears, hooked one arm under Kate’s knees, and supported her back as he carried her limp body to the car. She was breathing softly, that was a good sign. She was alive. But it didn’t really mean anything. The damage was done. Nothing was making noise, except for Kate. Her small breaths were all that was keeping him moving right now. He got her into the car, clumsily balancing her on his knee as he reached to open
her door. He set her in the seat with more gentleness than he thought he had, and climbed over her to reach the driver’s seat. He started the car, swallowed hard, then headed back to Blackwell.

Eventually, they were back. There were no sounds. No words. Only guilt. He felt it all. Kate wasn’t the first that he’d helped Jefferson with. But…but she could have been the last. He didn’t want to search her pockets for the key to her room; he figured she’d been violated enough today. Nathan sat by Kate’s door, holding her, crying over her, wishing he hadn’t done what he’d done or helped Mark Jefferson.

“I’m sorry,” he sobbed over and over. He wished he’d known what he’d been doing. “I’m so, so sorry, Kate. For everything. I’m a fuck up. I’m sorry.” But she said nothing. He didn’t expect her to. But…it wasn’t really his fault, right? It was Mark Jefferson’s, right? No! He’d played his part! “You don’t deserve this,” Nathan cried. “And nobody will ever deserve you.” He gently laid her down by her door, and left her there.

“What, come here to tell me you’re fuckin done with me?” Nathan said.

“Hey whatever you’re angry about, go fucking throw that on somebody else. I was mean, but I wasn’t wrong,” Victoria said. “I wasn’t wrong.”

Nathan looked at her, then back to Kate. “You won’t tell anybody about this, will you?”

“That depends. What the fuck did you do to her?”

“What do you care, you don’t even fucking like her?”

“I swear to god if you—”

“I didn’t do anything to her! I just… I just…” Nathan burst into tears. “I fuck up everything. I fucked up everything. I didn’t hurt Kate. I’m sorry. I’m so fucking sorry.”

Victoria took his hand and guided him to her room. She sat in her chair and pointed to the bed, where he sat. She opened a small drawer in her desk and pulled out something small and white. “You still smoking this? Hayden gave it to me.”

“You fucking Hayden now?”

Victoria lit up, inhaled, then exhaled some time later. “Fuck you,” she chuckled. “No, he gave it to me because I helped him score. You wanna talk about this?”

“No,” Nathan said. He took the joint and took a long drag. He wanted to fix everything, but couldn’t. It wasn’t that he didn’t have the resources to do it; he was just a goddamn coward. Yeah, he wanted to go back there and punch Jefferson in his stupid face, but all Jefferson had to do was pull out his gun. Fuck that. He’d get his own fucking gun.

*                                                          *                                                          *

And the rest was history.

Nathan looked over at Max, who had an expectant look in her eye. “Uh…are you sure they want me
“there?” he asked.

Max rolled her eyes and reached to start the car. “Do you really think I’d invite you if they didn’t all want you there?”

Nathan shrugged and sat up straight in his seat. “Yeah, well, we’ll see how the night goes.” Nathan scooted closer to try to lie on her lap, but she scooted away, fast.

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” Max assured him. “I just…I haven’t showered yet today.”

“Like I give a fuck,” he said, squinting. “I didn’t either.”

“Ew!” Max teased. “So gross.”

“Well, hey, at least I remember my bra this morning,” Nathan said, producing hers out from inside his jacket. “You threw it on top of my jacket in the middle of the night and it hooked onto the tag.”

Max knew Nathan was trying to be funny, but her face was bright red. Was he saying that because of the bra, or because he could feel it? Or was it both?

Nathan realized what she was thinking. Instead of being embarrassed like Max expected, he only laughed. “Trust me, I would have known even if you DIDN’T leave the little gift on my jacket.”

Both. Of course it was both. Nathan picked up the bra off the seat between them and checked the tag. “Thirty-four B. Is that big?”

Max snatched the bra and threw it onto the floor. “Where does ‘b’ come in the alphabet?” Max asked mock-innocently.

“Um…second? Right after ‘a’?”

Max raised her eyebrows and released the emergency brake. “Exactly,’ she said, hitting the gas and turning out of the parking lot.

*                                                          *                                                          *

Nathan had just finished getting dressed after a short shower. It took him a long time to pick what he wanted to wear—which was unusual—but he eventually decided on a pair of grey pants, with a light blue button up shirt. He zipped up a pair of black boots, then slipped a thin black sweater on over his blue shirt. He wanted to roll up his sleeves a bit and button them, but he knew he couldn’t do it by himself. This would be a good excuse to go and bother Max. he wanted to wait in there while she showered, but she wouldn’t let him. It was nearly time for them to go; they wanted to get some food in before they went out and drank all night with the—Max’s—group. It was Max’s idea, and Nathan couldn’t tell if she suggested it because she wanted some alone time with him or because she planned on getting trashed that night.

Nathan tiptoed to Max’s room, trying not to make any noise and be noticed by Kristine. It wasn’t like he was mad at her or anything; he wanted to be up underneath Max, and that was all. Plus, Max never seemed to get tired of him, and if she did, she was good at hiding it, good enough at it that he had no guilt about being in her space all the time. Max was nice like that.

Nathan knocked on her door, then opened it slowly when he received no answer. Even if she was busy, she always answered him. “Max?” he called out timidly. “You in here?”

“I’m in the bathroom,” he heard, though muffled by the closed door. “Come in here.”
Nathan obliged somewhat reluctantly. He knew he and Max had gotten really close over the past year, but he didn’t think he was *quite* ready to be a stand in while she was using the bathroom. Then, he thought for a moment and laughed. He hoped he’d never see her with her pants around her ankles.

He opened the bathroom door and there was Max: a tube of mascara in one hand and a tube of lip gloss in the other. Nathan's face turned bright red, and he was thankful that Max was too distracted by her own eyelashes to really notice it. She was in a short, black, sleeveless dress with a drooping neckline, all because the back was unzipped, her bra exposed.

“Ah,” Nathan hesitated, nearly tripping over his own feet as he tried to leave the bathroom. “Sorry. I need help with my sleeves. Should I…uh…wait outside?”

Max gave him a funny look, then capped her mascara and threw it into a nearby open makeup bag. “I called you in here, didn’t I?” she reminded. She pointed to her exposed bra. “Can you zip me up? I haven’t tried on this dress before and I want to make sure it’s not about to choke me all night.”

He bit back a snarky reply, but he didn’t move to zip her up. He wanted to. He really, *really* wanted to, but he was so distracted by how pretty she looked. Her hair was pulled back into two neat braids, and Nathan suddenly realized he’d never seen her whole face before—it was always partially covered by bangs. She had a shimmery pink eyeshadow on, one that made her blue eyes sparkle, and her lips had a bit of shine. She turned and pulled her braids over her shoulders as Nathan slowly, very slowly zipped up her dress.

“Thanks,” Max said, quickly rolling up his sleeves once, then buttoning each of them before he could ask her to do it again. She walked past him and over to the bed, eager to finish dressing. Now that her dress was zipped, Nathan saw that the front went up to her neck, and the only exposed skin she had was her face along with her shoulders and arms. On the comforter of her bed was a black leather jacket, and, on top of that, Max’s purse. She gave a short, dainty spin and stopped, grinning in Nathan's direction. She pushed her bag off of her jacket and picked it up, swinging it over her shoulder. “So? How do I look?” she asked.

In a word, hot. She was in a fitted black dress, wearing a pair of patterned, burgundy tights. On her feet were a tall pair of electric blue lita boots, which made her much, MUCH taller than she actually was.

“I…like it,” Nathan said plainly. “It’s okay.”

“Okay? OKAY? You better eat those words, Nathan Prescott, because I look *amazing*.”

Nathan couldn’t help but to laugh. She was so different than the person she was in high school. Back then, she would have moved to the other side of the hallway if she saw someone glance in her direction. Now? Now she wanted them to see her. “Okay, yeah, you look great. But I like it better when I can see over the top of your head.”

Max laughed, then slipped on her jacket. He walked over and sat on the bed. She sat next to him, and rested her head on his shoulder, looking up at him. He did NOT like it when she did that. Her eyes sparkled, looking at him with something he couldn’t quite place. He didn’t like it when she looked at him like that. He couldn’t tell what she was thinking. “You know,” she started, “that sounds vaguely dirty.”

“How the HECK could that possibly—” but Nathan stopped short. He knew EXACTLY what kind of activity they’d have to be doing for him to be seeing over her head. “Jesus, Max! That’s disgusting!”
Max stood up, turned on her heel, jacket on, and walked toward the door. “Oh, please, you spend half your life in the gutter, Prescott. Not my fault you dragged me into it with you!”

Nathan glared after her for a moment, but ultimately, followed along behind her. “That is NOT going to happen, Max Caulfield. Plus, I wouldn’t want to get holes in the knees of those pretty tights.”

Max spun back around, lacing her fingers together and sweetly bringing her hands up by her cheek. “Aww, what a gentleman!” she beamed. She kept walking backwards as Nathan followed her, her purse on his shoulder and his hands in his pockets. “So, where do you want to eat?”

“I would fucking kill for a burger,” Nathan said.

“You know the only good burger place in this town,” Max said wryly.

“Oh,” Nathan realized. He’d completely forgotten that the only decent burger place in Arcadia Bay was the Two Whales Diner, and judging by the nostalgic look in her eye, Max really, really wanted to eat there. He couldn’t say no—and he didn’t want to, not with her seeming so excited. “Then… how about it? Would Joyce kick my ass out?”

“I don’t know,” Max mumbled truthfully. She wanted to tell him that everything was gonna be all sunshine and rainbows, but she didn’t know that. Circumstances and magical time travel powers aside, Nathan killed Joyce’s daughter. It had been six years since then, but Max knew the wound would be sore forever.

Nathan offered a smile. It wasn’t genuine, Max knew, but the fact that he put so much effort into making it seem real meant the world to her. He did his part by offering, and now she had to do hers by declining. “I don’t think either of us are quite ready for that. How about Rocco’s?”

It wasn’t his favorite burger place. It wasn’t because the food was bad or anything; it was because he had memories there. Nathan thought it’d be funny to pee into the fountain outside of the restaurant when he was like twelve and his dad bought Rocco’s in order to avoid a lawsuit. It sort of ended up being one of the nicest things his dad had ever done. Rocco was happy to sell and was probably enjoying his mansion in Japan—Sean Prescott paid for it. It seemed nice in retrospect, but then again, his dad probably only did it to protect the Prescott name, as if it really mattered.

“Rocco’s is fine,” Nathan said.

The drive to the restaurant was short, but it felt like forever. Max and Nathan had been getting better at talking to each other, but they’d also mastered finding contentment in silence. They’d finally realized that all either of them really wanted was the other’s company. Max drove, with Nathan’s hand in its usual place on her thigh. She liked the silence; it helped her focus. At first, driving Nathan around was difficult. He seldom wore his seatbelt, and on the rare occasion that he did, he wriggled out of it within five minutes. He always scooted over to her so he could reach her, and if he was tired, he’d rest his head on her shoulder. Cheeky and hot-headed as he seemed, Nathan was actually a very affectionate person.

“we’re here,” Max said, pulling into the parking lot.

Nathan groaned and rolled his neck around, and let out a soft “ah” when it cracked. “Good, I’m starving,” he said excitedly, reaching over her and opening her door. He playfully nudged her thigh with the palm of his hand. “Scoot! Scoot!” he shouted.

Max laughed. “Okay, hot shot, let me grab my stuff.” She reached into her purse and pulled out her
phone. She had a bunch of messages fulling up the group chat. Most were from Stella, who was the genius mom-friend behind them all who made the plans, along with a few scattered messages from the other group members. Max took her jacket and purse and hopped off of the seat, landing on her heels.

“Impressive,” Nathan laughed. He followed her out of the car and into the restaurant.

Luckily for them, two was the magic number, and they were seated almost immediately. Nathan was preoccupied with scanning his menu while Max had hers closed, having already decided.

“There’s no way you decided that fast!” Nathan shouted.

Max laughed again. “But I did. I’ve been craving a bacon cheeseburger.”

Nathan glared at her. “So you mean to tell me that out of all the gourmet burgers they have, you settled on a bacon cheeseburger?”

Max raised her brows and grinned smugly. “You can’t go wrong with the classics.”

Now Nathan was nervous. He stopped Max’s hand for the umpteenth time, both of them with their fingertips on the car keys, which were in the ignition. “Just like…five more minutes,” he panicked. “That’s all, I promise.”

Max rolled her eyes and moved her hand out from under his. “If we wait any longer, we’ll no longer be fashionably late, we’ll be asshole late, and whoever is asshole-late has to pay for all the drinks. You can wait in the car, Nathan, but I’m going in.” Max pushed down the emergency brake pedal and tossed the keys over to Nathan. “Your call.”

Nathan crosses his arms and pouted. “I’ll wait in the car.”

Max raised her eyebrows and shrugged. “Fine with me. See you later.” Max slid off of the seat and pulled her purse and jacket along with her.

“Max! Wait! Don’t leave!” Nathan cried, reaching out to her.

Max turned to face him, but she didn’t budge. “If you would like to have a conversation with me, you need to get out of the car,” she said.

Nathan didn’t like that. He didn’t like ultimatums. But he was being unfair. He couldn’t expect her to do whatever he wanted her to do and treat her like she was a pawn and not his friend. Slowly, Nathan scooted out of the car, standing face to face with her. “I’m scared, Max. I want to believe you, I really, really do, but I can’t.”

“Believe me?” Max wondered. “Believe me about what?”

“That everyone is okay with me being there. I KNOW Warren and Luke and Kate, oh god, Kate—”

“Nathan!” Max shouted, cupping his face in her hands. His face was already red with panic and it was so warm, it made her hands seem cold. His breathing was erratic, and he was doing all he could to calm down.

Nathan grit his teeth and closed his eyes under frustrated eyebrows. He gently, very gently, covered her hands with his own. “M-Max,” he managed. “I’m scared.”
“I know,” Max said. She rubbed her thumbs along his cheeks and she felt them cool. “But I’m here for you, remember? I’m here with you every step of the way. You can trust me. Trust me.”

Nathan took a deep breath and opened his eyes. After seeing Max standing there, a faint smile on her pretty face, he didn’t feel so scared anymore. Max was here. She was here for him. “Let’s…go inside.”

“Is that Max Caulfield I see over there?” Kate said sweetly, waving her over. “Nathan, too!”

Max was already flapping her hand, then she nudged Nathan in the ribs with her elbow, encouraging him to wave, too. It was weird, and it didn’t make any sense to do so because he and Kate were NOT friends, but he did so anyway.

And, much to his surprise, Kate waved again. And Luke waved, too.

As Max and Nathan worked their way through a crowd a Justine’s bar, he could see more and more of the group. There was Kate in a long-sleeved white dress and Luke, practically frozen in time. He was dressed in his usual outfit, a t-shirt, some jeans, a jacket and hat. The only thing that had changed was that he was sporting a pretty impressive beard. Next to Luke was Warren, in a Cowboy Bebop shirt, smiling at the both of them. Next to Kate was Justin, presumably wearing whatever he always wore coupled with a warm jacket. Stella was hanging on Justin’s arm, wearing a pair of fitted black shorts and a striped tank top, tucked in. Stella smiled and pat the chair next to her and Max happily sat down. Nathan said nothing to the group; he only sat on the chair next to Max, trying to make himself as unnoticeable as possible. There were still far more seats to fill, but Nathan couldn’t remember who all was coming.

“Sorry we’re late, as usual, Lyss didn’t have her shoes on,” Zach joked, coming to the table. “Holy shit, is that really Nathan Prescott? How you been, man?”

Nathan turned and stood, and he couldn’t fucking believe how HUGE Zach was. He was already tall back in high school, but now he towered over the group almost awkwardly. “Uh, hey, man,” Nathan said, standing up. He went to shake Zach’s hand, but Zach was far too excited, pulling Nathan into a hug instead.

“It’s been forever man! Did you get my letters?” Zach yelled. He put Nathan down, giving him a chance to breathe. “I know I should have visited more.”

Damn right, you should have, Nathan thought. But that wasn’t nice. That would make him not want to visit anymore. “Well, we’re visiting now,” Nathan said carefully. “And I did get your letters.” And the spelling was questionable, but Zach’s letters were heartfelt and made Nathan feel like he was really one of Zach’s closest friends.

Alyssa seemed totally unimpressed. She was wearing a yellow dress that stopped above her knee and some flat brown boots. The boots matched her now dark brown locks, which were pulled to the side in a ponytail that hung thoughtfully over her left shoulder. She sat down next to Warren, glaring in Nathan’s direction.

Great. Max lied. Alyssa did NOT want him there and she was doing a great job of showing it. While he prepared for the tongue-lashing he was sure to get, he ended up pleasantly surprised when Alyssa dropped her scowl and turned to look at him. Max was too busy gossiping with Stella to really notice. Alyssa leaned closer, so that he could hear her. She mouthed the words to him, opting not to let anyone else here, and Nathan nodded furiously, as he’d already been planning on doing what
she’d asked.

*Make sure you apologize to Kate.*

Alyssa smiled, *finally*; not really at Nathan, but it made him feel like it was for him. Zach took his seat next to Alyssa, but there were two seats left between him and Nathan.

Before Nathan could ask who else was coming, a pair of very familiar hands covered his eyes. He heard a faint “guess who” but the voice didn’t match the hands. The voice was recognizable, it was on the tip of his tongue…it kind of sounded like…like…

“Is that Josh Tobler?” Nathan said, pulling the hands down from his eyes. He turned to look over his left shoulder, and sure enough, there was Josh. But his hands were in his pockets.

“Yeah, it’s me. Plus one,” Josh grinned.

And just like that, Victoria popped out from behind Nathan, hands still in his, and smiled. “Hiiii best friend.”

Nathan shot up immediately and pulled Victoria into a tight hug. “You’re here!” he yelled. He pulled away and really looked at her. They were adults, now. Victoria was *married* now. She had started a family, and she lived in a house that she owned with that family. She had a BABY. She was a MOTHER. But on top of all that, she was his best friend. And she was here.

Nathan turned back to the group and smiled. Max was holding her camera in one hand, shaking a polaroid in the other. “Surprise!” she beamed. Nathan took his seat next to her, and Victoria came and sat down to his left, with Josh on her left.

“Sorry Taylor couldn’t make it,” Victoria frowned. “She and her mom are in Japan right now and she did NOT want to leave…”

Victoria went on with how not-jealous she was of Taylor’s trip and everyone fell into a groove of listening, that is, everyone except Nathan. It was so weird to be sitting with them all, to be having social time when soon enough, he’d go back to his cell until Arcadia Bay believed he was both sane and remorseful enough for freedom.

Remorse? Nathan was practically overflowing with it. No amount of time in jail or counseling could ever absolve him of how sorry he was. Nathan accepted that. He didn’t mind that forgiving himself was an uphill battle as long as the battle continued.

But sane? Nathan had just about given up all hope of sanity—and what was really “sane” anyway? It was relative, wasn’t it? He had a condition. *TWO* conditions! And him living; him experiencing happiness and figuring out his reality—wasn’t that his version of sanity? Sure, maybe some days everything was so overwhelming he couldn’t leave the bed. Some days nothing mattered and bathing himself was just another thing that he couldn’t do. The bad days were just that: bad. And he’d often lose hope. But slowly, very slowly, things started to matter again. Hell, he’d showered every day for the past two weeks! He brushed his teeth. He ate. He’d created his own “sane” right?

*Right?*

“Oh my GOD Nathan your hand is COLD!” Max hissed.

Nathan was very thankful that she’d said it quietly, just loud enough for him to hear.

He hadn’t noticed that his hand had somehow found its way onto her thigh. He couldn’t explain how
it always ended up there, or how much it calmed him. He was taken aback by it, probably more so than Max was. “Sorry,” he whispered to her. He was thinking on his toes now. “I didn’t think you’d feel it through your tights.”

Max gave him a funny look, then rejoined the conversation. She didn’t make him move his hand away.

Following her, Nathan rejoined the conversation as well. “Oh, how’s Courtney by the way?” Nathan chimed in. “Did she ever get over that weird crush she had on me?”

Victoria laughed so hard that if she’d had her drink, she’d have sprayed the whole table. She slipped out of her coat, revealing a very flattering, very see through red silk top. She was in a pair of fitted black pants and some flat black boots. Nathan chuckled. Even after all this time, she still got a little self conscious about how tall she was. It was very cute.

“No she did not,” Victoria laughed. “But I’m kind of surprised you didn’t ask about her sooner. You haven’t heard any of her music?”

Nathan turned to Max and said teasingly, “Nope, Max hadn’t brought me up to speed yet.”

Max looked over to Kate, then pulled out her phone.

Kate continued, “Courtney makes CDs full of love songs and is dating ANOTHER singer that looks exactly like you.”

Josh almost doubled over with laughter as Max put her phone in Nathan's face. “I think his name is ‘Nathan,’ too.”

“It is,” Alyssa joined in. “Nathan Shane.”

“He looks just like you with red hair,” Zach said.

“It’s pretty uncanny,” Warren chuckled. “Like, she really searched for you.”

Nathan was basically in shock, staring wide-eyed at his clone. And Courtney looked WAY different, too. His face stayed frozen in silent horror for a moment longer, then he looked away. “I can’t believe I have to go my whole life avoiding her and her music.”

“Speaking of music,” Justin said, “we got a new karaoke machine. It’s pretty fun watching all the drunk people think they’re Whitney Houston or some shit.”

“I’m surprised you even know who that is,” Nathan chuckled. “Since you were always blasting the same Drake album back at the dorms.”

“I only did that when I was getting laid,” Justin defended.

“So what, you were getting laid every single hour of every day?” Zach asked.

“Yeah,” Josh joined in. “By his girlfriend, Jill.” He wiggled his fingers, and all the guys joined in and laughed.

Victoria sighed. It wasn’t a disappointed sigh; it was her “Everyone’s-Attention-On-Me” sigh, and it was surprisingly effective. “As much as I’m enjoying Justin’s obliteration, this mama is thirsty. Drinks?”

“Drinks!” Everyone but Nathan answered.
Victoria pulled a writing pad and pen out of her bag and wrote down her drink, then passed them both to Nathan.

He quickly wrote down his drink, then passed the pad to Max. It got around to the entire table, and Josh was the last to write his down.

He stood up and pointed as he read. “Jesus…Long Island for Vic, Coke for Nathan—”

“Wait a minute,” Stella interrupted. She looked at Nathan, surprised. “You’re not drinking—drinking?”

Nathan had been dreading this question all night. His grip on Max’s thigh tightened and he felt a lump for min his throat. His chest was burning and no words came out. His heart was beating too fast. He couldn’t BREATHE. He couldn’t think.

But before he could go into a full-blown anxiety attack, Stella smiled and reached for him across the table. “I’m proud of you!” she sang. “You’re making a good choice!”

He was a little embarrassed that she was saying this in front of everybody, but he didn’t let it show. He was happy that Stela was proud of him.

Josh smiled warmly and continued. “Adios times two for Max—who is trying to die tonight.”

Max chuckled and flipped her braid over her shoulder. Nathan's eyes widened. Suddenly the air was hot, criminally hot all of a sudden and his face felt warm. Why was this happening?

“Hey, I was the D-D last time. I’m just making up for drinks not consumed,” she winked.

Josh went on. “Jack and coke for Stella and Justin, keeping it simple. Sprite for Kate—”

“You’re not drinking either, Katie?” Victoria asked. “You’re supposed to get all of that done before you and your fresh new husband here have kids. Don’t sneak back to it like I am,” she giggled.

If Nathan thought his face was red, he was mistaken, because Kate somehow outdid him. “That’s…um…it’s a little too late for that,” Kate said quietly. Awed, Josh sat down as Kate slowly stood up. The whole table was silent. She was wearing a knee-length white dress that made her look like a little angel. Nothing could be seen from the front, but when Kate slowly turned to the side, it was clear—small as it was, Kate’s stomach had a distinctive bump.

Victoria was already getting emotional; her eyes were brimming with tears and her breathing was wild. Nathan had never seen her like this before. Back in high school, Victoria could barely even tolerate having friends, let alone squeezing an entire human baby out of her.

“How far along?” Victoria asked. Nathan wondered if Victoria was emotional because she missed her baby. HE sure missed Natalia.

Kate smiled sweetly and sat back down. “Twenty weeks. It’s a boy.”

“Twenty weeks!” Victoria shouted. “I should have known! How the hell did you hide it that long?”

“Big bags and bigger sweaters,” Kate grinned.

“Congratulations, Kate!” Max said, walking over and hugging her. She glanced over at Stella, then Alyssa, and noticed they were both smirking. “You knew, didn’t you?”

“Yes!” Alyssa blurted. “It’s been HELL trying to talk to Juggernaut over here about it. He doesn’t
know how to be excited about kids.”

“I’m excited about you, kid,” Zach smiled, nudging Alyssa’s arm.


“No! Forget Nose Goes,” Victoria shouted. “I say the nondrinkers go together. Bye Kate, bye Nathan.”

As much as Victoria had changed, she was still the same mean girl at heart, but Nathan loved her more for it. He made eye contact with Kate, who got up nonchalantly and guided Nathan to the bar. Max followed them, knowing she’d need some liquid courage for what she wanted to do next. The three of them stood at the bar, Max almost flirting with the cute bartender and winking at Kate as she began sipping her first Adios.

“What’s in those things again?”

“I don’t really know,” Max admitted. “But I think you’d like it.”

“It’s gin,” Kate answered. “Gin, vodka, rum, tequila, blue curacao, and lemon and lime juice. Justin and Luke took a bartending class together and they dragged me along.”

“Oh,” Max said, making a sour face. “It’s good. I’m gonna go get on that Karaoke Machine.”

Max walked away, going to configure that karaoke machine, leaving Kate and Nathan to wait on Alyssa’s and Victoria’s drinks. It was awkward, just standing in between couples with a tray full of drinks. There was plenty to say, but neither of them really knew where to start. Before Nathan could, Max beat him to it once her song started.

_Pack up_

_I’m straight_

_Enough_

_Oh, say, say, say_

_Oh, say, say, say_

_Oh, say, say, say_

_Oh, say, say, say_

_Oh, say, say, say_

Max looked like she was having a great time. She was smiling, singing with all her heart, shaking her hips as she sipped her drink. She looked great and confident, and Nathan found himself mouthing the words with her as she sang.

_Wait, they don’t love you like I love you_

_Wait, they don’t love you like I love you_

Maps, wait
They don’t love you like I love you

Nathan turned back to Kate, who was looking at him with sparkling eyes.

“Kate—”

“You like Max, don’t you, Nathan Prescott?”

Nathan sighed in defeat. “I DON’T…dislike her,” Nathan said. It was the truth. It was as close to the truth as he was willing to get.

Kate just stood there, shaking her head as she grinned at him. “You better figure out how you do feel.”

Made off

Don’t stray

My kind’s yoru kind

I’ll stay the same

Pack up

Don’t stray

Oh, say, say, say

Oh, say, say, say

Pack up

Don’t stray

Oh, say, say, say

Oh, say, say, say

“Kate,” Nathan said suddenly. “I’m sorry.”

Wait! They don’t love you like I love you

She turned to him, confused, brows furrowed. “What?”

Wait! They don’t love you like I love you

“I’m sorry. For everything. I’m sorry for drugging you. For making you trust me. For kissing you and for Victoria recording it all,” Nathan continued.

“Nathan, you and Victoria—”

“I’m sorry if this brings it all back. I’m sorry for all the pain I caused, everything. You didn’t deserve it, Kate. And if…if I were a better person, I would have never let it happen to you. And—”

“Nathan, Stop,” Kate said, a little more firmly this time. “I know what you did was wrong. But I’ve moved on, and you’re a better person now. I wouldn’t have been able to move on if I didn’t believe that. It was hard, and it took time, but I forgave you.”
“I don’t deserve your forgiveness,” Nathan said.

Kate turned and leaned on the counter, and she knew it made his heart skip a beat. “That’s the funny thing about forgiveness. You don’t get to decide when you deserve it. I do.”

Nathan's face was red and he suddenly felt his throat become very dry. That was the thing about Kate. She was a beautiful person with a glowing, pure aura. She was the kind of person that everyone fell in love with, even if it was just for a second. But Nathan was lucky.

He got two seconds.

Nathan chuckled, grabbing the full tray as Kate held her sprite and like’s beer. “You’re a beautiful person, Kate.”

“Oh, stop it,” Kate said shyly.

“I meant it,” Nathan said. “you…you melt the bad in people.”

Kate laughed, spilling a little sprite from her glass as they neared the table. She didn’t really know what he meant by that, but she smiled regardless.

After all the drinks were passed out, Max returned to the table, having completed her song and drink along with it.

“Wooooow, Max, I didn’t know you could sing so well,” Stella beamed, having already downed half her drink.

“Um, I can’t,” Max giggled. She took a sip of her second drink. “I can only sing that song because when I was like…eleven, Chloe told me she was singing ‘Max,’ not ‘Maps.’ So I thought some random lady was singing a song about how much she loved me. Pretty much figured out I was bi then and there. Or maybe earlier.”

Warren laughed. “You’re bi?”

Victoria and Josh joined in. “What a shock.”

Max was confused. “Well…I mean…I’ve been with guys and girls. I thought it was obvious?”

“True, it was,” Kate said. She looked over at Alyssa knowingly.

“You’ve just never said it out loud,” Alyssa chimed in. She held up her margarita and clinked it to Max’s glass. “Happy coming out!”

“Happy coming out!” The group joined in. Max was blushing as everyone hit her glass, and Nathan thought it was adorable.

“How about some shots?” Nathan said. “Washington Apples for everyone but Kate and me. We could do Shirley Temples.”

Kate smiled and rubbed her belly. “I’m on board…NOW nose goes!”

Everyone quickly put their fingers to their noses. Max was too busy finishing off her second drink while Warren had bent down to tie his shoe.
A twinge of jealousy surged through Nathan's entire body. Warren was gonna be alone with Max. HE wanted to be alone with Max! Well, were they REALLY gonna be alone? There was the bartender, right? People around dancing, right? But why did it even matter? Nathan didn’t care. He didn’t care. Max could do whatever she wanted.

Warren and Max walked over to the bar, leaving Nathan and the others behind. He did his best to keep up with the small talk, but his mind was elsewhere. He glanced at the bar. Max was laughing at something Warren had said. What did he say? Was it a real laugh or a courtesy laugh? Did she still like him? Was she going to stop talking to Nathan? Was she going to leave?

_God, Max, please don’t leave._

“What?” Victoria asked. “Max is leaving?”

_FUCK_, Nathan thought. He didn’t mean to say that out loud. “No, she’s not,” Nathan said quickly. “I was just thinking of ah, uh, an old song. Something like ‘you don’t have to put on the red light?’”

Justine laughed. “That’s _Roxanne_, not _Maxine_,” he said.

“Right. _Roxanne_. So, uh, what were we talking about?”

Meanwhile, Nathan had completely misread what was happening between Max and Warren at the bar. They had ordered drinks, but they hadn’t yet really talked to each other. Their conversation started off awkwardly, with Warren being the one to break the ice.

“This is weird, isn’t it?” Warren chuckled.

Max finished the rest of her second adios, and didn’t turn to Warren just yet. She flagged down one of the bartenders, who was failing horribly at flirting with one of the guys sitting at the bar. “I’ll have a dirty martini. And I mean _really_ dirty. And instead of talking about the woes of being a bartender, maybe compliment his hair.” Max turned back to Warren, sipping her martini as the other bartender worked on their shots. “Maybe a little,” she said truthfully. “So…Stella and Justin, huh?”

Warren sipped his beer. “Yeah! It was kind of weird at first, but then you just kind of get used to it. We’re all good now.”

“If you don’t mind me asking…”

“It was a super amicable breakup,” Warren smiled. “He turned to Max, still laughing. “It was hilarious; Stells—Stella—was prepared for this huge blowout fight. And we’d talked about it. She was uncomfortable with how often we talked and I know she asked you to put some space between us but I didn’t think I was doing anything wrong. I missed you and our friendship, but I knew our ship had sailed. Anyway, I come home and she’s just sitting in the living room, half her stuff packed, sobbing. As soon as she saw me she was like, ‘I cheated on you.’”

“STELLA CHEATED ON YOU?” Max shouted. She couldn’t believe it. Wasn’t Stella the one who was afraid Warren was going to go outside of their relationship? What the hell, Stella? And when did this all happen? Hadn’t Stella been all salty texting her while she was on the plane to Arcadia Bay, worried that Warren was being too friendly? How did that make sense?

“She didn’t.” Warren defended her almost immediately. “She had like, texted Justin and told him whatever hat he was wearing that day looked good on him. But she did it outside of the group chat. I was scared, cause I told Alyssa I was gonna steal her and marry her like forty-seven times in the
“But on the way here,” Max said, definitely feeling just how dirty that martini was, “she was texting me about how friendly you were being with me.”

“How!” Warren laughed. “She wanted her thing with Justin to be a surprise. So sometimes we’d switch phones to see if you could tell the difference between us. I even called you Maxwell Silver Hammer like six times, but you never noticed. She and I broke up four months ago.”

Now that Max thought about it, the messages were a little different. She was so wrapped up in thinking Warren wanted to be with her and her fear over things going wrong with Nathan and Kristine while she was here in Arcadia Bay. She didn’t think about them at all. Now, Max couldn’t help but to laugh, thinking about it all. Stella was so considerate, thinking it was being sneaky texting Justin. Maybe it was. But it was good that she said something about it. Max pat Warren’s arm as she sipped her drink. “How are you feeling about the whole thing?”

Warren turned and smiled at her.

*                                                          *                                                          *

And just like that, Max was eighteen again, dancing in the gym near Trevor and Dana in her costume on Halloween. Warren was dressed as Scott Pilgrim, an easy costume, while Max was dressed up as a blue butterfly. The tragedy was still fresh, but Max was determined to have fun that night. Chloe was with her in spirit.

Warren danced over to Max somewhat shyly, waving his arms and legs until the music eventually faded into a slower song. He was nervous and it was obvious, and it made Max nervous, too, but in an exciting way. He inched his fingers to her waist hesitantly, looking up at her for silent permission. They danced together, not really paying attention to the beat of the music or anything but each other. It was their time, their time, and nobody else mattered but the two of them.

They ended up in her room eventually, Warren drunkenly hanging on Max as she giggled and shushed him for the hundredth time. Normally, she wouldn’t have been caught DEAD with a guy in her room, but seeing as how nobody objected when Trevor sneaked into Dana’s room, Max was sure things would be okay. Plus, Chloe would have thought it was cool for Max to be a little rebellious.

Warren laid down on the bed and kicked off one shoe while Max pulled off the other, cracking up at his own joke while Max rolled her eyes and tucked him in. She pulled her blue fairy-wings off and glittered showered off of her, and got all over the thin white sweater she had worn to stay arm.

“Ooh, hello,” Warren cheesed. He looked her up and down as she laughed and gave a small twirl. “Looking good, Caulfield.”

Max laughed out loud and crawled over him to the other side of the bed, against the way. “Turn on your side,” she said softly. She knew how he got when he was drunk: he was a spewer. If he was going to barf, he’d be on his side, so he wouldn’t somehow choke on his own vomit in his sleep. “You’re staying here tonight.”

“I’ve never slept in a girl’s room before. Well, I have, but I was eight, and there were four other guys there and three other girls,” he said. “I did get my first kiss that night, though.” He turned to face Max. She was so, so pretty. And shy! And at first she wouldn’t give him the time of day and now she was here, rubbing his arm and making sure he didn’t vomit and choke and die in his sleep. They
stayed like this for a while, just looking at each other and smiling. She ran her fingers through his hair, then tapped his nose.

“Nooooo, don’t DO that,” Warren said. He put his hand in his hair and fell onto his back, staring at the ceiling, praying that Max couldn’t see how red his face was.

“I’m sorry,” Max said, shrinking away. “You feeling sick?”

“No…yes…maybe?” Warren said. Max shot up to get her trash can but Warren stopped her. She looked confused. “Max, I really really wanna kiss you right now, but I’m drunk.”

Max relaxed and took a deep breath. She cocked her head to the side, amused. “Do you think you’ll still want to kiss me when you’re sober?” she asked plainly.

“Oh yes. Most definitely,” he replied eagerly.

Max poked his nose again. “Let’s wait until then.”

Warren had no idea how many hours it had been. They got to her dorm around one…he turned to the small nightstand by the door and grabbed Max’s phone. It was almost four-thirty. Three hours. His head didn’t feel all hazey anymore. He felt good, really good. He turned to Max, who was still lying there, fast asleep, in a completely different outfit that the one she he thought she’d gone to sleep in. Warren blushed. She trusted him! Or maybe she only chanced changing with him in the room because she already knew he slept like the dead.

“Max,” he whispered. She didn’t move. “Max?” he said again, just a little bit louder now. Her eyes opened and she stretched, then rolled over to look at him.

“What? What is it? Do you need the garbage can?”

“No,” Warren said. He swallowed audibly, then looked Max right in the eye, determined and brave. He pulled her up gently by her hands, and she faced him. They were both sitting cross-legged, their faces only inches apart because Warren was ready. “I’m not drunk anymore.”

And before he had the chance to kiss her, she had already kissed him.

*                                                          *                                                          *

“Oh, I feel totally fine,” Warren answered.

Max snapped herself out of her memory and tried to pay attention. “You’re not sad?”

“Oh, I am a little sad. Stella and I were close, and watching us grow apart from each other was hard. But then I got the new job and she was focused on Nathan's recovery and eventually, we there was too much space between us and neither of us were interested in trying to fix the romantic aspect of our relationship. I’ll miss her, but I think we just got too comfortable and stopped putting effort into being, like, in love.”

“You got a new job?” Max asked. He started to sound a little sad. Max didn’t want to make it any worse.

“Oh, uh, yeah,” Warren said shyly. “Well, I mean, not quite yet. But I might. I’m giving a presentation at Stanford. If they like me, I get to grade hot twenty-somethings on their theses until I

Warren laughed. “All those AP classes paid off! Now come on, Superstar, you know how Victoria gets when she has to wait.”

Max and Warren returned to their table with their drinks, careful to make sure Nathan and Kate got the right drinks. Nathan replaced his right hand on Max’s thigh, and raised his glass in Kate’s direction. “To your boy.”

“To the boy!” the group yelled.

“And Max claiming her gayness out loud,” Victoria shouted, just before downing her shot.

The rest of the group downed their drinks and continued their chatter loftily until someone came over to their table. He was young, maybe mid-twenties, and very attractive. He swaggered over to where Max was sitting and put his hand down on the table between her and Nathan, getting his hand off of her thigh and interrupting Alyssa’s story about a problem student in one fell swoop.

Alyssa glared at him. “Um…can we help you?” she asked, annoyed.

“I was just wondering if any of you lovely ladies could use a drink,” he said smugly.

Before Victoria could finish rolling up her sleeves in preparation for the tongue lashing she was about to give, Nathan burst into laughter. He looked the guy in the eye and pointed to Stella. “That’s Stella. Taken. Kate—” he pointed again, “married with a kid on the way. Alyssa—taken AND pissed that you interrupted her story on why Chris can’t have pencils anymore, Vic—married with a kid, and Max here, well, she’s with me. So are you gonna be buying drinks for us all?”

The guy swallowed hard and turned away from the table, awkwardly shuffling away as they erupted into laughter.

“I’ve never witnessed a murder before,” Warren laughed.

Max nudged Nathan with her elbow. “I’m with you, huh?”

Nathan chuckled. “It was either that or that you were a gold-star lesbian, but he wouldn’t have bought that. He was one of the miscellaneous, irrelevant seniors at Blackwell and no doubt he saw you and Warren holding pinkies or some shit all around campus.”

Josh laughed. “He was probably—what the hell? Where the hell is Victoria?”

Nathan hadn’t even noticed that she was gone. He heard a familiar guitar chord and immediately turned to face the karaoke machine, where Victoria was standing with a sneaky grin on her face. She had two microphones in her hands, and she was holding one out in Nathan's direction. She brought the other to her lips. “This song is a reminder of all the good memories I’ve had with my best friend. Come on and sing with me, best friend!”

Nathan chuckled and left the table, and the comfort of having Max nearby. He couldn’t resist Cherry Lips—it was he and Victoria’s song. They’d dance to it in her room when they were little when Victoria’s parents were fighting or when Sean was on the hunt for him to rewind time. The memory was a little bittersweet, like the song, but he liked the good parts. He walked over, grabbed the
microphone, and sang, thinking about how great Victoria was and how much she meant to him.

*Shaky feet but solid ground*

*Everyone’s on valium and there’s no one around*

*She can’t seem to find a friend in the whole of his town*

*Maybe you’re not looking or you’re only looking down*

Once Victoria and Nathan were gone, the group all turned to Max, who was sipping her martini like it was going out of style. She knew that they were going to grill her sooner or later on her living arrangements but she had the power to not be sober while it was happening. She downed her martini like it was the last thing she’d ever drink and swallowed hard, working through the burn.

“So, Max,” Stella began, “how’s it been living with Nathan?”

“I didn’t really like the morning blowjobs at first, but I think I’ve gotten used to them,” Max answered plainly.

Warren and Zach burst into laughter while Max silently berated herself. She forgot how crude she could be when she was drunk, and she was DEFINITELY drunk. Slowly Alyssa joined them in laughter while Luke, Kate, Josh, and Justin laughed quietly to themselves. Stella seemed to be the only one who didn’t understand.

“The morning—”

“I was KIDDING, Stella,” Max said. “It’s all been going pretty well. I mean, sometimes he has those nightmares and he talks in his sleep, but—”

“Wait a minute, you guys are sleeping together?” Luke blurted.

Kate swat him in the arm. “Don’t make it sound like that!” she hissed. She paused, then turned to Max. “Unless…unless it is like that?”

“It’s not,” Max defended. She hadn’t meant to reveal this much, but since Victoria and Nathan were far away, she figured she was okay. Josh knew it’d be best to spill the beans to Victoria when they were alone. Victoria was a good friend, but every once in a while, her insecurity got the better of her. Max didn’t blame her. “Nathan sleeps on the floor in my room. Says he doesn’t like to be alone. When he had nightmares, we just sit and talk until he passes out again. Is…is that weird?”

“It is only if you make it weird,” Zach laughed, taking a big, loud gulp of his light beer.

“Sounds like you guys have gotten pretty close,” Kate said, raising her eyebrow. She’d learned that from Victoria.

*But it’s almost night time*

*And you know that’s the right time to dance*

*Put your cherry on your lips and shake those sexy hips*

*Tonight’s the chance*

*Ooh to dance, yeah to dance*
“Yeah, we have,” Max said. “We pretty much just hang out, watching TV, or go hang out at the—at the mall.”

“And sometimes he cops a feel,” Justin mumbled into his jack and coke, splashing his drink onto his face as Stella pushed the bottom of his glass upward in annoyance.

“Cops…cops a feel?”

“He was touching your leg,” Josh explained. “He was really trying to stop himself from doing it, too, I don’t even think he noticed. We were all joking about it in the group chat.”

“Ooh,” Max said, realizing now. “I think it’s a comfort thing for him. I don’t know. I wish his hands weren’t so goddamn cold, though.” Max blinked slowly and leaned and rested her head on Stella’s arm. “His hands are always so cold.”

“Well, hopefully he doesn’t become a gynecologist,” Alyssa giggled, much more relaxed now that her margarita was practically gone. “What do you put in these things, Justin?”

“Horse tranquilizer for an extra kick,” he joked. “The regular, though my new bartender has a thing for tequila.”

“And dirty martinis,” Max said, smiling. Still holding onto Stella, Max looked over at Nathan. He was smiling, singing badly with Victoria and swaying to the music. He looked so happy, and it made Max happy. She wanted him to be happy. Max felt like laughing and dancing, and, after linking eyes with Victoria, knew exactly what they’d all be doing later tonight.

“He won’t even notice that you just put two pills down
Except for when you cuddle him or the way you jump around
He calls you by your last name but he thinks that it’s your first
Everyone’s in love with him but you’re just feeling worse

“You guys wanna DO something tonight?” Max asked.

“PLEASE no drunken mini-golf, again,” Zach groaned.

“Babe,” Alyssa started. “It’s time to let it go. We all warned you that that many long islands were a bad idea. It’s your own fault that you ended up in the water.”

Max and the other laughed as Zach and Alyssa argued about story details. Nathan and Victoria were finishing up the last chorus of their song, and Nathan looked eager to return to the table and join the group.

Nathan knew that everyone here knew exactly who he was and what he did, but none of them said anything. Nathan couldn’t tell if it was because they were afraid of him or they just didn’t care. With how his dad ran the town with an iron fist, he figured it was the former. It was nice to feel a little bit normal for a change but as always, it was short-lived. No matter how much time passed, or even how forgiving the people of this town could be, what he did could never be erased.

Nathan and Victoria made their way back to the table. Max was still hanging on Stella’s arm, looking up at her like she was made out of diamonds. It made Nathan a little jealous. HE wanted to feel like diamonds, too.
Max greeted him with a warm smile. Victoria quickly cozied up to Josh, her long Island Iced tea having already taken effect. Nathan sat back next to Max and almost immediately, she let go of Stella’s arm. Noticing her eyeing him, Nathan scooted a little closer to her, pulling his black sweater off over his head. Max reached out, and to his surprise, she grabbed his arm, holding it in one hand as she pat it with the other.

Nathan chuckled at her, seeing how furrowed her brows were and how hard she seemed to be concentrating. It was cute. “What are you doing?” he asked.

“Shh. Floofing,” Max said.

Warren gulped his beer and laughed. “Like you’re a pillow.”

Max rubbed his arm some more, then she laid her head against it, wrapped her arms around it, then looked up at him so innocently he felt like his heart was going to burst.

Kate, noticing the admiration growing in Nathan's eyes, hugged Luke a little closer to her. “Max can be pretty affectionate once she’s got a little liquid courage. She usually sticks to compliments but she’s warmed right up to you.”

“Yeah, she usually only cuddles up to me,” Stella whined, having emptied her glass and sampled Justin’s.

Nathan looked down at Max, eyebrows raised.

She kept her gaze on him, completely unaware of its affect. He swallowed.

Victoria rolled her eyes, very obviously annoyed about the lack of attention on her. “ANYWAY,” Victoria said. “Max and I were talking—”


“Or were you just staring at each other?” Justin asked.

Max and Victoria responded by staring at each other again, then falling into a bout of laughter.

“Staring is talking,” Victoria said. “And we wanna go out somewhere and dance.”

Nathan perked up almost immediately. He owned—well, his dad—owned practically every club in Arcadia Bay, and the ones he didn’t completely own were probably on their way there. If he gave the right look, he could get them into any place they wanted—and he KNEW where Victoria wanted to go. “I can get us into Lure,” Nathan said almost too excitedly, perking up once he’d realized what a great help he’d be.

Stella looked at him apologetically. “That’s really sweet, Nathan,” Stella said. “But half of us Lyfted here and your car only seats three while Alyssa’s seats six. We’re a seat short.”

“You, Vic, and Josh in the truck,” Max chime in, pointing at Nathan. “The rest of us squished into Alyssa’s car.”

Victoria grinned and held up her glass. Everyone who had an unfinished drink—except Nathan—all followed suit. Max, who was perfectly sloshed, held up her empty glass and mock-joined the others as they all downed their drinks. Nathan grabbed his coke halfway through and it burned as he forced
it all down. Everything seemed like it was happening so fast, his brain couldn’t keep up with all the excitement. His keys were in Josh’s hand, and he was walking arm-in-arm with Victoria, having somehow gotten separated from Max. And now, he was sitting in the car, Josh driving and Victoria in the middle, and he was not happy.

Max wasn’t much happier with her riding situation. She had made it clear rather vehemently that she would not be sitting on anyone’s lap, like she had the last time they went out for drinks. Max sat squished next to Alysssa, followed by Zach, Warren, and Justin. Stella was on Max’s lap, and Kate drove while lucky Luke got the front seat. They were all pretty smashed together, silently fuming about their seating arrangement until Stella started giggling.

“Max, did you leave your phone in your lap?” she asked.

Max was halfway out of her mind. All the passing lights were so pretty and she was with her friends and it made her so happy. “Probably,” she said.

“I think you’re getting a call,” Stella said, a little more willfully this time.

“Hello?”

Nathan exhaled. His fingers had been shaking so much as he dialed, he was afraid he’d called the wrong number. He breathed in sharply and exhaled again. She was here. thank god she was here.

“Nathan?” Max said. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, god, yes,” he whispered.

It wasn’t like he wasn’t having a fun ride with Josh—who was busy angrily arguing with his phone’s GPS—and Victoria—who was facetimeing her mom and daughter and cooing sweetly. He just wanted to make sure Max still existed. He’d gotten scared. Now that he was hearing her voice, his concern seemed silly. ‘I just wanted to talk to you. How’s the ride?’

“Well, Zach just tried to kill us all with his toxic fart,” she giggled. “And Stella is on my lap because there aren’t enough seats. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I am, I promise,” Nathan said. He gulped. “You…you look really pretty tonight, Max.”

Max blushed and grinned. “Aww, that’s so sweet, thank you! Sometimes, Nathan, you make my heart melt.”

Now Nathan was blushing. He didn’t know why he said that.

“What did he say?” Nathan heard Stella shout. “What did he say?”

“He said I looked pretty, Stella.”


“Of course, Stella,” Nathan chuckled.
While Stella and Max bickered on the other end, Nathan laughed, and soon the two cars pulled up and parked in front of Lure. Nathan opened his door and jumped out of his seat, grabbing his red jacket and slipping it on. He was eager to be out in the cool night air. He looked over at Alyssa’s car, where Stella was slowly sliding off of Max’s lap. Max unbuckled her seatbelt, then hopped out of the car, landing perfectly on her electric blue heels. She gave a small bow once she saw how impressed he was, then laughed when he rolled his eyes.

The group gathered just outside of the club, hoping that the bouncer would let them all in. Their fear was meaningless; once the bouncer saw the look on Nathan's face, he scooted aside, much to the dismay of the nearby waiting line. Nobody said anything about their anger while Nathan was still in earshot, for fear that they'd be banned from all Arcadia Bay clubs for life. They all entered the club, automatically fascinated by the music and low, sensual lighting.

“Wow,” Victoria said. “It’s—”

“What the fuck?” Nathan interrupted, squinting. He was looking over at the DJ, a very tall black guy with a faded haircut and a trimmed beard. He was turning the tables while also vaping and dancing to the music. “Is that Hayden?”

Immediately, the DJ’s eyes shot toward the group. He grinned and waved them over, and the crowd parted for them. “What is UP party people? Shit, Nate, I haven’t seen your ass in years,” he said, walking around the booth and pulling Nathan into a hug. “I almost didn’t recognize you, ‘cept for all the mean muggin’.”

Nathan smiled. Hayden was always nice to him. He was one of the few people who still wrote to Nathan, every other week. There was one time back in high school, they got high together, and they both spilled their guts. Of course, Hayden didn’t remember half of it once he’d sobered up, but it was meaningful to Nathan nonetheless.

Max took a whiff of the vapor-filled air and pulled Nathan away from it. “Hayden...is that smell what I think it is?”

Hayden grinned and took a long drag of his vape pen. “Hell yeah, Max! Dank o-g bud! Legal in Oregon! Anyways guys, I gotta get back to the gig. Ooh, and Vic, I got a song for you. It’s a little different than your usual taste but I know you’ll like it, Party Girl. Good for grinding. Called ‘Somebody’.”

Victoria grinned, flattered. She was pleased to know that Hayden remember how much she loved to dance. “Who’s it by?”

“Now hear me out before you whine about it,” he said, holding up his hand defensively. “Her name is Junglepussy.”

If laughs could kill, they’d all be dead. Victoria coughed out the most shrill, loud, screech of a laugh that could make eardrums bleed. It was her genuine laugh, and it was music to Nathan's ears. “I trust you, Hayden” Victoria said. “Josh, babe, let’s go dance.”

“ALLLLLLLLRIGHT ALRIGHT ALRIGHT!” Hayden called out over the speaker. “I got a song for all you couples tonight, get your happy asses to that dancefloor!”

Automatically, Max held out her arms and everyone in their group handed her their purses and jackets. While they dispersed to the dancefloor, Nathan led Max to the VIP section of the club, where a table was waiting for them. Nathan knew the table would be there; it was his table. If he wasn’t there, the table stayed empty.
Max sat across from Nathan at the table, and before he could freak out about not being able to plant a hand on her thigh, she reached across and held his hands. He felt calm looking at her, the red lights in the club making her blue eyes almost glow. They didn’t say anything to each other.

They didn’t need to.

*Do you want somebody?*

*Are you often dreaming of somebody?*

*Visions of my body*

*Dancing in the party, feeling naughty*

*I’m callin’ somebody*

*I’m gettin’ closer to your body*

*Do you feel my heartbeat?*

*Chemistry passing through our bodies*

“Max,” Nathan said, breathy.

“Hmm?” she asked.

He tried to speak, but no words came out. He knew what he wanted to say, but he just…he couldn’t say it. He was scared. And before he could muster up the courage to ask her what he wanted to ask her, Warren came and tapped Max’s arm.

“Hey, Max, you wanna dance?” he asked, winking, and cocking his head toward the dancefloor.

Max laughed. “Sure,” she said. “I’ll be right back, Nathan.”

“Sure,” he said quietly. “I’ll be here.”

*Oh alright, okay okay*

*One day we’ll play a new game*

*A few new ways a true flame*

*Oh alright, okay okay*

*Next day I’ll say I never hurt you again*

*Not the way your last lover*

*Tried to curve you again*

Nathan rested his chin on his open palm, sighing as Max and Warren danced through the next chorus. He’d never admit it, but Nathan was envious of Warren. He was smart, and more confident that he’d ever been at Blackwell, but most importantly, he was *nice*.

And Nathan wasn’t.
He hated seeing how well they all fit together—but at the same time, he didn’t. Victoria and Josh danced slowly, eyes locked on each other, pretending they were alone together. Kate and Luke were leaning by the bar, a wide grin on Luke’s face as he lovingly rubbed Kate’s belly. Stella and Justin joined them at the bar, Justin drinking some water while Stella caressed his cheek. Then, Zach and Alyssa sneaked a quick kiss while swaying to the beat of their own song.

Max had her back against Warren’s front, and she laughed and chatted with him as they moved together.

_They’re just friends, _Nathan thought. _Just friends._

He shouldn’t have cared, anyway.

He didn’t.

So why did it hurt?

_I wish upon a star for an afternoon with you_

_To kiss above the stars inside of an air balloon_

_My love a black dove when I fly for you_

_A crush of purple dust is in the sky for you_

_From my hush to full discussions ‘bout that ass on you_

_When I cuff it, no discussin’ what that ass gon’ do_

_I put the pass on you_

_Make it last come through_

_‘cause I usually don’t do this but I do it for you_

Max turned around and danced face-to-face with Warren, laughing at whatever he was whispering to her. Nathan couldn’t stand it.

_I gotta freeze it_

_My heart so cold ain’t got no feelings_

_So now I’m leavin’_

_Tryna get beside me you don’t need this_

Over the next chorus, Nathan just felt…weird. Why was he even here, to watch the table while they all had fun? But they were his friends, right? His friends wouldn’t use him. They were good friends, right? Why was it like this? He didn’t want to be here. He wanted to be home. He had his keys back. He could leave whenever he wanted.

_But what about Max?_

And just like that, Max rejoined him at the table, laughing into a sigh, and reached out to hold his hands again.
Nathan laughed nervously. Did she know he was planning on leaving? “Abandoned Warren somewhere?”

“What?” Max laughed quietly. “No. He wanted me to be his wingman. He’s dancing with that cute redhead that was sitting by the bar earlier.”

Nathan sighed in relief. He was glad he didn’t go. He leaned forward and held Max’s hands as tightly as he could. He wasn’t going anywhere, not as long as she was here.

*Any weather is whatever*
*Sunshine or the rain*
*Imma rub your body down*
*You won’t feel no pain*
*Let me love you how they do it*
*At the villas in Spain*
*Near the fountain where I found you*
*Wipe the tears off your face*
*I’m paintin’ the perfect picture*
*And the vision explains*
*We are art taking shape*
*Inside of one frame*
*Two hearts pouring out*
*Two cups, two brains*
*Can’t get enough of your uh, uh, sweet sugar cane*

*Are you often dreaming of somebody?*
*Are you outside your mind inside your body?*
*Do you stand in the corner of the party?*
*Just jammin’ to the rhythm of your heartbeat?*

As the final chorus of the song played, Nathan felt like he was finally ready. He looked in Max’s direction, only to see that she was no longer holding his hands at the other side of the table. She’d stood up to go talk to Hayden while he was here in his own world, alone, again. Maybe she didn’t even want to really sit with him. Maybe she just pitied him. That was probably why she—no. She was here because she cared. Max was a good person…and he knew she still felt guilty for pinning Chloe’s death on him.

Nathan didn’t even know why he was thinking about this stuff. Why was it so hard for him to just
have a good time? He wanted to have a good time, he really wanted to. But even more than that, he desperately wanted to dance with Max Caulfield. He’d never, ever in his life, had ever had to ask somebody to dance with him—girls always sort of flocked to him when he was waving around his credit cards. He didn’t know how to ask. Warren made it look so easy, and it couldn’t have really been that easy, because nothing in his life ever was.

Nathan turned his attention back to the table, startled to see Alyssa sitting there, drumming her fingers and smirking. “What are you thinking about, Nathan Prescott?”

He had to mentally tell himself not to look at Max, but he couldn’t help it. She was behind the booth, looking at something on Hayden’s computer. “Nothing,” Nathan answered. “Everything.”

Alyssa got up and stood between him and his view of Max. “Y’know, if you want to dance with her, you could just ask,” she said. Alyssa walked back over to Zach, who was eager to have her in his arms again. They looked at Nathan knowingly, then joined him at the table.

The song changed, and before Nathan could muster up the courage to ask Max to dance, here she was, taking his hands and guiding him to the dance floor.

This was so weird. He wasn’t used to not being the aggressor. When he really liked a girl, like really liked her, he’d feel himself going crazy. He’d do the most outrageous shit to get her to notice him, to get her to think about him. But Max was different. He was fairly sure he wasn’t in love with her or something complicated like that, but he had this overwhelming need for her to be proud of him. He wanted her to like him.

Max pulled him close to her, positioning his arms around her waist and resting both of her hands on his shoulder, then her head upon her hands, looking up at him.

Fuck, he hated that look. He had to force himself to hate it in fear that he’d eventually admit to her how much he liked it. She looked up at him like he was her whole world, and he could feel his heart skip a beat. He was mesmerized.

*Time stands still and then one day it’s gone*

*Where did it go?*

*Where did I go?*

*We couldn’t wait to grow old*

*But I can’t fight the feeling anymore*

*You know I tried*

*I know you tried*

*We’re still waiting to arrive*

The silence was really weird. Nathan really wanted to enjoy their moment together, but his brain just wouldn’t fucking let him.

“Are you having fun?” he asked her nervously.

“Yup,” she replied.
“How do you feel about being a wingman?”

“It happens.”

“Oh,” Nathan said, desperate to keep the conversation going. “That’s cool.”

Suddenly, Max kissed her finger, then pressed it against Nathan's lips.

He was practically in shock. “What was that for?” he rasped.

Max shrugged. “I dunno, you looked like you needed it,” she answered. “Also I want you to be quiet because I like this song.”

Nathan laughed wryly. “Oh, sorry.”

Max giggled. “That came out wrong. I don’t mind when you chat. It’s comforting. I just may not respond.”

Nathan smiled and continued wrong.

_Nineteen hours from my door to yours_

_I count the miles and all the while_

_Waiting for the sun to rise_

_But how come you can be so sure about everything when_

_I got to sleep you’re waking up?_

_Ooh, how much is enough?_

_Ooh, how can we be sure of?_

_I start our day so late in the evening_

_Ooh, how much is enough?_

Nathan swallowed, hard. He’d had so much to say, and now he was speechless. Max changed her position and wrapped her arms around his neck, and he instinctively pulled her closer to him. Really close. So close their noses were almost touching. While his heart and head whipped up into a frenzy, Max followed him and chatted while he listened in, having a silent heart attack every time she parted her lips.

_Sometimes_

_Oh, you know it feels like_

_That we’re on the same side of different coins_

_Somehow I could do more now_

_If we’ve gotta struggle_

_I want to struggle again now_
They were close. Too close. Unbearably close. But before they got too-too close; before anything
could touch, Max said a few would that Nathan would have burned into his mind forever:

“Wait. I have to pee.”

Wait.

Did she want it to continue? Nathan thought.

Max walked away, stopping by the table to grab her bag and jacket, then rushed to the bathroom,
leaving Nathan very, very confused on the dancefloor.

Max finished up in the bathroom, sighing as she pat her face with cold-water hands. She told him to
“wait.” Would she have kept going had she not felt all that alcohol about to come out?

Max sighed and swung her jacket over her shoulders and slipped her arms into the sleeves. She hung
her bag on her arm, then walked out of the bathroom and onto the dancefloor just in time to see
Warren swing and punch Nathan in the nose.

Max flew into action, leaving her buzz behind and making a beeline to where Nathan was holding
his nose and Warren was shaking his hurting hand. Max couldn’t hear Victoria’s gasps, nor could
she hear any of Stella’s shouting. She blocked out almost everything. All she could hear were the
sound of the sneakers she’d changed into and Nathan's incessant whining. She walked straight past
the group, grabbing the fronts of both Nathan's and Warren’s shirts, and yanked them both out of
Lure through the back door before any cellphone camera could potentially give Nathan's furlough an
early end.

Max kicked the back door open and let the two of them outside. She turned and pointed some ways
down a long, long sidewalk, where a curb sat. “You, sit,” she said.

Warren stayed silent and walked over to the back curb. He rubbed his sore hand and tried to calm
himself down.

Once he was far away enough, Max turned her attention back to Nathan. “What did you do?”

Nathan scowled at her, still holding one of Kate’s tissues to his nose. “Oh, thanks, Max, of course
you think that I fuckin’ started this! I can’t believe you! I didn’t do anything!”

Max gave him a glare that he would never forget. He’d never seen her this angry before. “You better
never, after this moment, ever fucking lie to me again, Nathan. Now, I’m going to ask you one last
time: what—did—you—do?”

Nathan swallowed harshly and felt himself start to sweat. He should’ve known she’d figure him out
right off the bat; he had the guilt written all over his face. He leaned up against the side of the
building, sheepishly looking down at his feet. “I said something mean,” he admitted.

“What did you say?” Max asked, a little more calmly this time.

“I don’t want to tell you,” Nathan mumbled. “You’ll get mad and leave Arcadia Bay if I do.”

“GOD DAMMIT, NATHAN!” Max screeched. She grabbed his face with both hands and made
him look at her. “I already told you, I’m not—going—anywhere! I’ll be here for you as long as you
need me!” She let go of his face. “I’ll even take a month off of work every goddamn year for the rest
of my life if I have to!” she screamed, stomping her feet and clenching her fists. “Now go back inside and say goodbye for the both of us. We’re going home. I’m going to talk to Warren.

Nathan rolled onto his other shoulder, then reluctantly walked back inside.

Max took a deep breath, then walked away from Lure and down toward where Warren was sitting. She sat down next to him and sighed. “What did he say to you?”

Warren turned his head to look at Max, and raised an eyebrow. He had a weird look on his face, like he was smiling and frowning at the same time. He shouldn’t have been surprised that she didn’t want the whole store. She probably knew how it all went down anyway. “Ah,” Warren began. “He said, ‘You’re just mad because I managed to make things work with Max and Stella.’”

Max sighed heavily and covered her eyes. They burned. “Ooh, I’m gonna kill him.”

“I really didn’t mean to hit him.” Warren said. “That, uh, that was really in bad taste. I didn’t even think about people filming us or something wild like that. That’s why you pulled us out of there so fast, right?”

“Yeaaaah.” Max said slowly. “Hopefully nobody got anything. I’m sorry he said that, Warren. I know it’s been hard for you.”

Warren smiled as Max turned to try to drag Nathan over to apologize, only to be startled by, well, Nathan himself. The rest of their group had all shuffled outside with him, with all of their things, ready to call it a night since Max and Nathan were going home. As annoying as the situation was, Max felt a little flattered.

Nathan was holding a lighter—one that Victoria always kept in her purse—and he had a cigarette behind his ear. Before Max could command him to do it, Nathan walked over and said, “Can I talk to Warren for a second?”

Max nodded and walked back over to the group. She said her good-byes and laughed as Victoria and Alyssa bickered about story details while Justin and Zach worried about how their seating arrangements were going to be. They all headed back to the front, to wait by Alyssa’s car for Warren once he was done.

Max didn’t really need to know the story, though she knew it was probably going to be discussed all night in the group chat. She made a mental note to turn off her phone. She knew how it probably went: Warren tried to make simple small talk to break the ice and try to lessen the animosity between them. Warren probably made a joke that Nathan blew up over. But man, Max was surprised Warren went so far as to punching him. That comment about her and Stella must have really hurt his feelings. Max turned to look on to make sure that Nathan and Warren were really making an effort to work things out. As her adrenaline calmed, she felt the effects of her drinks return. She smiled as Nathan and Warren shook hands, then continued looking on in horror when Nathan punched Warren in the face.

Max was livid. She was going to go off and it was going to be ugly. But, before she could, she forced herself to take a moment to collect herself, then she realized that both Nathan and Warren were laughing. Nathan reached down and helped Warren up, and already Warren’s eye was beginning to turn purple. At this point, Max couldn’t help but to laugh with them. She was too tired and drunk not to.

“I’ve had enough ass-beatings for one night,” Max commented as they all met halfway on the long sidewalk.
Warren laughed, but didn’t respond. He could see Alyssa’s car in the distance, speeding over impatiently to come and scoop him up. He gave Nathan a look, then headed off to the car.

Soon, it was just Nathan and Max, looking awkwardly at each other until Nathan grabbed his cigarette and lit it, taking in a deep drag. “You’re fucking magical, Max, you know that?”

Max smiled warmly as her face grew red and hot. “How so?” she asked.

He took another long drag. “So I apologized, right? And before I could go on he just says, ‘We should try to be friends. It’d make Max happy and I know that’s what we both want. And I’m sorry I punched you. Let’s make it even, then start fresh.’ He’s wild. Fuck. You have this amazing way of bringing people together, Max, and I fucking love that about you.”

Max smirked, but she was laughing too hard for it to make him feel embarrassed. “Nathan Prescott, are you flirting with me?”

“Shit, I don’t know. Maybe,” he smiled.

Max sighed and hooked her arm in his, and pulled him along toward the front parking lot. “I think we’ve both had enough excitement for one night. Let’s head home.”

Max giggled as Nathan struggled up the stairs, holding her over one of his shoulders. He made his way to his old room—her room—where he flopped her down onto the bed. He hovered over her for just a moment, then laughed as her crawled off of the top of her, pulling her chucks off of her feet. She kicked them off in an attempt to help him, then cozied onto her bed, burying her face into the soft pillow.

Nathan left the room, opting not to use the bathroom where he found his mom to clean his still-bloodied face. He went into the guest room—his room—bathroom, then splashed his stinging face with cold water. He inspected his injury in the mirror, smiling just to see how much it would hurt. Luckily, his nose wasn’t broken, just pretty bruised and a little swollen.

He returned to Max’s room, where she laid on the bed, hardly moving, fast asleep, from what he could tell. He laid down on the floor, rested his head onto his pillow, and tried to make himself go to sleep. He was just about out when he heard footsteps beside him, and he flipped over to see Max’s back, and she was still in the black dress. He tapped her shoulder and she turned only her head, straining to look at him over her shoulder. “What are you doing down here?” he asked.

Max flipped over and grabbed his face again with both hands. “I’m here for you. I’m not going anywhere. You’re not going to ever be alone again.”

Nathan nodded, then flipped over, smiling.

It was easier for him to get to sleep after hearing that.
Bond

Chapter Summary

Max and Nathan find themselves testing just how comfortable they should be with each other.

Chapter Notes

FORGIVE ME!!!! This chapter comes in at 38,898 words! There was so much that HAD to be done in this chapter and we're so close to the end! I have no idea when the next update will be. This chapter was NEVER supposed to be this long, but it just ended up that way. I post all updates on my Caulscott blog on tumblr. I'll post screenshots of what the word count the current chapter is at periodically up until it is finished. The direct url to all updates is caulscott-garbage.tumblr.com/tagged/update. I don't know when the next chapter will come, but I will keep you posted. This chapter is a ride from start to finish!

PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE COMMENT ON THE FIC!! I WELCOME criticisms (as long as they are constructive and not just "this sucks" or "bad writing") and I love love LOVE reading what you all think!!

***This chapter picks up RIGHT where the previous chapter left off***

“Max? Max!”

Max rolled over in her sleep, into Nathan. Nathan stayed still.

The knocking and shaking the door handle continued. “Max, please, wake up! I can’t find Nathan anywhere!”

This time, both Max’s and Nathan's eyes shot open. They shared a split-second look, hem both rushed to get up. Max turned around and Nathan quickly unzipped her dress as silently as he could. Kristine might be weird about them sleeping together, so they had to make it seem like an isolated incident.

Nathan lunged for her suitcase as Max unhooked her bra. He rummaged for a moment before pulling out a light blue t-shirt with a duck on it. He examined it for a moment, then snapped out of it when Max snatched it out of his hands and quickly pulled it over her head. “Yes!” she yelled out toward the door. “He’s in here!” Max mouthed lie down to Nathan and he quickly did as he was told. Max hiked up her dress and pulled on some shorts that had probably been on the floor all week. Nathan lied down, looking toward the edge of his old bed, his back to the door.

Max quickly ran her fingers over her braids, though she didn’t know why. Maybe she thought they were too gelled or something.
“He is? What happened? Why is the door locked?” Kristine asked, still shaking the door handle.

Max looked at the door and ran to it, tripping over Nathan's midsection along the way. He let out a loud, belabored breath and Max laid on the floor, her foot still on him, laughing. Nathan was trying to laugh, too, but he couldn’t, as Max had knocked the wind out of him. Max crawled to the door, despite her aching stomach, and unlocked it.

Kristine threw the door open, hitting Max in the eye with the handle, and Max flopped down onto the floor next to Nathan, still laughing, but now with a stinging eye. Kristine looked at them, Nathan holding his stomach and Max holding her throbbing eye.

“What happened? She asked.

Max cupped her eye, then took a deep breath so that she could speak. “Nathan had a bad dream last night. He came in and fell asleep on the floor. He probably locked the door out of habit or something. This morning, I tripped over him, and, uh, I think you gave me a black eye when you hit me with the door,” she explained. Nathan gave a thumbs-up in an attempt to corroborate her story, for he still couldn’t say a thing.

Kristine exhaled in relief and sat down on the outside of the room, looking exhausted. “I'm sorry about all of that, guys, I just get so worried.” Kristine chuckled as Nathan held another thumbs-up at her. “I just wanted to make sure you're okay. I'll leave you guys…I'm sorry, Max.” Kristine stood up and closed the door behind her.

Max scooted and flopped back by Nathan on their—his pallet-bed, covering her bruised right eye while pulling her dress down and off over her shorts. She flung the dress toward the door, then looked over at Nathan's bruised nose.

Before either of them could say anything about the other, they both started laughing again. Max clutched her burning stomach and turned to him again. He brushed her hair away from her bruised eye and she winced, so she, as gently as she could, tapped his nose and he winced.

“We're just masters of bad luck, aren't we?” Max said.

Nathan rolled onto his back, then turned his head to look at her. He saw the purple bruise growing on her eye, and he found it kind of charming. It brought out the blue in her eyes. Then, he thought about how cool purple lipstick would look on her. Then he thought about it smeared across both of their mouths and then—he stopped himself. Nathan tore his eyes away from her and forced himself to focus on the ceiling. “If I didn’t have bad luck, I wouldn’t have any at all.”

“Is it really all so bad?”

Against his better judgement, he looked over at her again. She was giving him that look, the one he hated that he liked. She just looked so innocent, so sincere, and it made him think about how he… how he wasn’t. at least, he felt like he wasn’t. He was just...

He swallowed hard. He couldn’t say anything snarky with her looking at him like that. He had to face it—he couldn’t be that way with her at all, ever. Max brought out a side of him that he barely knew existed, and he was grateful for it. “It isn’t all bad,” Nathan admitted quietly. And then, she smiled.

Holy FUCK she had such a great smile. She always looked so genuinely happy when she smiled like that. It was a smile that made it feel like she was impossible to be angry with. He’d feel bad if he got angry with her.
Nathan rolled onto his side, looking at her, then felt a weird buzz in the waistband of his pants. He knew he’d put his phone into his jacket pocket—he’d felt it slide when he’d rolled over to look at her. He rolled back onto his back and lifted his blue shirt.

Max really, really wished she hadn’t seen that much of him. But before she could marvel at him, her eyes flew to the phone in the waistband of his pants. It was HER phone. “Um…why is my phone in your underwear?”

“It is not in my underwear, clearly,” Nathan defended. He lifted his shirt just a bit more. The phone wasn’t touching his skin and he pulled it out and made a big show of cleaning it on his pant leg before handing it back to her. “I took it because that Talia lady called and you kept trying to talk to her while you were drunk. You kept getting your sneaky grubby little hands on it so I put it there. I mean it didn’t stop you but it helped. A little.”

Max was completely mortified. “Did I talk to her?”

“What did you say!” Max yelled. Nathan gave her a hurt look, and it made her calm down a little. “I’m sorry, I really don’t mean to yell, it’s just…it’s just that…me and Talia’s relationship is really complicated. She and I…you know, we have history. I shouldn’t have put that pressure on you. What did she call for?”

Nathan softened a little bit. He sat up and leaned his back against the edge of the bed. Max joined him. “She was crying. She’d called five or six times. You were really out of it, so I—”

“Drunk, Nathan. You can say I was drunk,” she interrupted.

Nathan nodded slowly as he continued. “Right. That. You got ahold of your phone during the last call, but you only told her that you were…drunk…and to talk to me. So, I did.”

That was stupid. Stupid and reckless—beyond reckless! What if she’d told Nathan something about her or what if he’d gotten jealous and said something mean? Max was just messing things up left and right. “Um…what did you…what did you guys talk about?” Max asked. She was really, trying to stay calm. Max’s filter got lost with her shyness when she drank, and she should have had more self-control. She knew better. And Max wasn’t sure if she was placing it incorrectly, but Nathan seemed…weird. Almost like he was disappointed in her. It wasn’t all that surprising—he couldn’t even say the word “drunk” in front of her.

“A date stood her up or something. It sounded like she’d been drinking, too. She was just sad, I don’t know,” Nathan said truthfully. He didn’t remember specifics, but he knew at some point, Talia thanked him for being there for her—and for Max, too. But he didn’t have to tell Max that. He hoped Max wasn’t worried. “But she was okay.” Nathan wanted that to be enough for Max, but he knew it wasn’t. she still looked expectant, like she wanted him to say or share more. He knew what she wanted. Nathan cleared his throat and slid until he was lying down. He had a soul look on his face, so Max reached out to him, and he rolled over. He was facing away from her now. He swallowed again and crossed his arms. “You should call her,” he said softly.

Max smiled at him. She knew Talia had probably said something about her, something Nathan didn’t want to repeat. She knew he was probably getting anxious again. He was getting all scared that Max was going to leave him to go make sure Talia was okay. “Thank you, Nathan.” He seemed calm, so Max rested her hand on him to reassure him. He pulled away, not in the mood to be touched, so Max rested her hand on her own thigh as she shakily dialed Talia’s number.

Talia answered on the first ring. From the sound of it, she was eating. Probably grapes and cheese, Max thought, as it was something they’d eat at her office together when Max came by to visit. She
missed those days.

She heard Talia swallow, then clear her throat. “Good morning, Party Max,” she said smugly.

Max covered her eyes and grimaced. She only called herself that when she got a little too wild. She didn’t even remember Talia calling in the first place! At some point, she knew she made a mental note to turn off her cell, but as for what happened on the car ride home, she was coming up blank. Did something happen to—no. This was just one of those times where she had one too many.

“Are you calling me that because that’s how I referred to myself last night, or do you just love to torture me?” Max asked.

Talia laughed. “Both. I figured it was appropriate. How’s your friend?”

“Which friend?”

Max could practically hear Talia rolling those beautiful eyes. “The one who answered your phone last night,” Talia clarified.

“He’s fine,” Max said. Nathan's eyes lit up and he turned to face her. “He’s here with me now,” Max finished.

Nathan suddenly looked very grave. He didn’t want Max to talk to Talia—but he knew she had to. Instead of distracting her, he laid his head down on her lap and pulled up some game on his phone so he wouldn’t be tempted to be obnoxious. He jumped a little when he felt Max’s hand in his hair, but he let her continue. It felt nice to just be here with her. Maybe Talia wasn’t so bad.


“Talia, he’s not that kind of guest. He’s the guy I told you about? Nathan?” Max reminded. “Nathan Prescott?”

Nathan's face lit up, although Max didn’t see it. He couldn’t believe she told people about him. Did she tell them she was visiting him, or that he was a jailbird and she was there to keep him in check during his thirty days of freedom?

“Ooh, him!” Talia remembered. “Yeah, okay. Come to think of it, I think I organized something for his dad, once. Literally, once. I know about Nathan. He is cute.”

“I mean, I guess,” Max acknowledged. It’d come out a lot meaner than she meant, but she could already feel her face getting red and she didn’t want to make it any worse. She’d already almost kissed Nathan while she was drunk and she was infinitely thankful that her tiny bladder stopped it.

“You guess?” Talia fired back. “Let’s make this easy: do you think he’s cute enough to see that bra you have? You know, the black one with the white-lace trim and the—”

“NO, Talia, nobody will be seeing that bra, ever, ever again,” Max blurted.

Nathan set his phone down on his stomach, then turned his full attention to Max, who was trying her damndest not to look at him. No matter how it got to that point, Nathan was DETERMINED to see that bra. But the more he thought about it, the stranger he felt. He only wanted to see it. He wasn’t thinking about what it might look like, or what Max might look like in it. He wasn’t thinking about that at all.
“I’m just teasing,” Talia giggled. She made a small ruckus, and Max recognized the sound of her trashcan closing. It was an automatic trash can, and it made a little buzz. That meant Talia was at home, not at the office. Max didn’t want to think about it. “So,” Talia said after a moment, “do you remember anything about last night?”

Max pinched the bridge of her nose. “Everything except your phone call, Talia. Did I embarrass myself?”

Talia mulled it over for a moment. She didn’t want to make Max too anxious but she loved to tease her. But was that appropriate in their current relationship? “No, surprisingly,” Talia answered, forgoing the teasing. “You very clearly told me that you were drunk, then gave the phone to your friend. You were very responsible, as always.”

Max sighed in relief. So, they actual bad decision of the night was trying to kiss Nathan—or rather, Nathan trying to kiss her. Max didn’t know who initiated it, but she knew it couldn’t happen again. “Did you still need to talk?” Max asked.

“I’d rather not relive last night,” Talia laughed. “Short version? I got stood up, got drunk, called you. But I’m doing fine now. I’ll text you later…er, would that be okay?”

“Yes, that’s fine,” Max said. “I’m sorry about all this, Talia.”

Talia laughed and sighed into the phone. Max could tell she was getting into her bed. Of all the things she missed about Talia, her bed wasn’t one of them. “You’re fine, Max. Talk to you later. Wouldn’t wanna keep your boy-toy waiting.”

“He’s not my boy toy!” Max shouted, but Talia had already hung up. She set her phone down on the floor beside her and ran her fingers through her hair.

Nathan looked up at her, brows raised, and she wanted to slap the smile off his snobby face. “What if I want to be your boy toy?”

Max lifted her legs suddenly, rolling his head off her and onto the floor. She propped herself up onto her knees and hovered over him, her hair lightly touching his face. “That position is not open and I don’t take reapplications.”

Nathan hugged his stomach as he burst into uproarious laughter. “Okay, okay,” he breathed. “I’ll work for it and then you’ll be BEGGING me to be your boy toy. And what’s this about a bra? It sounds fancy. Look at little rich kid Max, buying some nice things.”

Max crossed her arms and smirked. “The only people who get to see that bra are my boy toys. Or girl toys. Either way, not you.”

“Then I’m gonna become your boy toy and see a lot more that that bra,” Nathan resolved.

Max cringed. She was almost positive that he was doing and saying this just to be annoying, but it was weird and she felt like there was an ounce of truth to what should have been harmless flirting. It felt like they were both avoiding mentioning their almost-kiss, and she knew that wouldn’t last long. Sooner or later Nathan was going to ask about it, and she’d have to have something to say about it. She was ready to do just about anything to make sure it never came up again. “If I show you the bra, will you stop with all this boy toy stuff?”

“Holy shit you brought it with you?” Nathan said excitedly, scrambling to get off the floor. “Were you hoping somebody out here was going to see it?”
Max rolled her eyes and got off the floor with him, dragging her feet toward her suitcase. “No,” Max said. She didn’t know why she brought it with her. It was a great bra, but it wasn’t super comfortable and it didn’t offer a lot of support. The point of the bra was to look good in it for ten seconds, then get out of it as soon as possible. And that’s how it usually went. The only person who had ever seen the bra on her—along with the matching underwear, but Nathan didn’t need to know about those—was Talia, and Max wasn’t sure she wanted anyone else to see it in that setting.

Max dug through her things for a moment, feigning searching to heighten the suspense and try to get Nathan bored of wanting to see it. It would have been easier to get him to buy her a house. Once she saw him practically bursting with excitement, Max excruciatingly slowly pulled the bra out of a small, white-mesh drawstring bag. “This is it,” Max said, holding it up by the shoulder straps with her thumbs.

It was a black lace bra made up of a cute flower pattern, and it was completely see-through. It had a white-lace trim, as Talia had said, that kind of reminded Nathan of butterfly wings—and he was sure that’s what drew Max to the bra in the first place. There were also two straps that came from the middle of the bra and went up to the shoulders, most likely to add support. It was a pretty great bra, Max could tell Nathan thought so, because his neck was turning red and he swallowed, audibly. Max hoped he was imaging a supermodel or someone other than her in the bra. But he cleared that up for her.

“Put it on,” he said softly.

Max hung the bra by her hips and looked at Nathan dubiously. “Are you outside of your mind! It’s completely see-through! Are you kidding? ARE YOU KIDDING?” she reamed him.

Nathan laughed again, then collected himself once he saw that she was serious. “Look, Max, Maxine, Maxine Caulfield,’ he said, grinning every time she winced, “if I wanted to see your nipples, I would have figured out how to do that already.”

“Oh, you would have?” Max jeered, putting her arms through the straps of the bra, over her pajama shirt.

“Hell yeah,” Nathan said, walking over to her. “It would have been cake.”

She hooked the bra behind her then spun around, showing how ill it fit when it was on top of her clothes. “How so? You know I don’t take cash bribes.”

“Despite being a shithead like my old man, I am a very, very smooth-talker,” he bragged. He walked a little closer.

“Oh, yes, I’m sure many girls think you telling them about your twenty-six second piss is very impressive,” Max said, crossing her arms over her chest.

Nathan smirked, then walked over and sat down on the side of the bed. He curled his index finger, beckoning her to come closer.

“I am NOT sitting on your lap, Nathan Prescott,” Max asserted. She’d uncrossed her arms and was pointing at him accusingly.

Nathan only laughed again. He didn’t know why it all seemed so damn funny. He held his hands up, surrendering. “I just want you to come here, Max,” he said softly.

Fidgeting, Max reluctantly went and walked over to him, just far enough so that he could reach her if he wanted to.
And he definitely wanted to.

Nathan reached out and grabbed her hips, pulling her so that she was standing between his open legs. It would have been easy for him to do something, with how hungry he suddenly felt, but he didn’t want to make her uncomfortable. “There’s one thing you need to understand about me, Max Caulfield: despite being rich enough to buy this hick-town ten times over,” he said curtly, pulling her that much closer to him, “I’ve never, and will never have to use money to get someone to hop into bed with me.”

Now Max was laughing out loud, but she stopped when Nathan’s hands trailed up her shirt and onto her waist, where he gripped her a little more firmly. It wasn’t a warning, and it’s wasn’t meant to scare her, either; it was an example. Max was shaking ever so slightly, feeling an odd spark though various parts of her anatomy, but she wasn’t about to come undone at the hands of Nathan Prescott.

But before Max could wriggle away or figure out some way to retaliate, Nathan wrapped his arms around her—locking her arms to her sides—and pulled her onto the bed on top of him. His nose jabbed into her eye, and she pulled away from him. They laid on the bed next to each other, Max holding her throbbing eye as Nathan cupped his stinging nose.

“What did you do that for?” Max whined.

“I don’t know,” Nathan lied. Much to his surprise, she didn’t catch it. “I thought it would be funny.” Now that was only half true. He did think it would have been funny if only she had gotten hurt by it. Even more than that, the way her skin felt under his fingertips had made him a little too excited, and if he hadn’t snapped out of it, he knew—or maybe more than knowing, he hoped—it would have gone too far.

Max stood up and grabbed her phone from the foot of the bed, then returned to her spot next to Nathan. Immediately, she shot back up, noticing something was amiss. She looked over at Nathan, who acknowledged her with a smirk, and twirled the bra around his finger victoriously.

Max’s hands flew to her chest, as if somehow, some way, the bra was still on her. “How did you—”

“Like I said,” Nathan interrupted, pulling the bra’s strap and flinging it across the room, “very smooth.”

Max couldn’t believe it. He’d gotten the bra off without her even noticing, and she didn’t know whether she should have been panicked or seduced. As she opened her mouth to respond, she noticed a message pop up from the group chat. “Aww, crap,” she groaned. “The Peanut Gallery.”

“What?” Nathan laughed, lifting up to look at the message. “Is that the name of your chat?”

“It is, actually.” Max giggled. She scooted closer so he could see the message more clearly. “Victoria and Josh are leaving late tonight. There’s gonna be a Hangover Brunch at Kate’s place. I don’t really want to go, but I know you want to see Victoria, right?”

Sheepishly, Nathan nodded. “I don’t get to see her a lot. I’m gonna miss her.”

“I figured,” Max smiled. She pulled herself off the bed and walked to her bag. “Give me thirty minutes. Meet here when you’re showered and dressed.”

Nathan stood in a towel in front of the guest room bathroom’s mirror, trying to figure out how to style his hair. It always got a little wavy when he got it wet, and he hated it. It made him look like
one of those chubby baby angels in renaissance paintings—and he was no angel. Still, glancing at
the clock that sat some ways behind him on the nightstand, he realized he was pressed for time. He
put a dime-sized amount of gel in his hand, ran his fingers through his hair, and hoped for the best.

Nathan slipped on a pair of dark blue jeans and a dark maroon t-shirt. He pulled on his red jacket,
checked himself out in the mirror, then headed to his door.

“Max!” he called out, scrolling through some week-old article on his phone as he headed to her
room. “Max, I’m ready.” He stopped by her door and knocked, and he heard her scurry to the door.

“Hey,” she said upon opening, “help me pick a shirt.”

She was in a dark blue turtle-necked long-sleeved shirt and a pair of jeans that were so fitted Nathan
thought his head would explode. He went and sat down on the bed, while Max modeled the blue
shirt and held up a very different purple one. “Which one?”

The blue turtleneck looked good on her, but Nathan knew Max was worried about it because of
Arcadia Bay’s indecisive weather. The purple shirt was something else.

It had mesh over the shoulders and upper chest and back, but it was solid purple from the end of the
mesh down. It was cropped, but long enough so that her belly button wouldn’t show.

Max had abstained from makeup today—the earlier door incident had left a nice shade of reddish
purple on her eye that she was completely unwilling to duplicate. Her hair was pulled back into those
two pretty French braids again, and she was in her classic black and white chucks.

“I like the purple one,” Nathan said.

“Okay, good, I thought that one would look better, too,” Max said. And before either of them
noticed, Max took her shirt off and quickly slipped into the purple one. “Ready?”

Nathan didn’t dare say anything about the white-polka dot bra she was wearing. He didn’t want to
embarrass her, or worse, embarrass himself. “I’m ready.”

“Cool let’s head out.”

Nathan nodded, slipped off his jacket, and held it in front of his waist as he walked out the door.

* * *

Of all the things he and Max did together, Nathan liked the long car rides the most. It was the only
time they were really, truly alone—and Nathan appreciated it. They didn’t have to put on any fronts
or be careful about what they talked about; they could just be themselves, and Nathan didn’t feel like
himself with anyone but Max.

“Then when I tried to grabbed the bottle from her, I spilled it all over the living room carpet,” Max
laughed. “Joyce just about killed us. William tried to cover for us, too, bless his heart.”

“Shit,” Nathan laughed. “When I was that age, I’d already been arrested twice.”

Max would have slammed on the breaks of her rental car had they not been rolling down the freeway
at seventy. “What?” she shouted. “We were like twelve! What would you have possibly done that
put you in handcuffs at TWELVE?”

“I drew a giant dick on the side of the courthouse,” Nathan said nonchalantly. “So my father paid to
have it removed, the building repainted, then bought all the judges new cars. Then BOOM! Clean record. Didn’t change me, though.”

“Just how many times have you been arrested, Nathan?”

“I don’t know—seven? Maybe eight? Definitely less than ten,” he said.

Max looked at him in disbelief. “For what?”

“Lots of things. Doing drugs, selling drugs, spitting at people, public urination, fighting, stealing an oxygen tank from an old man,” Nathan paused. “I wasn’t too proud of that last one, though. I made it up to him. Paid his medical bills up until he died.”

“What an interesting life to lead,” Max commented.

“Oh, please, like you’ve never been arrested,” Nathan defended. “You’ve never gotten in trouble with the law? Not even a speeding ticket?”

Max shot a worried glance at him, then returned her eyes to the road.

“What was that?”

“What was what?” Max asked innocently.

Nathan would have hopped up onto his knees, but his seatbelt’s sudden choking stopped him. “That look! You’ve been arrested! Goody two shoes Maxine Caulfield has been arrested!”

“I wasn’t arrested!” Max shouted at him, nearly swerving into the next lane. “I almost was.”

“What! For what?”

Max looked at him gravely. He was going to have a goddamn field day with this one and if the others found out, she’d never, ever live it down. “You have to PROMISE not to tell anyone,” Max stipulated.

“Oh, come on,” Nathan said.

“I mean it, Nathan,” Max said. “I’ve never told ANYONE this before so you have to promise to keep it a secret.”

“But—”

“PROMISE, NATHAN!”

“Okay, okay! I promise not to tell anyone, god,” Nathan said. Oh, this was good. This secret HAD to be juicy.

Max took a deep breath and focused on the road. “Indecent exposure.”

Nathan rolled his eyes. “What, that’s it? Accidentally flash your ass to a bunch of middle-schoolers?”

“Is that something you did?”

“We’re not talking about me right now,” Nathan said a little too hastily. “I need details, Max.”
Max sighed and gripped the steering wheel. “It was a complete misunderstanding, okay? I was changing in the back of my car while my assistant, Annie, was driving. A bee flew in while I was topless, so I made her pull over. I ran out, screaming and crying, right as highway patrol passed by. But lucky for me, his son was a big fan. So he got an autograph, a free book—”

“And a sweet view,” Nathan smirked.

Max swat him in the arm. “I doubt he was interested,” she murmured.

“Of course he was, stupid,” Nathan said. “Everybody likes tits, Max. You and me…other people, probably. I can’t believe you freaked out that much over a bee. You just have to kill them.”

“No!” Max said, slowing to a stop in front of Kate and Luke’s place. “We have to save the bees, okay?” She put the car into park and sat for a moment trying to prepare herself. She was excited to be there, but she was exhausted from the night before. Being on good behavior was hard. As she prepared to get out of the car, her phone buzzed. “Aw,” she said.

“What is it?” Nathan asked. “Is Kate okay? Her kid?”

Max looked over and noticed the very concerned look in his eyes. “Yes, they’re fine,” Max said, leaning and resting her head on his shoulder as she answered the message. “Stella and Justin couldn’t make it, and Warren JUST canceled.”

“Maybe they’re having a threesome,” Nathan said nonchalantly.

Max tried to stifle her laughter, closing her eyes and covering her bruised face. Nathan readjusted, smiling at her while she laughed. He slipped off his seatbelt, then rested his head on top of hers. They weren’t late yet, so they just sat in silence until Max finally slipped off her own seatbelt. “Ready?”

Nathan was downright giddy as she opened the door and stepped out of the car.

Kate and Luke lived in a small neighborhood near the elementary school at which Kate taught kindergarten. The house was a pretty periwinkle with a white trim and white front door. In the front yard was a nice table with two comfortable-looking chairs, and a tiny garden where Max could smell fresh tomatoes. She stepped in front of the garden and touched the vines, and it reminded her of being far, far away from Arcadia Bay. As much as Max liked spending time with Nathan, there was something very stagnant about Arcadia Bay. Max missed being able to just pack a bag, buy a ticket, then spend a few days in Italy, unbothered and relaxing with Venetian Wine. But, even so…

Max looked back up at Nathan, who was admiring Kate’s house, walking around in her front yard. He looked so peaceful and happy, so Max sneakily grabbed her camera and snapped a picture.

He noticed the flash, but he seemed unbothered, smiling loftily to himself as Max shook the picture a bit, then put it into her bag. Before she could put her camera away, Nathan held his hand out. Max handed the bag to him so he could get the picture, then turned back to admire Kate’s hard gardening work. As Max wondered if it was getting hard for Kate to garden with her growing belly, she heard a click and turned to see Nathan smiling at a Hummingbird feeder, seemingly having taken a picture of the nearby birds. Once the picture had developed, he tried to hide it from her. “It looks like shit,” he complained.

“No, it doesn’t,” Max said. She took the picture and went to compliment it, only to realize that it wasn’t of a hummingbird at all: it was her, smiling as she touched the tomato on the vines. “Looks like shit, huh?” Max said smugly.
Nathan laughed and took the picture from her. “It's not my best work, I meant.”

Max rolled her eyes and reached for the door.

“What, we’re not gonna knock?”

Max scoffed, entering before him. “Kate’s place is home base, Nathan. The only time her door is locked is at night.”

Max and Nathan shuffled in, only for her eyes to be covered upon entry. “Sss,” she hissed. “Be careful, I had an eye-related accident this morning.”

“Don’t worry, we’re gentle,” Max heard Taylor say.

“Gentle?” said a familiar voice. “Since when have you EVER been gentle?”

“Taylor?” Max gasped, pulling the hands away from her eyes. She walked over to her with a smile and gave her a hug. “I thought you were in Japan! Like, literally yesterday!”

“Well, last night, when I was supposed to be surprising you guys, I was in Japan,” Taylor explained, “and I wasn’t all too happy about it. Plus, I was held up coordinating trying to get everyone here on time.” Taylor gestured behind Max, and she turned to see none other than Brooke and Daniel smiling at her.

Max immediately started crying as she scooted forward to give Brooke a hug. She’d thought she’d gotten used to not seeing them all the time, but she was hurt that Brooke hadn’t returned any of her calls all week. Of course Brooke had a very busy life and had business to take care of, but it wasn’t like her to go radio silent like this. Max didn’t realize how much she missed the both of them.

“Uh, Brooke, I missed Max, too,” Daniel said, breaking the awkward silence.

Brooke pulled away from Max, wiping her own tears as she laughed. “Can you blame us?” Brooke said.

Daniel rolled his eyes then leaned in to hug Max as Nathan tried to ignore the dirty looks Brooke was shooting him. They all made their way to the table, where Victoria was sitting and clutching her throbbing head, along with Luke. Kate stood up slowly and hugged everyone near her seat, too tired to do much of anything else. “You’ll have to forgive me,” Kate said. “The baby kept me up all night with his incessant whining.”

“Can he even do that yet?” Victoria asked as Josh sipped his coffee. “Josh, sweetie, I love you, but if you set that mug down anywhere but the QUIET cushion of a coaster, my head will explode.”

Kate chuckled and rubbed her belly. “No, not this baby, THAT one,” Kate said, pointing and glaring at Luke. Luke looked at her pleadingly as both Zach and Alyssa tried to avoid Kate’s gaze. Once Max and crew had joined them at the table, she looked over at them. “Did something happen after we left?”

Kate perked up and smiled. “Why yes, something DID happen. Alyssa challenged Luke to a drinking contest and, brilliantly, Zach decided to join in. So I, PREGNANT and SWOLLEN, became the designated driver. They crashed here, were barfing all night, and now they’re hungover. AND THEY DESERVE IT!” she shouted.

As they all held their heads, Victoria looked over at Kate, her eyes brimming with tears.
“Ooh, sorry Victoria,” she said. “But not you three. You guys owe me a spa day. A nice one.”

As Kate hounded them and Max and Brooke chatted, Nathan took some time to look at all the food on the table. There were tons of fresh fruits in bowls, an enormous platter of eggs and bacon, yogurt, three different juices, toast, and more than Nathan could ever eat in a day. Nathan was HUNGRY, but nobody else was eating, so he waited.

Once Max’s attention was free, Nathan took it over before Brooke could finish with Daniel and get back to her.

“Hey Max,” he whispered. “Why isn’t anyone eating?”

“Kate likes to say grace first,” Max said.

Nathan smiled to himself. Kate was a really sweet person.

Now that the tongue lashing was over, Kate was ready to make nice. “Okay,” she said, turning back to the group. “We’re all here and I’m sure we’re all very hungry. Let’s say grace.”

Everyone at the table began to join hands as Nathan sat there, watching them. Victoria took his left hand while Max held her hand out on his right. Reluctantly, Nathan took her hand, then watched as everyone closed their eyes and bowed their heads. Max had one eye open, laughing internally as she saw how confused Nathan was. She squeezed his hand so he’d look at her, then mimed closing her eyes and bowing her head. Nathan quickly did the same, then Kate started.

“Heavenly father, we thank you for this delicious meal and for allowing us to join together on this beautiful day,” she began. “All we do, we do through you. In Jesus’ name, Amen.”

“That’s it?” Victoria laughed. “You prayed for almost forty minutes at your last dinner party.”

“Yes,” Kate said, scooping some scrambled eggs onto her plate. “But last time, I wasn’t pregnant, swollen, or cranky from taking care of my three kids.” She gestured to guilty Zach, Luke, and Alyssa. They knew they deserved it, but the whole thing was so embarrassing. At some point, Zach had screamed that he wanted Alyssa to marry him because she shotgunned two beers in under a minute.

As Victoria and everyone chatted, Max excused herself to the bathroom. Nathan tried to keep up with all the chatter and questions, and he glanced at Brooke, wondering what the HELL her damage was. Why did he get a dirty look? He hadn’t spoken to Brooke in YEARS and any time they spoke before that was probably coincidental. But then, Nathan remembered what might have made her mad, but it was…it was small, right? Way back in high school, he sort of hounded her into letting him fly her drone under the threat of expulsion. He had a lot of fun flying the drone around until he totally on accident hit a tree and broke the drone. But what the fuck! He went and bought her a brand new, super expensive drone that was ten times better than the one he’d broken and all she did was whine that it wasn’t the same! Ungrateful. And as Nathan fumed in Brooke’s general direction, he suddenly realized he was fuming at no one at all, because Brooke was no longer at the table.

Nathan’s eyes darted around, trying to find someone else to glare at, then he stopped when he got to Daniel, and felt a lump forming in his throat. Daniel was another casualty of Nathan’s.

Nathan always watched Logan and some other misfit gang up on Daniel, and when he wasn’t washing down ibuprofen with Fireball, Nathan would join in, and he said some pretty horrible things. At some point, the guilt set in. Why did I say that, Nathan would think Why did I do that?
Meanwhile, Max had just finished in the bathroom. She unlocked the door, only to have it open and Brooke force herself inside. Before Max could react, Brooke had closed the door and locked it behind her. “Uh…hey, Brooke?” Max managed awkwardly.

“I’m pregnant,” Brooke blurted.

Daniel said nothing to Nathan; he offered a friendly smile as he spooned some eggs onto his and Brooke’s plates before handing the dish over to Nathan. He scooped some out onto his plate, then went to pass the bowl, but stopped abruptly. Max probably anted some eggs, too. He hurriedly scooped some eggs onto Max’s plate, then turned to Daniel and said eloquently, “I’m really sorry I called you a greasy fat fuck back at Blackwell.”

“YOU’RE WHAT?” Max gasped, falling backwards and catching herself on the edge of the bathtub. She took a breath and tried to avoid Brooke’s eyes, wondering why this was the way Brooke decided to tell her. “Did you take a pregnancy test?”

“No,” Brooke blurted. “I’ve been too freaked out! I mean, I knew I was ready to be a wife—by the way, that happened,” she interrupted herself, flashing a sizeable rock on her left ring finger.

“You and Daniel got MARRIED?” Max shouted. “And you were just gonna come in here and tell me! I thought we were friends!” Though she tried to avoid it, Max’s eyes filled with tears—she wasn’t expecting to be this hurt—beyond hurt, really, heartbroken. Brooke was one of the few people that Max had told about her powers and the alternate timelines, including the time she’d spent in the dark room with Mark Jefferson. It had all been so traumatizing and it had been incredibly difficult for Max to share it. Max had put all her trust in Brooke and she was bothered that Brooke didn’t do the same.

“Not married, engaged,” Brooke corrected. “I couldn’t tell you that over the phone, Max. That’s why I haven’t called all week; we were trying to arrange getting here so you could be the first to know, in person. But then I realized I was PREGNANT and—”

“You what? You realized you were pregnant? You know that’s not exactly how it works, right?” Max asked.

“I missed a period, Max, so I’m sure,” Brooke answered matter-of-factly.

Max pinched the bridge of her nose and sighed. This all would have been really funny, had it not all happened like this. Smart as Brooke was, she went a little crazy when she had secrets—and two was usually her limit. “When was your period supposed to come?” Max asked a little more calmly.

“Two days ago.”

“Excuse me?” Daniel said, shocked. “What did you just say?”

Aw, shit, Nathan thought. This was not good. Nathan was apologizing but Daniel wasn’t happy about it at all. Nathan was sincere, but he was always so harsh without realizing it. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, that came out wrong,” Nathan reattempted. “I’m…I’m sorry that I was such a shithead in high school. I’m sorry I wouldn’t do anything when Logan was wailing on you and I’m sorry for all those times I beat you up with him. I’m sorry for all of the shitty things I did and said and I’m sorry for
repeating them,” he finished quickly.

Daniel blinked hard, then returned to his plate. He took his napkin and opened it, then set it in his lap. Sure that no food would get on his pants, Daniel began to eat. He suddenly set his fork down very pointedly, and it made Nathan nervous. He reached for one of the coffee pots on the table. “You caused me a lot of grief back in high school, Nathan,” Daniel said totally nonchalantly, pouring coffee into his nearby mug. He took a long, long sip and continued eating while Nathan just sat there, staring, waiting anxiously for what was going to come next. Daniel was probably going to rake him over the coals and Nathan knew he deserved it.

“I wrote a letter,” Daniel said. “And I take it with me everywhere I go.”

Daniel continued eating, so Nathan followed suit, taking a hefty bite of the eggs he had on his plate. He knew he had a habit of interrupting when people were talking, so what better way was there to stop it than stuffing his face?

As Daniel continued leisurely, Nathan tried to do the same, gobbling eggs like there was no tomorrow. Eventually, he choked, then he grabbed his water glass and gulped down its contents.


“Nathan, are you okay?” Kate shouted from her end of the table.

“Kate, baby, sweetheart, glowing goddess bearing a child, please no screaming,” Victoria said. All she had on her plate was a single piece of bread and two aspirin.

Nathan waved, signaling he was okay, then pounded on his chest, trying to get his coughs out somehow. He turned to Daniel, red-faced, eyes tearing, showing no sign of wavering. “You said something about a letter?”

“Oh, right,” Daniel said, licking his lips after another sip of coffee. “I wrote it a very long time ago, back in high school. It’s pretty outdated, to be honest. I always knew what I was going to do with it, but Max changed my mind.”

“What are you going to do with it?”

“I’m going to give it to you,” Daniel said proudly.

Max really, tried her best not to laugh, but she couldn’t help it. She doubled over, earning a hurt look from Brooke. “Brooke, you’re not pregnant,” Max said confidently. Brooke was only freaking out because of stress. Her demanding job had little room for distractions—and that’s exactly what a kid was for Brooke. She was pretty sure she didn’t want kids, and even if she did, she didn’t have time for one right now. Max knew for a fact that Daniel wasn’t too thrilled with the idea of kids, either, and Brooke must have been losing her mind trying to figure out a way to tell him about her missed period.

“I am, Max,” Brooke sniffed. She took off her glasses and wiped her tearing eyes. “I know I am.”

Max sat and joined Brooke on the floor by the door. “Did you say you didn’t take a pregnancy test?”

Brooke sniffled again and wiped her nose. She rested her head on Max’s shoulder and sighed. “Not yet.”
Then, Max shot up and looked at Brooke incredulously. “Then how could you possibly know?”

“I edited a few parts of it,” Daniel said meekly, “to…to make it a little more current.” Slowly, Daniel went into his pocket and handed Nathan the letter.

It had been folded and refolded multiple times, and it was a miracle that it hadn’t completely fallen apart. The paper was stained with coffee, jelly, any food that was easy to spill, and parts of the paper had worn away completely.

Nathan swallowed hard and took the note, starting to open it before it was completely in his hand. He excused himself from the table and into the hallway, just about when his phone buzzed. He ignored it. He brought the note up to his face, open, then quickly closed it again, too afraid to see what was written inside. His hands were getting sweaty, now, and his heart was beating fast.

It was probably something mean and scathing inside, right? Nathan wasn’t sure if he wanted to see it, but he also knew that he didn’t get to decide that. Daniel didn’t want to hear all of Nathan’s shitty comments about his body and clothes, he didn’t want to live in constant fear of the next beating, and he probably wasn’t too happy about explaining all those bruises to Principal Wells, only to be told that Nathan was a model student and that it couldn’t have possibly happened. Nathan wasn’t getting out of this one. Finally, he opened the letter.

Many, many words had been scribbled out on the worn, yellowing paper, but Nathan could still make most of them out. Back when he and Victoria were in the note-passing phase, he’d learned to write other words on top of his mistakes so that Victoria wouldn’t be able to make them out. As he read the letter, he wished Daniel knew that, too:

You are a bully, Nathan Prescott. I’m sure you knew that already, though. I was gonna detail everything that happened, the bruises and the lengths you’d go to make me feel worthless—but you’ve got bruises on your hands and smears on your glass ego to remind you. Instead, I’m going to tell you a story.

Before Blackwell, life was okay. I’d always sort of been an outcast. I had all the ingredients: shy, quiet, weird—and my weight made the target on my back even bigger, especially to people like you. I was at a high school near home, before. I didn’t have any friends—and I didn’t think I needed them. I had my books, my drawings, and myself. There was name-calling here and there, but nothing that kept me up at night. Initially, I was very excited when I got accepted into the prestigious Blackwell Academy—it was going to be my fresh start, my chance to be normal and learn how to make friends. But when I got there, I genuinely believed things were going to change. But Blackwell ended up being the worst experience of my life.

You, like most people at our high school, did not know who I was—but you made sure everyone knew who you were. Your family name was plastered everywhere, a constant reminder that you owned this place. I never really settled in at Blackwell; I was too afraid to sleep half the time because I thought you’d break into my dorm room. I’ve had a lot of scary things happen, but I’d never felt fear quite like that before. After I got used to you, things were worse than ever. It started: the pushing, the punching, the comments, the petty theft. Despite how good Rachel Amber made me feel, it wasn’t enough, and I’d had enough. When you’re in a better place, having had enough is a good thing—it’s a push forward, but I wasn’t in a good place. Things are different when you’re buried in your sadness.

You probably had your own demons, but you didn’t need to use me to keep them from getting to you. Eventually, I came to my dorm one day, took an entire bottle of Tylenol PM, and waited for it all to
be over as I laid in my bed.

But then, the weirdest thing happened: fear set in. there was too much I wanted to do, and I couldn’t bear the thought of missing out on those things. I rolled over and made myself vomit into my trashcan, soon to be en route to the hospital, thanks to Warren. I’d gotten so discouraged, I’d thought suicide would…I thought it would help. You’d taken so much from me, and I didn’t know how to get it back.

Then, I met Max. She was about as social as I was: she wasn’t—but she seemed so cool. I don’t know how to explain it. She was just…she was just so nice and made me feel like I had value. I felt like a person, and I was learning how to trust again. Max ended up convincing me to go to the Vortex Club party—excuse me, the “Life Celebration” party—after Chloe and everything. That’s where I connected with Brooke, and for once, I didn’t have the looming fear of what you’d do to me. I’m free. It took me a long time to get here, but I know it counts.

I can’t believe how much has changed in so little time. There’s only two months of school left. Max, Brooke, and I have gotten really close. We’re thinking of moving in together after graduation. The cuts you made still sting, but I know they will all be scars one day, and everything will be good and right again. You can’t hurt me anymore, Nathan Prescott. And you never will. I’m certain of that.

--Daniel Dacosta

Nathan closed the letter and sat on the ground, trying to force himself to calm down. The letter was exactly what he’d expected—he’d gotten countless others exactly like it when he’d received his first batch of mail at the correctional facility. They’d all had varying degrees of nastiness, but with an odd take on what he’d done. The meaner letters always had small offenses: cutting class, stealing merchandise, knocking over garbage cans with his truck, things like that. But the other ones? They were nasty in a different way. They were so indifferent. None of them seemed happy nor sad that he was in jail; they just didn’t care. They felt nothing, and he could have gotten killed in there, and everyone would have carried on—and somehow, that was worse than anger.

But Daniel’s letter was much different than both of those letters. And Nathan wasn’t losing it over what Daniel had written; it was the message left behind when Nathan read the letter while keeping Daniel’s edits in mind:

You are the worst experience I’ve ever had. You took it all. Then I got help from Max. I don’t trust you but I believe together you will be good. I’m certain of that.

--Daniel Dacosta

As Nathan looked down at the note, his vision went blurry, and he eventually realized that he was crying. He kept trying to wipe the tears, but they just kept coming, so he let them fall. He couldn’t believe it. He rarely ever cried when he was happy. One of the other times it caught him like this was when Max had agreed to stay in Arcadia Bay for a month. Nathan knew he had more to say to Daniel, but he just couldn’t do it right now. As he wiped his eyes, his phone buzzed again. It was from Max:

911! Bathroom!! Come alone!

Max was sitting on the edge of the bathtub with Brooke only partially consolable at her side. She wanted to calm Brooke down, but she was really sort of half-assing it, nodding while Brooke was talking and offering a “that sucks” or an “oh wow” as she tried to will Nathan to pick up his pace to
the bathroom.

“We were so careful,” Brooke continued. “We always used protection if I missed a pill and I always doubled up on pills the next day!” Brooke sobbed.

Max was past the point of trying to keep it light hearted with a chuckle. “Brooke, it’s just two days late. That is perfectly normal, especially if you’re under a lot of stress.”

“Not when it comes on the same day every—single—time!” Brooke shouted.

“Brooke, listen,” Max snapped, “you will be fine. I know how it all looks right now. One time I missed a pill and when me and the guy went to do it later, the condom broke. It was a really shitty two weeks, then my period ended up being four days late. Four days! And I was freaking out, just like you, then Warren suggested a pregnancy test and boom! no kid, just a false alarm.”

Brooke’s eyes widened, as did her mouth.

“What?” Max said.

“Warren almost got you pregnant?” Brooke asked. “How could you not tell me!”

Max’s face turned completely red. “Brooke, you cannot tell Warren I told you this.” It was supposed to be a secret forever, one that they took to their graves. It was a huge ordeal when it happened, but they’d decided to keep it private for a very, very good reason.

“I can’t believe you kept this from me all these years,” Brooke screamed. The hurt in her eyes made Max’s heart ache. “You’re supposed to be one of my best friends!”

“That’s exactly why I didn’t tell you,” Max reasoned, trying to lower Brooke’s voice. “Because you’re one of my best friends.”

“Best friends don’t keep secrets from each other,” Brooke snapped coldly. “Ever.”

“It was for your own good!” Max shrieked back, flailing her arms. “What the hell was I supposed to say! ‘Hey, Brooke, I know you’re sort of seeing Daniel-ish right now, but remember the guy you REALLY liked before him—Warren? Well, funny story—firstly, I’m dating him—and we’ve gotten to the sex part of the relationship, and—whoopsie, our condom broke and I could’ve gotten PREGNANT! Isn’t that hilarious?’ I was trying not to hurt your feelings! God knows you had a lot of them, seeing as you acted like an asshole if I so much as mentioned his name!” When Max was finished, she flopped back down next to Brooke on the edge of the tub, her eye stinging, her head throbbing, and her voice coarse. “I didn’t want to hurt you. And I didn’t want to be treated like that.”

As Brooke parted her lips to respond, there was a warning knock at the door. Max unlocked it and let him in.

Nathan closed the door behind him, and leaned against it awkwardly. “Warren almost got you pregnant?”

Max stood up and jabbed a finger in his direction. “You, be quiet,” she said, her entire face red. This was just great, the ONE thing Max wanted to keep to herself would be swirling around her friend group in a matter of minutes. Brooke would have to spill the beans to Daniel, then somehow, Victoria would squeeze it out of him or Nathan. She could smell a secret from a mile away and once it was in her hands, it wasn’t safe. Before Max could swear Nathan to secrecy, she noticed that his nose was a little pinker than it was before. She would have chalked it up to swelling, had his eyes not been wet and puffy. “Have you been crying, Nathan?”
He’d heard her question, but he wasn’t listening. As much as he liked to hear about Max and her life and all the shenanigans that went on while he was in jail, this stung. He didn’t want to hear about her sex life! He didn’t want to think about her like that. He knew Max was an adult and had had multiple partners, but imagining her in a sexual setting—especially after not having touched a girl intimately in five years—was not his goddamn cup of tea. He didn’t want to imagine her in a bed with no clothes on, totally wet and ready, moaning his name as he kissed her inner thigh, beckoning him to come closer with the curling of her index finger…

And while he was in la-la land, for some reason he couldn’t figure out, the next thing out of his mouth was, “I never imagined you’d be the type to take it raw, Caulfield.”

Brooke stifled laughter as Max attempted to shut her down with a dirty look. He obviously hadn’t heard the entire story, or he wouldn’t have said it, right? “Don’t change the subject,” Max she said sternly. She crossed the room and held his face in her hands. “Are you okay?”

“Leave me alone,” Nathan whined, coming back to reality. He shook his head and pulled away from her. “I’m fine.”

“Then why were you crying?” Max asked softly. He was quiet, and Max replaced her hands on his cheeks, testing to see what she could get away with. He always started acting weird whenever she touched him, but touch was the only way she could get him to focus, so he’d just have to deal with whatever thoughts he was having until he could be honest with her without her having to guide him there.

Nathan blushed and swallowed the lump in his throat, and Brooke saw and smirked. He was mad when Brooke pulled out her phone, presumably to share what she was seeing in the group chat, but he ignored it once he concentrated on the worried look in Max’s eyes. He covered her hands with his own and tried to look as sincere as he was about to try to be. “Max, I promise it was nothing, I am okay. What’s the nine-one-one?”

Max took one of her braids and twirled it around her finger. “I need you to take the car,” she said, moving her hands to his shoulders so he’d get his head out of the gutter, “and go to that little convenience store down the street and buy a pregnancy test for Brooke.”

“Max!” Brooke hissed, eyes wide. “Way to be subtle!”

“Consider it payback for all your asshole comments about how much smarter you were than everyone back in high school,” Max sneered. “He’s doing you a favor, Brooke, and the least you could do is be thankful for it.”

Max knew Brooke only said that because she was practically hysterical, but she could still hear a trickle of malice in it. Nathan obviously wasn’t Brooke’s favorite person—and she was entitled to her anger. He’d tormented her, broke her drone, then attempted to get her another one that wasn’t even equipped with a camera, like the one she’d gotten for herself. But that was the problem: Brooke ONLY saw Nathan as Nathan Prescott: Nineteen-Year-Old Spoiled Blackwell Brat, and her husband’s abuser. She didn’t see how much he’d changed and grown, and she didn’t know that Nathan had had an apology waiting for her—and even so, Max didn’t expect Brooke to forgive him. She was a diamond-level grudge-holder and she’d be damned before she ever forgave anyone. Funny enough, Max was the exception.

“You’re right,” Brooke finally mumble begrudgingly. “I’m sorry, Nathan.”

Nathan shrugged. “No worries,” he said, then he turned his attention back to Max. “You know leaving’s gonna be impossible, right? Victoria’s gonna know instantly.”
“Make up a lie if you have to! Tell them I’m constipated and need a laxative!” Max shouted, exasperated. “I just need you to do me this favor, Nathan, please, go.” She spun him around and shuffled him out of the door. She plopped down on the edge of the tub, next to Brooke, and hung her head in her hands.

“Max, I—”

“Unless the next words out of your mouth are ‘I appreciate everything you’ve done for me today,’ you better zip those lips, sister,” Max barked.

Brooke thought for a moment, then teased, “I appreciate everything you’ve done for me, ever. I’m sorry, Max.”

“God, I’m sorry, too,” Max conceded. “Everything’s just so tense and I was so upset that you didn’t tell me about your engagement. I know you wanted to do it in person but like…I wouldn’t keep it to myself. I would have told you right away. You know that.”

“Max, I didn’t call you on purpose,” Brooke confessed. “Yes, I wanted you to know in person—and, it worked out, because you were the first to know—but Warren and I were chatting yesterday and he told me everything that happened last night and I figured you needed some time to just…to just chill. I didn’t want to get you all fired up.”

“And all this animosity toward Nathan?” Max said. It was an unfair thing to bring up. Nathan was horrible to her and she was allowed to be mad about it forever. Max wasn’t expecting Brooke to forgive him and allow him to be the best man at her wedding, but it’d be nice to have them all in the same room together without worrying about a fight.

Brooke swallowed hard. “Max, listen. I used to really hate you. Like lie in my bed and stew over it while punching a pillow type of hate you.”

“Thanks?” Max said. “What does this have to do with—”

“Let me FINISH,” Brooke said. “But then, you and I became friends. I was and still am a bajillion times smarter than you—” Brooke winked—“and I got to know you and see how great and fun you are and…and…and and maybe, aside from all the shit he caused in high school…maybe I was jealous that Nathan's had half of you for a year and now he has all of you. You know how I can get, Max. when I was talking to Warren, I was expecting to hear about how his fight with Nathan got out of hand and he went back to jail and you were coming home right away, but that didn’t happen at all. Everything that happened sounded like fun and I was really sad that we weren’t there for it. It sounded like you were doing just fine without Seattle. Without…without me. I just…I don’t want to lose you because of him.”

“Brooke, I’m not staying here,” Max said. She decided a long time ago that Arcadia Bay wasn’t her home anymore, and no amount of time spent with Nathan Prescott was going to change that. There was too much history here and everything stung so much, Max didn’t know how to deal with it all, so she didn’t. She knew that being away made it all hurt a little less, and she was barely keeping everything from flooding back in, as well some something new that she couldn’t quite place. “But, you’ll have to let me go one day, Brooke. You’re getting married.”

“I know,” Brooke said, her eyes tearing again. “I know.”

And before they could console each other, Nathan burst back in and hurriedly closed and locked the door behind him. “Hey, girls. Here’s that pregnancy test.”
“How did you get back here so fast?” Max asked suspiciously. “That wasn’t even enough time to get to the store, let alone buy an item, and return.”

“Let’s just say I got lucky, Caulfield,” Nathan smirked. He pushed himself off the door and stood in front of her, looking up and down. He’d done this dance with other girls before: he’d stand up straight, reminding them of how tall he was, while simultaneously lifting and “adjusting” his shirt, reminding them of what was underneath. It worked even against Dana Ward—who legitimately had zero interest in him—so it was bound to work on Max, who seemingly had the same amount of interest.

He was right, of course. A very faint blush washed over Max’s and she had to look away from him for a second, but she didn’t totally falter. She took a moment to regain her composure by loudly clearing her throat to remind herself exactly why she was hungry and holed-up in a bathroom with two other people. “Listen to me, Nathan Prescott: I do not have time for this. Go flaunt your pretty boy act somewhere else. Where—did—you—get—this—test?”

This time, Nathan had to look away. “Promise you won’t get mad,” he started.

Max rolled her eyes, but before she could yell at him, there was a knock at the door.

“Nathan?” Kate asked softly, “is everything okay in there?”

Nathan’s eyes darted to Brooke and he said to her very firmly, “Don’t you dare come out until you pee on that stick, you hear me?” He slipped out the door and Max turned on her heel to look at Brooke, who was stifling laughter while reaching toward the test. As Brooke situated herself on the toilet, Max unwrapped the pregnancy test, handed it to Brooke, then sat on the edge of the tub.

As Max tried to look anywhere but Brooke’s eyes, Brooke could only laugh. “So like…is this cool? Is this cool in our relationship? Are we here yet?”

“Yeah, you and Nathan both,” Max laughed.

“You watched him pee?” Brooke coughed. She set her pregnancy test on the counter and grabbed some toilet paper. “That’s weird, Max. Even for you.”

“You’re literally—never mind. And I wasn’t watching him. I was in the shower. He burst in to use the bathroom while the curtain was drawn.” Max felt it wise to leave out the part about him killing the bug and seeing her naked—even for that split second. It seemed in bad taste to tell her that now.

“And you just—like, you just let him?”

“Well, yeah,” Max murmured, realizing how weird it suddenly sounded. “He…he sometimes has these little bouts of separation anxiety. It’s gotten a little better. Before, he never would have left the bathroom if I didn’t go with him.”

“God, it sounds like babysitting,” Brooke said. “But I guess, whatever floats his boat.” She washed her hands, then pulled out her phone and started a timer. “Three minutes,” she breathed. “Three minutes.”

Max stood up and put her hands on Brooke’s shoulders. “Keep breathing,” she said, “because this is about to be the longest three minutes of your life.”

Meanwhile, Nathan was leaning against the bathroom door, trying his best to stall Kate.
“Max had an emergency,” Nathan started.

“What’s he saying?” Brooke asked, inattentively unable to tear her eyes from her phone’s timer.

“He’s telling Kate I had an emergency,” Max whispered back, her ear to the bathroom door.

“Oh, well, is she okay?” Kate asked.

“She’s fiiiiine,” Nathan said. Something about Kate’s glare told him she wasn’t convinced. “She’s crazy constipated and needed a lax—”

“A LAXATIVE?” Max blurted as she opened the door and quickly closed it behind her. “Really, Nathan? Really?”

“I was selling it!” Nathan shouted, very clearly embarrassed.

“Okay, you two and the table peanut gallery are seriously about to send me into early labor,” Kate said. She tuned and reached back behind her, trying to find the wall. Nathan immediately fell into action, taking her hand and letting her use him for support as she lowered herself to the ground. Kate closed her eyes and rubbed her bump, humming some song that Nathan knew. They sang what they knew of the lyrics together, laughing when they couldn’t fill in the missing words. Max leaned against the wall across from them, careful to be out of the way when Brooke no doubt yanked the door open.

“What does it feel like?” Nathan asked Kate, gesturing toward her belly. “Can you feel it yet?”

“Yeah,” Kate replied. She smiled and stretched out her legs, her foot tapping Max’s knee. “It feels like popcorn popping in your stomach.”

Nathan couldn’t imagine how that felt. He bent down next to Kate, totally beaming, and Max couldn’t help but smile at how cute he was. Nathan had never shown interest in things like this. When Max really thought about it, she mostly knew Nathan on a surface level. Sure, she knew about his past and a few of his hobbies and how to calm him down when he was feeling anxious, but sometimes, when she looked into his eyes, all she saw was…him. The eyes, the hair, the always-angry eyebrows, but nothing more—nothing deeper. He’d locked that away.

Nathan looked at Kate with his hand outstretched, asking for silent permission, and Kate nodded. Carefully, Nathan pressed his hand against her stomach and closed his eyes. Kate shot Max an “Is this for real?” look and Max only shrugged. The whole thing was a little…

The thing was, everyone who knew Nathan was married to the idea that Nathan was evil—and some of it was pretty justifiable. Nathan was the unofficial law of Blackwell and he made sure everybody knew it. The trauma he’d put people through even before what had transpired with Mark Jefferson hadn’t been pacified by his jail time and he’d have amends to make once he was free.

But what most people didn’t realize was that Nathan had changed. He’d made real progress and growth and soon enough, he’d be able to show everyone how sincere he was.

“Did you and Luke pick out a name yet?” Nathan asked, eyes still closed. He was concentrating hard
and trying to be calm, but both Kate and Max saw right through it: the baby hadn’t moved for him yet, and he was disappointed. He seemed determined to make it happen, though, because he stayed perfectly still and didn’t make a single sound. It was then, Max realized, that he probably hadn’t felt a baby kick since Natalia.

Kate smiled at him and covered his hand with her own, readjusting so Nathan could get a better feel. “I like ‘Christian,’ but Luke thought it was ‘too much.’ Can you believe that? It’s not like I said I wanted to name him ‘Jesus of Nazareth.’ Plus, Luke wants to name him after some alien in a video game from like, two-thousand seven.”

Before Nathan could guess the name, he felt something under the center of his palm. Eyes wide, he looked over at Kate, who was still, as always, smiling sweetly. He opened his mouth to speak, but Brooke interrupted, throwing open the bathroom door and screamed, “IT’S NEGATIVE!”

This prompted Victoria’s wailing form the table, followed by whining from Luke, Alyssa, and Zach. By the sound of it, Taylor threw her fork down as she grumbled about Victoria being a drama queen. Max heard Daniel’s nervous clearing of his throat, which meant he was probably on his way over to them.

Blinded by utter joy and relief, Brooke made a beeline toward Nathan with puckered lips. Daniel walked in just in time to seen Nathan duck out of Brooke’s path, which took her lips to Kate’s instead. At this point, the table crew had all filed into the bathroom hallway, and everyone was yelling at someone about something—Kate to Brooke, Nathan at Max, Taylor and Victoria, and the painful throbbing disaster grown in Alyssa’s head made her decide that she’d had enough.

Lucky for Alyssa, she was used to her rowdy fourth-grade class, so she’d kept a whistle on her everywhere she went. Alyssa blew her whistle as loud as she could, silencing the room as she held her index finger to her lips. She took a deep breath, quickly reached into Zach’s front pocket, and pulled out a small pill bottle. She opened it and said very sternly, very quietly, “This is ibuprofen. Hangover crew, take two.”

One by one, they went up to Alyssa, as did Max, who was giggling the entire way there. As Max opened her hand, Alyssa snatched the bottle away. “Go sit on the edge of the bathtub, asshole.”

Max chuckled as she walked to her “time out” spot. Nathan shot Victoria a look, questioning Alyssa’s harsh insult, and Victoria whispered, “Max doesn’t get hangovers. Ever.”

Alyssa dry-swallowed her ibuprofen while the others took turns at the bathroom sink. Max was granted permission to return from bathroom exile, so long as she stayed quiet. “Now,” Alyssa. “By raising your hand, would someone PLEASE tell me why four are playing around in the bathroom instead of enjoying this wonderful meal that Kate made?”

“Kate was—” Zach started.

“Zachary, go sit on the edge of the bathtub,” Alyssa said, rolling her eyes at him.

“What did I even do!” Zach whined, stepping over everyone to get to time out.

Alyssa pinched the bridge of her nose, then shouted at him, “You were half-asleep sitting next to me in the dining room the entire time! And you didn’t raise—your—god—damn—hand—sorry Kate.”

After she was calm, Alyssa continued, “Well?”

Brooke raised her hand, then waited to be called on to speak. “Max went to the bathroom to genuinely use it. I waited until she was finished and had unlocked the door so I could come in and
“Is that it?” Alyssa sighed.

“I was…I was afraid I was pregnant,” Brooke admitted, looking to Daniel for his reaction. Daniel’s eyes were wide, but there was something reassuring in Brooke’s eyes that made him feel calm. Brooke knew there was more to say, but she was far too embarrassed.

“Can one of you please tell me the full story?” Alyssa asked. “I’m losing my head here. I’m hungover, I’m cranky, I’m hungry…”

Max and Nathan both raised their hands and Alyssa gestured to Nathan, who had the floor. “That’s all true,” Nathan said. “I left the table, and Max texted me, telling me to come to the bathroom. She tells me Brooke needs a pregnancy test when I get there, so she tells me to go buy one, but I didn’t feel like going through all that trouble,” he said, looking mighty guilty. “So…so I sneaked upstairs to Kate and Luke’s bathroom to see if there was like, an extra pregnancy test—and I got lucky cause there WAS—but Kate caught me heading down the stairs and followed me to the bathroom.”

“Then I took the test, and it was negative, okay?” Brooke snapped. “So then I got excited, ran out of the bathroom screaming, then kissed Kate. I’m really sorry, Kate. I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry too, Kate,” Nathan said. “I also looked in the baby’s room, I’m sorry.”

Kate said nothing. She scanned the room, nothing everyone’s face, then threw her head back in laughter. She laughed until she cried, clawing at Nathan and Alyssa, who both rushed to help her up. Everyone just sort of sat and stared awkwardly until Kate finished. “I’m sorry guys,” Kate said, wiping her tears. “It’s just…I’m exhausted. I’ve been up since I-don’t-know-when, I’m nearly twenty-one weeks pregnant so my bladder is all squished up into my ribs so I’m probably peeing myself a little bit right now, and to top it all off, we were originally planning to do a baby name reveal but we didn’t, because I want to name the baby Christian Liam or Liam Christian Parker, but Luke has very strong feelings about how I vetoed his pitched name: Garrus—Shepard—Parker.”

“I FUCKING KNEW IT! I KNEW YOU WERE INTO THAT ALIEN-FUCKING GAME!” Nathan shouted, shooting up and pointing his finger at Luke’s face. “You would play it in your room all—fucking—night, and keep up half the dorms!”

“I didn’t keep everyone up all night,” Luke defended. “You did, screaming all night playing Deadpool.”

“At least the games I played were from that year, Parker,” Nathan said. “Mass Effect’s graphics looked like shit back in twenty-thirteen!”

“Wait,” Luke paused, ready to finally get the answers to a question he’d had for a long time. “You played those games?”

Nathan glared at him. “Of course I did. For Jack, duh! She wore a fucking nipple-cover, dude, and she was mean. I was into that.”

“Did you buy the games?” Luke asked hoarsely.

“No,” Nathan said carefully. “I may have…uh…borrowed them from your dorm and snapped the disk for the third game because of the ending.”

“I KNEW THAT WAS YOU!” Luke shouted, heated. “And you denied it! You denied it all the time!”
“I bought you a new one,” Nathan defended himself, proudly straightening his posture and crossing his arms.

“I didn’t want a new one, I wanted the one I had,” Luke said. “The one you broke was a special edition—and the one you replaced it with was not, first of all—and it was a gift. A special gift.”

“From who?” Nathan asked, suddenly interested.

Kate started to laugh and walked over to Luke and put her hand on his shoulder. “It was from me,” Kate laughed. “Luke was bullied constantly at Blackwell. He was having a really tough time—and so was I—and I had a small prayer group I went to, so I invited him to come to group to lift his spirits. After prayer, we went to get some tea and he was telling me about some video game he wanted—Dead Space three. I thought it’d be nice to get it for him as a gift.

“Before I came back to my dorm, I went to that old store in town, Gamerage, but I had no idea what I was doing—I didn’t even know what console the game was even played on, and I couldn’t remember the name. All I could remember was “three,” so I ended up getting him the Mass Effect trilogy because they had all these “all three games!” stickers on the front. I was so proud of myself; Dead Space three was still fifty dollars and I thought I’d gotten it for a bargain at twenty. He opened the gift and was noticeably surprised, but he played it off like it was the game he wanted. It was very sweet,” Kate finished. “It’s the story I’ll be telling…Liam Garrus, one day?”

Luke looked over at Kate and smiled. “Yes, it’s the story we’ll be telling Liam Thane, someday.” When Luke had first projected the name, he’d told Kate “Thane Shephard,” because it sounded the best. He did, however, tell her the name in some roundabout way that eventually had him telling her the plots of all three games, along with the choices he made and the characters he’d romanced. He couldn’t be surprised that Kate could only remember Garrus’s name.

Max stifled laughter as Nathan and Luke eventually continued their Mass Effect discussion at the breakfast table. Nathan was able to give out some much-needed apologies while Max looked on proudly, nothing how much he’d grown. She’d tell him later that, when she eventually got into the game, she also played because of Jack. Jack reminded her of Chloe. She wondered if Jack reminded him of Chloe, too.

*                                                          *                                                          *

Once everyone was gone, Nathan waited in the driver’s seat of Max’s rental car while she talked to Brooke and Daniel. Nathan spied on them using the rearview mirror. Max finished a hug with Daniel, then held onto Brooke so intimately it almost made Nathan blush. When Max pulled away, she smiled wryly, then hugged them both again, at the same time. She let go, holding their hands, then reluctantly headed back to the car.

Nathan turned his eyes onto his phone, quickly pulling up an open app and playing it until Max got to the passenger door. “You’re driving?” she said, waiting for his answer.

Nathan looked at her and, noticing her glossy eyes, nodded. “Yeah, you looked like you could use a break.”

Max slid into the car, determined to keep her smile as she waved at Brooke, who was going to get into the car and head back home to Seattle. Nathan didn’t start the car until they were gone, and Max turned to him with tears in her eyes. “Thank you for that,” she said.

Nathan offered a wry smile and turned out of Kate’s neighborhood. “Anytime,” he said.
After a little while, Nathan was glad he’d waited until they’d be alone on the road before they left. True, he was glad to have some alone time with her, but he didn’t want the others to see her like this. She was a wreck, and no doubt she’d say a lot more to them than she needed to when she was like this.

Max was somewhat hunched over, her shoulders hanging, her eyes closed, and she was sobbing loudly. She wiped away her tears, trying to find a way to calm down, but even she knew she was inconsolable. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I just didn’t realize how much I’d miss them.”

Nathan scoffed, laughing somewhat. “You have nothing to apologize—”

“But I do,” Max interrupted him. “I miss them, I miss Seattle. Being back here is so fucking hard. Arcadia Bay is just so...so...so suffocating. It never gets easier or goes away, even if you’re away from here. It always calls you back until you fix everything and I can’t fucking do that because I cannot think of any possible way I could have saved everyone without putting you in that bathroom what Chloe died.”

“No,” Nathan said. He leaned against the driver’s side door of the car—trying to put some space between the two of them—and glared at her. “You didn’t put me there. I put me there.”

“No,” Nathan said. He leaned against the driver’s side door of the car—trying to put some space between the two of them—and glared at her. “You didn’t put me there. I put me there.”

“No, that doesn’t make sense,” Max cried. “I remember. It was Chloe or Arcadia Bay and god, I chose Arcadia, and that choice put you in that bathroom.”

“No, it didn’t,” Nathan said, more sternly this time. Max expected him to get angry and emotional, but he didn’t. His grip on the steering wheel didn’t tighten and his grinding teeth didn’t start in on his fingernails. He was as calm as ever. “You’re only seeing yourself, Max, and the choices you made. I had my whole life—Rachel did, Chloe did—and a whole slew of choices that led me to that bathroom. Chloe would have died when you made the choice to save Arcadia Bay no matter what—and it could have been anyone at any time who did it. But the choices I made, the paths I took led me to killing her. I...I accept that. I own that. And I am paying for it, I’m trying to make amends. Fuck, Max, there’s so much I need to say to her, to her family, and I know I can get there because even though my path led me to...to hurting so many people, it also led me to you, Max. Chloe forgave you for whatever you did that hurt her. I forgive you, too.”

Max smiled at him and scooted closer, and he scooted closer to her, letting her rest her head on one of his shoulders. The rest of the ride was nice and quiet, both of them listening to the quiet hum of the radio.

* * *

But that quiet was short-lived, as it often was. As they pulled up, they quickly separated from each other, noticing Melinda’s silver Lexus in the driveway.

“This sucks,” Nathan whined.

Max hardly reacted, her anxiety fueling her exit from the car before she could think to respond to him. Nathan probably thought his mom was there to complain about how he’d been out for nearly three weeks now and hadn’t visited again, but Max automatically thought it was something much worse. What if Sean Prescott was dead? What if she rushed over in the middle of the day to tell them that?

Max closed the car door behind her, ignoring a shouting Nathan as she rushed to the front door and
struggled to unlock it with a key that Kristine had given her. She threw the door open as Nathan locked the car and caught up with her, only to see Sean and Melinda sitting in the kitchen, laughing over coffee with Kristine.

“Hey Max, Hi Nathan—Max, are you okay?” Kristine asked, noticing the grave look on her face.

Max cleared her throat and put on a convincing look of fright. “There was a bee outside. I panicked.”

Nathan let out a deep guffaw, having suddenly remembered the circumstances of Max’s almost-arrest. She shot him an angry look and he stopped instantly, trying not to make her any more upset than she already was. “Yeah, it was huge. She got stuck in a car with a bee once and it did NOT go well.”

Kristine chuckled and turned back to Sean and Melinda as Max’s face grew red. “Well,” Kristine said, pointing, “there’s coffee in the pot if you guys want some.”

Nathan wanted to refuse and retire to upstairs, but upon seeing the hopeful look in Melinda’s eyes, he changed his mind. He looked at Max and gestured toward the kitchen in an “after you” fashion, sending her to the table while he grabbed some coffee for the both of them. He dipped past Kristine, avoiding Sean’s gaze, and pulled two mugs out of the cabinet above the French press. He filled the cups, suppressing the urge to pull his dad out of the barstool and leave him there struggling on the floor, then went past Kristine again and joined Max at the table.

After adding some extras to his own mug, Nathan slid the cream and sugar to Max, who had already begun sipping her drink. She waved them away and Nathan rolled his eyes, wondering how she could possibly enjoy coffee without cream and sugar.

“So, Max, Nathan,” Melinda said confidently, very excited. “Do you have plans for tonight?”

“No,” Max said truthfully. Nathan looked angry that she said it, but he didn’t contradict her. He didn’t want Max to feel smothered by him with all the alone time they usually had, but the last thing he wanted to do was play family with his father.

Nathan didn’t mind spending time with Melinda, but Sean Prescott was the devil incarnate. When Nathan was with Melinda, it was like he was a little boy again. He always missed her when she left and everything she said made him feel better even if he wasn’t sad. But Sean? Even in the midst of dying, the man managed to be an asshole. His father only cared about himself and the only reason he was even trying to mend his relationship with Nathan was so he could sleep a little better at night. It seemed like the perfect goal of a man who abused his son for years, yet still managed to find a way to be disappointed in him. Having a son in jail made him look bad, and nothing he’d done made Nathan think Sean had stopped caring about his reputation long enough to try at being a decent father.

“Melinda and I were wondering if you’d like to join us for dinner,” Sean continued, his eyes locked on Max.

Max didn’t want to leave the house again, but she was also terrified of saying no to them. It wouldn’t have mattered in the long run, but Max was determined not to get on Sean Prescott’s bad side while she was in Arcadia Bay.

“Actually, mom and dad,” Kristine chimed in. “How about we just spend some time together now?”

“No,” Nathan said suddenly. “Dinner is fine.” He quickly downed the rest of his coffee, narrowly escaping burning his throat, then walked over to the sink, rinsed the mug, then turned toward the
stairs. “Can’t wait!” he called back to them as he walked up. Max closed her eyes as she heard his
door slam upstairs.

Nathan awoke much, much later to Max sleeping soundly beside him, her head resting on his chest.
Her hair was braided and she was still in the shirt she’d worn to Kate’s, but was in some comfy
looking shorts instead of her jeans, and his arm was wrapped around her shoulder. The blanket was
lazily thrown across their legs, sideways, not covering either of their feet. Glancing toward the
window, it was dark outside, so Nathan assumed he was right on schedule to start getting ready for
dinner.

He wasn’t quite ready to face his parents just yet, so he laid back down, stroking Max’s back while
staring up at the ceiling in a daze.

Eventually Max began to stir, and before he could think of a reason as to why he’d gone up to her
room and not his own, her phone buzzed. “If it’s the group chat,” Max said grumpily, “tell them to
fuck off.”

“Someone’s cranky,” Nathan said, grabbing her phone. “You really want me to put those exact
words into the group chat?”

“Oh, sorry,” Max laughed, sitting up and crossing her legs. She yawned and Nathan had to look
away when she began to stretch her arms over her head. “It’s an inside joke we have,” she said,
pausing again to rub her eyes and yawn again. “We send each there that when we don’t feel like
hanging out.”

“Good call, seeing as we’re going to have to start getting ready for dinner with Father Dearest soon,”
Nathan groaned.

Max shot him a confused look. “We went already.”

Nathan glared at her. He took his phone from his pocket and set it and her phone down next to each
other on the bed. Both very clearly read four twenty-seven. “You dream that? It’s four-thirty, Max.”

“Oh, yeah, it’s four-thirty in the morning. Have you ever seen it this dark before five?” Max said. He
looked more confused than before, so she explained everything that had happened.

When Nathan went upstairs the day before, he never came back down. Max had given him a few
minutes to cool down, then went upstairs to check on him once she could get away from the family.
She almost panicked when he wasn’t in the guest room—the room he was using—and immediately
went to his old room—the room she was using—and found him fast asleep, curled up in a ball in her
bed. She helped him get settled in, then opted to let him rest, even inviting his family upstairs to
prove he really had fallen asleep when she’d told them. Max went out with Kristine and Sean and
Melinda, but not before setting up a video call using her and Nathan’s phones, so she’d be there
when he eventually woke up by himself. He hadn’t stirred the entire time, but she was nervous all
night wondering if he’d be okay.

“I also told Kristine that I’d sleep on the floor in here but I was not about to sleep on the hard-ass
floor while you got the bet to yourself—and I’m now wondering why you have a California King in
a bedroom this damn big in the first place!” Max finished.

Nathan smirked at her and sat up. Before he could tease her about wanting to sleep with him, he
noticed his pants were a lot looser than they had been when he first came up to his old room. “Hey,
no offense Max, but where the fuck is the belt I was wearing?"

Max gave him a funny look and stretched out sideways, her head hanging over the bed, pointing at his belt, which was resting on the floor. “I took it off.”

“YOU took my belt off?” Nathan’s voice cracked. His face was red, and when she looked back at him, noticing his surprise, his face grew even redder. If she was going to be undressing him. He’d at LEAST like to be conscious for it.

“Let me rephrase,” she said, holding up her hand, “I helped you take it off. You were fumbling with it half asleep, so I helped you take it off.”

“And it wasn’t…weird?” Nathan asked.

She flipped over and he laid his head on her stomach, his body perpendicular to hers.

It wasn’t weird at all. Max laughed and told Nathan about a time she’d gotten sick at Victoria’s during a party. Victoria had Max out of her jeans, t-shirt, bra, and changed into pajamas and tucked in all under a minute, then checked on Max every half hour while still managing to host her party.

Nathan chuckled softly, suddenly very mindful of how early it was and how loud he’d been earlier. “That’s not surprising. Victoria always plays mom friend when she wants to—why do you think she was so bossy and nosy? I couldn’t have a single girlfriend that she didn’t approve of. But then again, she kept me from some trouble. Probably why she’s my best friend,” he said, turning his head away from Max. He hoped it didn’t hurt her feelings; he just didn’t want her to see the sad look he knew he had on his face.

“I’m nosy,” Max corrected.

“Yeah, probably why she’s friends with you, too,” Nathan said, finding his smile again. “She’s a good friend.”

Max smiled, giving up trying to let him see her smile at him after practically breaking her neck. “That’s sweet, Nathan.”

Nathan gave her a look, just for a second, then looked away. “So, since for some reason we’re both up at—” Nathan checked Max’s phone—“four thirty-nine, what do you want to do today?”

Max rolled out from under him with some difficulty, then turned to him and grinned. “Nothing,” she said.

* * *

Nathan frowned in the guestroom shower, wondering why bathing was necessary on a day where they were supposed to be doing nothing. Max hadn’t explained what was going on at all! She kicked him out of her room to take a shower, telling him to “dress comfy” and nothing else. He rinsed his hair and let the water wash over his face as he stood there and thought about where he was in his life right now.

Simply put, this whole situation—even without all the realities and time reversal—was totally bizarre. Here he was in the guestroom of his house, showering there because he was half-scared of his own bathroom, out of jail until his dad eventually died. He’d gone out, got to dance and hang out, just like before everything happened, but he couldn’t help but feel out of place. These were Max’s friends and he was a part of Max’s life—which he loved—but the fear of change kept him from really enjoying his time out of jail with her. She kept saying she was here for him, but was that true? If he
was paroled, would he ever see her again? And why did even the thought of never seeing her again hurt so badly? He knew she had a life back in Seattle that she’d have to return to, but was it too much to ask to be a part of it?

He quickly finished rinsing and reached down out of the shower and toward the toilet, where his towel should have been sitting. Instead, he felt something else entirely.

“What the fuck?” he hollered, falling backwards into the shower wall. He caught himself after a few moments of his feet sliding around on the tub floor, then took a deep breath. Once he’d regained his balance, he pulled just the top left corner of the shower curtain back, only to see Max sitting on the floor, legs sprawled out, laughing, with a sloppy wet handprint on the stomach of her loose, long-sleeved shirt. She was in some black leggings as well, her classic chucks, and her hair was up in what looked like started as a bun, but fell out into a ponytail.

“Max, what the fuck! What are you doing in here?” he growled through clenched teeth.

Max caught her breath and quietly croaked, “I’ve been calling your name for like five minutes and you were just standing there mumbling, obviously distracted. So, I figured I’d just sit and wait until you were finished. I didn’t realize I’d sat on your towel, and when you put your hand on me, it tickled and I kicked the side of the tub and fell back onto the floor.”

“Serves you right, now you’ve got a bruised ass to go with that bruised eye,” Nathan snapped. “Don’t EVER do that again,” he warned.

“What?” Max argued. “You do stuff like this to me all the time! I don’t get to have any fun?”

“No! No, you don’t!”

Max glared at him then, noticing that she’d knocked his towel just out of reach, smirked. Nathan glanced down at his far away towel, then back at her devilish grin, and slowly shook his head in a “don’t you dare” fashion. Max ignored the warning, of course, and took the towel, tucking it under her arm.

She walked over to the bathroom door and opened it, then turned back to him. “When you’re ready, your towel will be on your bed. And since the heat from the shower has made your room a little stuffy, I’ll leave your bedroom door open as well,” she chirped, just before leaving him behind with a pretty interesting look on his face.

Nathan waited until he heard her walk far away, then shut off the shower and scowled. He left the shower, still scoping the hallway, listening closely for footsteps or talking of any kind. He rolled out into his room, quickly grabbing his towel and wrapping it around him and lunging to close his door.

He was glad Max didn’t stick around to see him naked, because it was very, very cold in the house that morning.

“You’re so insensitive,” Nathan said, walking down the driveway and over to his truck, where Max was waiting with the keys. He was dressed in a pair of fitted black joggers and some sneakers, a soft-looking long-sleeved shirt and his classic red jacket. His hair was still sort of wet and he left it unstyled wavy on his head in a way that Max really liked.

“Insensitive?”

“Meet me outside, Coldilocks? Really? It sounds like how Frank used to talk to me.”
Max snorted. “What, and you messaged him with eloquence and grace? ‘Good evening, my dear Franklin,’” Max laughed. “‘Would you be up to brining to me a quarter of your finest marijuana? I’ll offer fantastic coin.’”

Nathan gave Max a look so sweet it almost made her sick, and covered his heart with his hand. “Aww, you really think weed was the only thing I was buying from Frank? You’re so cute.”

“I was being facetious,” Max said, opening the driver’s side door and motioning for him to go around to the other side.

Nathan chuckled and they got in at the same time, and slammed their doors in unison as well. “So was I,” he replied as Max pulled out of the driveway.

Max had been on the freeway for a few minutes now, heading in a direction that was all too familiar. He knew where they were going, but he didn’t want to say anything about it, because Max looked so excited.

“We’re going to the diner,” Max said finally, after it was pretty much obvious that they were heading there. “But we’re not going to eat there. Joyce let me call an order in and I’m going to pick it up. We’re going to have an awesome lazy day, got it?”

“Jeez, mom, anything else?” Nathan teased.

Max looked and glared at him. “No more sass,” she requested.

Nathan scoffed and laid down across the seat of his truck, his head resting on Max’s lap. “I’m not gonna make any promises.”

Max laughed and pat his head. He always laid down when he was in the car. She wondered if he used to do that when he was little. “Since we’re spending the day together,” Max opened, trying to sound nonchalant, “you’re going to tell me about yourself. What were you like when you were little?”

“Bad as shit, next question,” Nathan replied, distracted by a game on his phone.

Max risked a glare down at him, but he hardly noticed. She wanted to get to know him better, but he didn’t seem to want to let her. It seemed like any attempt at knowing him on a deeper level was squashed by his resistance. He’d once even said she knew all that she needed to know, and it got her to thinking: had he really thought those videos that he’d hidden in the safe in the dark room showed who he really was? Did he think he was reduced to how he felt on the days where he had his breakdowns? The thought of him thinking so little of himself hurt her heart. He’d progressed in so many ways, but now where Max felt he needed it the most: Nathan didn’t like himself, and he had a long way to go before he ever loved himself. She knew he was more than capable of loving other people, but she wished he could see that there was so much about him to love, not that she was in love with him…

“How did you and Victoria meet?” she asked. She’d asked Victoria before, but Victoria just laughed and said that she should hear the story from Nathan.

Nathan sighed and put his phone face-down on his chest. He wanted to sleep, but with a little coffee from the diner, he could put it off until later. An entire day spent with Max Caulfield sounded heavenly and he wasn’t about to mess it up by being rude. He decided to tuck his phone into his pocket, to give her his full attention. He cleared his throat, relishing in the expectant tapping of her
leg, and told the story. “We’ve been friends since we were real little. Our moms are super close so we kind of had to be, but we became friends in kindergarten. Or maybe preschool, I think. A long time ago. Anyway, some inbred hit her and told her that she was ugly, so I punched him in the fucking face.”

Max tried to hold in her laughter, but it was impossible. “You were her little knight in shining armor,” Max cooed, sneaking a peek down at him with a smile. “What did the kid you punched do?”

Nathan laughed, struggling to finish the story between giggles. “Victoria literally started kicking while he was down, but then his friends started pushing her, so I started pushing them, and we both kept calling in other kids and pretty soon it was a royal rumble of twenty-six five-year-olds swinging and three teachers fighting to stop it. Then Vic lied and said the other kid had started everything and we didn’t get in trouble. Good times. I love Victoria.”

Max smiled. There was never going to be another person that Nathan would love the way he loved Victoria. That girl had put a stamp on his heart. Max couldn’t help but to wonder if she’d ever have an impact on ANYONE like that. She felt generally unremarkable, even with her massive success as a photographer. But the way Nathan made her feel needed and appreciated made her feel more than remarkable, she’d only felt that way with Talia before, but for some reason, the feeling didn’t scare her as much as it did back then. No, this was something else entirely…

Max shook the thought from her head and slowed as she made a right into the diner’s parking lot. She glared down at Nathan until he rolled his eyes and lifted himself off her.

“Wait here,” Max said, gathering her bag and turning the car off. She left the keys in the ignition, took off her seatbelt, then slid out of the seat and onto the ground. As she straightened her shirt and untwisted the straps on her purse, Nathan looked down at her and quickly rolled the driver’s side window down.

Max had only barely began walking when Nathan called out to her. She looked at him, only to see him smirking with half of his body hanging out the window. She turned back toward the diner, again barely getting in another step before he called out, “Max Caulfield, is that an ass I see in those leggings?”

She turned around and gave him a dirty look, and as she stomped her way back to the car, seethed, “I couldn’t stay the awkward, homely stick I was back in high school forever, Nathan!”

Nathan frowned, realizing that he’d probably hurt her feelings. “Oh, come on, you were cute back in high school, aside from the Lesbian-Bob haircut,” he laughed.

Max immediately softened, laughing with a light blush over her freckled cheeks. “you thought I was cute ab Blackwell?”

“Of course I did, I checked you out all the time,” Nathan blurted. “Well, I mean…I…uh…”

Awkward silence ensued as Max stood there in shock and Nathan blushed, wishing he could eat his words.

Max cleared her throat, choosing to ignore both of their embarrassment. “I could say similar things about you—what happened to those bony arms? And what, did you suddenly grow nine inches in a year?”

Before he could make a crude joke about something else that may have grown nine inches, Nathan laughed. “Funny story, they made me take these boxing class bullshit three times a week at the
Nathan smirked. “And my dad was a pretty tall guy, you know, before karma came along and served him right.”

“…anyways,” Max said. “Worry about your own butt.”

Nathan frowned again, then turned and leaned his head against the inside of the car door. “Fine!” he called out to her.

Max continued inside the diner while Nathan waited in the car. He felt a little sore that Max wouldn’t let him go in with her, but it was probably for the best. Nathan didn’t know what he’d do if he ever saw Joyce again. There was a lot he wanted AND needed to say to her, but facing her in person was going to be damn near impossible. He’d consider writing her a long letter if his writing wasn’t shit.

Nathan heard a knock on the driver’s side door and he perked up immediately. “That was fast,” he said, lifting and turning and hoping to see Max, but instead seeing Joyce standing there with a blank look on her face. His eyes went wide and his throat went dry, and it felt like there was a brick in his stomach. He didn’t know whether to run away or fall to his knees, kiss her feet, and beg for forgiveness that he KNEW he didn’t deserve. Instead of making his next words to her an apology, Nathan stupidly asked, “Where’s Max?”

“She’s inside with David, packing up your food,” Joyce said. “I thought we could have a little chat.”

Nathan wasn’t thinking. He fumbled to push the door open, narrowly missing Joyce with it, then jumped out of the car so he could face her properly. “Joyce…I-I…I’m so, so sorry. I’m so sorry—”

“Unless that next ‘sorry’ is going to bring my daughter back, you can keep it,” Joyce said firmly, pointing. “Now sit down.”

Nathan sat on the step bar of his truck and looked up at her, ready to listen.

“I need you to do two things for me,” Joyce continued. “First, when you’re eventually out of jail for good—and I know you will be—you better spend the rest of your days showing gratitude to that Max Caulfield, you hear me? She gave up an art exhibit on her work to be here with you, and you better keep your nose clean.”

Nathan swallowed and nodded his head, trying not to let his anger show.

“Good. And the last thing,” Joyce growled, “I want every news article, every magazine cover, every single piece of your father’s mudslinging toward my daughter taken back and deleted. I want everything you and your father plotted to—”

“I never said anything bad about Chloe,” Nathan snapped, unable to contain his anger any more. He’d do what he could to earn Joyce’s forgiveness, but he wasn’t going to be grouped in with his father and not say anything about it. Nathan softened his tone and stood up slowly. “That was my dad and his team. He knew what having a kid in jail would do to his reputation. He was a shitty dad, no surprise he’d end up being a shitty person, too,” Nathan said. “I’ll do what I can, but it’s going to take some time, especially I’d rather eat a box of thumb tacks than be in the same room with him. It’s going to take time.”

Joyce looked up at him and clutched the front of his jacket. There were tears in her eyes and Nathan didn’t know how he could possibly comfort her if she started crying. “I waited this long, haven’t I?”

Before Nathan could say more, he noticed Max and David coming out of the diner, multiple food
bags in hand. This conversation was over. Joyce dried her tears, turned to David and Max, and waved with a smile on her fast and did it all so quickly, Nathan was impressed. Nathan followed her lead, waving as well, but still, whispered to her, “I really am sorry.”

Joyce forced a laugh to cover up that she was tearing up again. “I know,” she said.

“So we have one last stop before home,” Max said, once she’d stopped the car again.

“I figured,” Nathan said, furrowing his brows at her, “seeing as we’re in a Target parking lot right now.”

Max turned off the car and took off her seatbelt. It was a bit past five-thirty, and it was still dark outside. Nathan had almost a death-grip on her thigh, so she knew something was bothering him. Nathan liked to think that he was a pretty private person, but the way his face looked always betrayed him.

“Nathan,” Max said gently, putting her hand on his, trying to ease the pressure, “you’re hurting me.”

“What?” Nathan said, having spaced out. He’d been thinking about the art exhibit, and he hadn’t noticed how hard he was squeezing her. His knuckles were practically white. “Shit, I’m sorry. I’m always fucking things up.”

“Where did that come from?” Max asked, concerned. “Why would you say that?”

Nathan turned toward the window, refusing to look at her, but keeping his hand on her leg. “Why didn’t you tell me you gave up an exhibit to be here for me?”

Max rolled her eyes, then pinched the bridge of her nose. She knew Joyce was going to break her promise, but she couldn’t blame her. Joyce had been more excited about the exhibit than Max was, and was incredibly disappointed when Max called and said she was coming to Arcadia Bay instead. “I didn’t tell you because it doesn’t matter,” Max said. “Yes, I did have a chance for a monthlong exhibit of my work, but it was all the way in New York, and it was offered after I’d already decided to come here. Now let’s get inside, Justin’s little sister went out of her way to put a package together for me and I don’t want to make her mad.” Max looked over at him, trying to gauge his reaction. He didn’t seem convinced that she was telling the truth, but it wasn’t her job to convince him. If he wanted to punish himself for this, Max couldn’t stop him, but she’d be there to carry it with him if she needed to. He still hadn’t looked at her, as he was feeling bad about himself, until Max grabbed his face and turned his head, forcing him to see her.

Her grip had scared him initially, but he was comforted by her touch right after. She had both hands on his cheeks, and she was stroking them with her thumbs. “Talk to me,” she said, and he tried to pull away, but she wouldn’t let him. She took her hands away, afraid she was making him uncomfortable, but he put them right back up to his face. “Talk to me,” she repeated in a whisper.

There was a lot he wanted to say, but he had to keep it short. He didn’t want to tell her how conflicted it made him feel. Nathan was overjoyed that she’d give up something so big for him, but he also didn’t want her doing things like that to become habitual. He knew how important her career was to her and he wouldn’t be able to live with himself if he got in the way of her dreams. It just made him feel so…so selfish, and so guilty. “I…I don’t understand why you’re always so nice to me,” he finally said. He closed his eyes and moved her hands away from his cheeks, folding them into his own. “I…I’m happy that you chose to be here,” Nathan admitted. That was partly true. He was downright euphoric that she was here. “But…you…it has to be your choice to be here.”
Max smiled at him, the love in her eyes catching him off-guard. She replaced her hands on his cheeks and pulled his face to hers, touching their foreheads together. She was staring into his perfect blue eyes, and she wouldn’t let him look away. “Listen to me,” she said. “I chose here. I chose you,” she said, just before opening the driver’s side door and slipping out of the car and onto the ground in the parking lot. “Are you coming?”

Nathan sort of half smiled, then followed out of the car. He quickly caught up to her and she locked the car, and a cool breeze made him zip his jacket. “So Justin has a little sister?” he asked.

Max slowed her pace and walked with him. “Yup. She’s a sweetheart, too.”

“What’s her name?” Nathan asked.

“Her name’s Ori,” Max answered, quickening her pace again, “and she is NOT a patient person.’

Nathan caught on and picked up his pace as well, entering Target with Max, only to be greeted by a black-haired, brown-eyed, tan-skinned girl with a bright smile on her face. “Good morning, welcome to Target.”

“Hey, Ori,” Max said, pulling her debit card out of her wallet.

“Hey, Max,” Ori replied giggling, then pulling a card reader from her back pocket. “I’ll go make sure everything’s put together, then I’ll have someone bring help wheel it out to the car.”

As Ori walked away and toward the back of the store to the electronics section, Nathan and Max sat down on a nearby bench. “That girl is related to Justin?” Nathan asked. Except for sharing, probably, the same last name, the two looked NOTHING alike.”

Max laughed. “Trust me, they are. I thought the same thing, until I met Justin’s parents.”

“You’ve met his parents?”

“Yeah,” Max chirped, cavalier. “They skyped him one time while we were at his bar. He looks JUST LIKE his dad, but Ori—Orion—looks just like his mom. His mom’s name is Dayana. She’sBrazilian and yes, she’s gorgeous. Did you know Justin’s fluent in Portuguese?”

Nathan laughed and rested his hand on her leg. “How do you know all this stuff?”

“Because Justin is my FRIEND,” Max shouted at him. Max could hang it from a skyscraper and Nathan still wouldn’t get that this entire time, she’d been trying to get to that level with him. He’d tell her stories about himself only when she pried them out of him, but she wanted him to feel comfortable enough with her to want to tell her about himself by himself.

Nathan, however, felt like he was being plenty open. Some stories just didn’t need explanations, but he couldn’t resist saying more once he saw how Max’s eyes lit up every time they talked to each other. He never though he was an interesting person until he met Max…but she didn’t need to know that.

Before Max could ask him a BURNING question, her phone rang and she answered. “Hello?”

“Good morning,” Victoria said. “You told me to call once we were headed to the airport. This morning’s plans were a bust so we’re heading home, right on time, for once.”

Max chuckled and put her on speaker. “You’re on speaker, Nathan's with me, and we’re at Target. Keep it tame, please?”
“No promise!” Victoria sang. “What are you two up to so early this morning?”

“We’re doing acid, then going steakin’ near an elementary school during recess,” Nathan answered. “Acid man only delivers in the morning.”

“A perfect day!” Josh yelled in the background.

Max and Nathan giggled. “Are you missing Natalia?” Max asked.

“Only every day!” Victoria said. “Anyway, I’m going to go. Just wanted to let you know we were headed home. Have a good day, Cherie, and Nathan, I love you! Au revoir.”

“Bye, Vic,” Nathan smiled. Max closed the phone and he smirked at her. “You guys are close.”

Max cackled when she heard that. “It’s probably because of The Spooning Incident.”

“The Spooning Incident?” Nathan asked. “I’ve got to hear this story.”

“Tell me about all your old girlfriends and I’ll tell you about The Spooning Incident,” Max bargained. It was fair. Max had shared a lot about her personal life—perhaps more than she should have—in the last year that she’d been visiting Nathan. He even knew about her last boyfriend—one that she never told the group chat about—because she was embarrassed she even dated him.

“That’s tough,” Nathan said. “A LOT of girls thought I was their boyfriend. You’ll have to be more specific.”

Max glared at him. “Tell me about the ones you ALSO considered your girlfriends,” she clarified. Now she was a little reluctant to hear about them.

“Hm,” Nathan thought. This was kind of a tough call. There were a lot of girls he’d considered girlfriends, too, but some of them didn’t consider him their boyfriend. After he thought about it, there were two girls that stood out in particular. “I’d have to say my first girlfriend was Haylie Feldman—”

“Bella West wasn’t your first girlfriend?” Max asked.

Nathan was surprised she even remembered that story. “No, she was my first. Bella and I didn’t want to go to high school as virgins, so we did it after we found a way to be alone during the summer of eighth grade. We went on a hike together and did it in the woods,” he explained. There was more to it, but Nathan figured Max didn’t need to know about the poison ivy they’d had sex on and how his friendship with Bella ended because she thought the rash from the plant was herpes. “But yeah, Haylie was my first girlfriend. I had just turned sixteen, and we only lasted six months. She cheated on me, so I cheated back, and it just became a contest about who could hurt the other the most. It led to some pretty good angry sex, but once that got out of hand, I dumped her and never looked back.”

“How did it get out of hand?” Max asked, sounding very curious.

Nathan thought she was faking her curiosity, but it was too present in her eyes to be so. Nathan continued as best as he could, trying not to blush. He’d told this story a bunch of times when he was high and with Zach or Hayden or Logan, but now it seemed incredibly crude and embarrassing. Still, he had to tell her, if he wanted to hear the spooning story. “Uh…okay…and, sorry…okay…um…”

“Just spit it out!”

“Fine! Okay,” Nathan said. He took a deep breath. “Haylie liked to be choked when she was getting plowed. So one day we were going at it and I was choking her pretty hard already, but she wanted it
harder. I fucking squeezed the shit out of her neck, but she still kept screaming ‘Harder! Harder!’ I was losing my shit, Max. Her face was PURPLE. She was starting to pass out—like I could literally see the color leaving her face—but she told me to keep squeezing. I stopped because I was scared I was gonna kill her and she got up all angry in my face and called me a pussy. I lost my shit telling her she was passing out and I told her also that she had MAD issues. We broke up shortly after. And before I tell you about my next and LAST girlfriend, what the hell is The Spooning Incident?"

“No time for a Q and A?” Max teased. She wanted to know more, but he’d held up his end of the deal. “This one night we were all drunk at Zach and Alyssa’s apartment, and I went to go lie in their bed because I felt sick—and they were cool with it, if I didn’t barf in the bed. So I go to sleep, lying down on my right side, and I wake up a few minutes later to Josh asleep in front of me. I didn’t think much of it and went back to sleep. An hour later, I wake up again and I’m in between Josh and Victoria, who is spooning me, because—”

“Because Victoria HATES being the little spoon, this I know,” Nathan laughed. “Continue.”

“Right. So by the end of the night, the bed was full and the order was Josh, me, then Victoria, Stella spooning Victoria, then Warren asleep next to Stella, facing her,” Max said, barely able to contain her laughter, “then Zach comes in, still drunk, and gets in bed next to Warren and scoops us all into a giant hug, barely able to keep his arms and all of us squished together. Half of us couldn’t breathe, and I could feel that barf coming up, so I was pleading for him to let us go. Eventually Warren yells, ‘Zach, what the fuck! Get off!’ and Zach goes, ‘I am not Zach.’ And we all start shouting because I can pretty much feel the vomit coming up at this point. Victoria then says, ‘Okay, big spoon, if you’re not Zach, what should we call you?’ and Zach just fucking says ‘You can call me The Ladle.’ I lost my shit laughing and spewed vomit over Josh’s head and all over the wall. And I didn’t get in trouble because I didn’t get any on the bed.”

Nathan burst into uproarious laughter. Zach had only changed from high school in the sense that he’d stopped cheating on all his girlfriends. He was the same old party guy at heart. “Okay,” Nathan prefaced his next story. “The last girlfriend I had was Rebecca. She started off normal but ended up taking me for a fucking ride. Rebecca was super-hot, super nice, but also super religious, but I liked her a LOT so we agreed to take things slow. I was seventeen at the time.

“After getting past the first kiss and feeling her up over her shirt, then under the shirt, then under the bra and all that fun stuff,” Nathan described, trying to get a reaction out of Max, who only rolled her eyes and urged him to continue, “after all that stuff, we’d been together eight months. Then she started pushing for us to have sex—and you know I was all for it—so we tried but Jesus, Max, the circumstances were fucking wild. First, she’d make me wait in the bathroom while she covered up her entire body, except for her bottom half, and she’d tell me to get myself hard and near the point of finishing in the bathroom because she didn’t want it to last too long her first time. So every time she and I would try and have sex, we had to go through that whole ritual.

“I’d only BARELY ever get the tip in every time, then she’d scream about how we were sinning in her parents’ home, so I’d stop and pat her head or rub her back until she was calm and we wouldn’t try again. Eventually we broke up—and she just up and dumped me out of the blue. I was super upset about it until one of her friends—her name was Mandy—came up and told me why Rebecca dumped me. She said that Rebecca was super sheltered and no idea how sex actually worked—she only knew how pregnancy worked. The reason she’d make me yank my dick in the bathroom was because she was trying to get me to finish inside her without taking her virginity. She wanted both the miracle of a ‘virgin birth’ and to be set for life because I have money. Once Mandy told her that I’d probably have to be inside her more than an inch for her to get pregnant, Rebecca freaked out and dumped me. So I fucked Mandy for revenge. Good times,” Nathan said smugly.
“Always a gentleman,” Max said, rolling her eyes again. She’d never admit it, but she couldn’t blame him for going for Mandy. The whole story was ridiculous, but something in Nathan’s tone told Max it was the truth. There was always more she wanted to ask him, and there was more to tell, but they had things they needed to do, if only Ori could get the package together already. As Max and Nathan waited, they made small talk, laughing and people-watching, until a little girl with short brown hair and bright blue eyes came up to them. She was visibly distraught, holding a sippy cup of what looked like apple juice in one hand, a stuffed elephant into the other, and she had no shoes on her feet. She looked to be two or three years old, and she was wearing a yellow dress with white polka dots.

The little girl gave Max a sort of bewildered look, but her eyes lit up once she saw Nathan. Max realized that, because of his red jacket, the little girl must’ve thought he worked at the store. She was going to end up asking him for help and ignoring Max altogether.

Max was right, of course, as the little girl made a beeline toward Nathan. He’d long noticed her presence, keeping an eye on her as she approached. Soon enough, the little girl was tugging on the leg of Nathan’s joggers, balancing both her drink AND her toy in one arm. “Can you help me?” she asked bravely. “I lost mommy.”

Nathan got up from the bench, then lowered himself so that he was at the same eye level as the little girl. “Do you remember what color she was wearing?” Nathan asked.

“Umm,” the little girl thought diligently for a moment. “Blue!”

Nathan looked back at Max, laughing. That “blue!” was confident, but it wasn’t very convincing. “What color is her hair?” Nathan asked this time.

The little girl pointed past Nathan and toward Max.

“Got it,” Nathan said, standing up. He reached his arms down toward the little girl, and she backed away, understandably. “Come on,” Nathan said gently, “you’re not waking around without shoes. You could hurt your foot.” The little girl shook her head and didn’t budge. Nathan sighed and instead offered his hand, which the little girl took happily. They’d only walked two or three steps when she started thinking about what he’d said, shifted uncomfortably, then reached up at him on her tiptoes, saying “Up, up!”

They walked around the store for a bit, Nathan and the little girl in front and Max following behind them, looking for a lady with brown hair. Nathan was doing great with the little girl, keeping her calm and distracted with meaningless conversation. Watching the display made a thought keep forcing its way into Max’s head, and she couldn’t make it go away no matter what she did.

Over a year ago, when Max made her first weeklong return to Arcadia Bay, she’d watched a video that Nathan had left for her. It was how she found out that Nathan shared her old time-manipulating power, but he’d discovered his much, much younger. Aside from the horrible view of Sean’s abuse of Nathan’s power, another thing about the video made Max’s heart feel tight. It was during the part right before Nathan sacrificed Rachel, and he was talking about all the other timelines he’d seen. In one such timeline, he and Max were at the lighthouse at sunset, and there was a kid there. Rachel immediately thought the kid was Max and Nathan’s, but he wasn’t so sure. But he’d said very clearly in the video, “any reality where I have a kid—if it is my kid, I want to be a good father.” Max didn’t see herself having a kid anytime soon—especially not with Nathan Prescott—but, even if that kid existed in some other timeline, the kid made mas curious. She couldn’t deny that if the kid was “theirs,” she wanted to meet them. But it also raised a bunch of questions: How did she and Nathan end up together? What was their kid’s name? And was this the timeline where that kid ended up existing?
And in that circumstance, if Max and Nathan built a life and a family together, how and when did they fall in love with each other?

Max had to be honest—being with Nathan brought up something in her that she could only describe as feeling “fuzzy.” Her heart raced every time he touched her—whether it was a friendly hug or a grip on her thigh—and he could make her laugh like no one else could. Max loved his company, and she was fairly sure she wasn’t in love with him. And maybe that fuzzy feeling wasn’t real; maybe it only came up because she had a dry spell that her body was very, very antsy to break.

Nathan was a pretty affectionate person on top of all of that, Max had decided, and she shouldn’t have thought that the way he treated her or the way he’d touch her to calm himself was only happening to her—he was far closer to Victoria, right? And he had his own, longer dry spell. If he was going to end up breaking his, Max hoped that he wasn’t just trying to use her to do so, and if he did use someone for it, Max hoped she wouldn’t be around for it.

“What are you doing?” Max suddenly heard Nathan ask, as he turned to look at her. He noticed the distressed look on her face, and the familiar redness of her cheeks and nose, despite the bruising from yesterday’s door incident. “Why are you crying?”

Max hadn’t started crying until their eyes met. Looking at him, she suddenly saw what their future together could be like: a future of waking up next to his smiling face, a little girl who looked just like him, the pressure of his hand, ever present on her thigh—and it terrified her. She’d never had an intrusive thought like that about anyone before, and she decided that the best way to deal with it was to, well, not deal with it.

Max quickly dried her eyes with her sleeves and put on a happy face, trying not to scare the little girl. “It’s nothing,” Max lied. “I just started thinking about…about Chloe.”

“Oh,” Nathan said, hesitant. “Do you…do you want to talk about it?”

“No,” Max said firmly. “Let’s just hurry and get out of here, I want to go home—back to the Hilltop House to be lazy.”

“Shit, me—fuck, I mean—shit!” Nathan blurted frantically, his eyes darting to the little girl, who’d hardly noticed his language. “Gosh,” he censored, “me too.”

They continued like this for a while, until a brown-haired woman in a white and yellow dress locked eyes with the little girl as she sat in Nathan's arms. “Leah!” she shouted, making a beeline toward them.

“You’re name’s Leah?” Nathan said, his face lighting up.

Before Leah could answer, Nathan was handing her over to her mom. “Don’t you ever walk away from me again,” she said. The woman looked up at the two of them apologetically. “I’m so sorry if she caused any trouble. I told her to go to someone in red if she needed help and I am so thankful she ended up with someone who didn’t do something to her. I saw you walking around with a kid, but I thought you were holding your own kid. But then I saw that she wasn’t wearing any shoes, and then I knew she was mine.”

Nathan only laughed. “It’s fine,” he said.

“No, it isn’t,” the woman said. “Thank you so much.”

Nathan nodded. “You…have a good day,” he managed.
Leah and her mother waved him off, and he and Max went back to the bench until Orion came by with a package, heading a group of three. One tall, muscular lady was wheeling a dolly with a large package with the help of a shorter, stockier guy.

“Everything’s here,” Ori smiled. She handed Max a receipt to sign, then tucked the receipt in her back pocket, and handed Max a copy. “We’ll load everything up in the car for you guys.”

Soon Max and Nathan were headed back home, sitting in their usual hand-on-thigh fashion, trying to fill the silence. Nathan was humming along to some song on the radio, and Max turned it down a bit so she could hear him.

Nathan continued singing along to the quieter music, as Max drove with a smile on her face.

*Leftover breakfast, cereal for lunch*

*She’s broken but she’s fun*

*My girl eats mayonnaise*

*From a jar when she’s gettin’ blazed*

“Don’t you need me, oh baby booooooy,” Nathan sang, right up until he got distracted by Max’s laughing. “Cause I’m so happy—what are you laughing at—without your noooooooooooise,” Nathan sang quickly, not wanting to miss the song.

Disappoint flashed across his face when she turned the radio even lower, but she ignored it. “How do you know this song? It came out…uh…while you were…uh…”

“Yes, when I was in jail, you’re always so articulate,” Nathan said. “You can just say it, you know. It’s weirder when you avoid it,” he said. She nodded meekly and he continued. “Stella used to play it in her office all the time,” he explained. “David couldn’t stand it. He’d always be like, ‘should you really be singing about drugs in a prison?’”

Max gave Nathan a peculiar look as he laughed until he couldn’t breathe. “You sure have a lot of respect for David,” Max noted.

Nathan blushed as he quieted down. David was a good person. “I guess,” Nathan mumbled, his thigh-hand shaking. “I want to write him a long letter someday. Every time I try to talk to him about it, he tells me to shut up.”

“Well…”

“About Chloe?”

“No…well, sort of, but it was more about—” Nathan stopped himself, then hesitated when he tried to speak again. “Max, you have to promise not to tell this to anyone,” he said sternly. “Promise.”

“I…promise,” Max answered. “What happened, is everything okay?”

Nathan sighed and readjusted so he was sitting cross-legged in his seat. It was his story-telling position and Max knew it well. He cleared his throat and started, hoping she wouldn’t get angry with him.

“Back at Blackwell,” he said, “I used to get into a lot of fights—and I mean a LOT of fights. I didn’t really give a shit about bleeding or having scars and all that—it was fun…in a fucked up way.
Anyways, there was one time I got into a fight behind the diner. It was horrible—I was outnumbered, and these three guys just started beating the shit out of me. At some point, I just kind of laid there and stopped fighting back, because—because…because I started thinking that maybe I wanted to die. I wouldn’t have to deal with my shitty dad, or how guilty I felt about Rachel, so I just sort of laid there.

“One of them had a bat,” he continued. Max had kept quiet even as she pulled into the driveway, unable to interrupt him and tell him to put on his goddamn seatbelt. She joined him in sitting cross-legged, and gave him her full attention. He went on. “He hadn’t hit me with it yet, but as he got ready to swing, I hear gunshots. All I hear is a bunch of yelling and then I just pass out. Fast forward, I’m in the hospital. Nothing’s broken, but I look like absolute shit, and David’s sitting in a chair at the foot of the bed.

“He was so—fucking—angry, Max. He says, ‘you wanna tell me why I picked your carcass up outside of my wife’s job?’ and I say nothing. I was freaking the fuck out, thinking he was going to tell my dad, and I just started crying and crying. Then I just…I just fucking spilled. I told him everything. I told him about my dad, Rachel, you, the timelines, my real mom, all of it.”

Max’s eyes widened and she held up her hands in shock. “Wait, wait—you told him about our powers?” Had Nathan also told David about the kid he and Max might have had together? And if he knew all of this, why didn’t he say anything to Max about it?

“I told him everything,” Nathan repeated. “He didn’t believe me at first—it’s actually kind of a long story. I don’t want to get into it.”

Max respected it. The whole thing was probably very triggering for him. “Go on,” she said.

“Long story short: I promised to stop fighting,” Nathan went on. “But then there was Benny Gates. He was this asshole shit-for-brains at Blackwell. David walked up just in time to see me punch him in the side, but then Benny started vomiting blood. He had some medical issue and when I hit him, his kidney ruptured. I was screwed, and David was beyond pissed. He asked me why I broke my promise and I told him it was because Benny said, ‘if your dad doesn’t love you and you got squirted out of his dick, how could you expect anybody else to try?’”

“Fuck Benny Gates,” Max blurted. “There’s tons to love about you.”

Nathan was taken aback by her comment, but he chose to ignore it and continue his story to save them both the embarrassment. “Yeah. So, David ended up saving me from getting expelled. Benny never touched me, but David lied and said he swung first and that there was no way I could have known about his kidney. And I even offered to pay the medical bills to look like the good guy and make Benny feel like shit. But David wasn’t done with me. He thought I got off way too easy.

“He pulled me outside after school a week later and told me I needed to be done with fighting and find a better way to get my anger out. I told him to eat shit, so he calmly took off his badge and hat, and decked me. He hit me so hard my teeth chattered and my ears rang. I hit the ground. He fucking knocked me out.

“When I woke up, he handed me an ice pack and a towel. He sat with me the whole time I was out—like two minutes. He goes, ‘A lot of angry people fight, Nathan,’ and then he shows me this huge scar on his stomach. I mean enormous, Max. Then he says, ‘There are some people angrier than you. And the next time you fight them, I might not be there to drive you to the hospital, like Joyce was there for me.’ He’d gotten stabbed outside of the diner, beaten un-fucking-recognizable. Joyce drove him to the hospital, then he started going to the diner all the time to try to figure out a way to thank her. If Joyce knows he’s the same guy she saved, she’s never told him. David…David made
me not want to die anymore. And in return, I shot his daughter. I will never, ever be able to thank him, or really tell him how fucking sorry I am. I’m a fucking walking disaster.”

Nathan was past the point of tears, sobbing heavily as he looked down at his hands. Max sat there, letting him get it out. She hated how complicated it all was. Hearing it all broke her heart. Nothing she said could possibly make him feel better, because he’d only deny the good she saw in him.

His sniffling was slowing now, and Max lifted his head with both hands, and pulled him close so that his head was resting on her shoulder. She wanted to tell him that he’d made great progress, that he was so, so deserving of the love he desperately wanted, but she didn’t. It was better for her to be quiet right now.

*                                                          *                                                          *

“Jesus, Max, are you trying to feed a whole village?” Nathan asked, annoyed. He had just finished his third trip to the car, grabbing the last bag from their stops earlier that morning.

Max glared at him and set out the food trays no the counter. “The food if sor EVERYONE,” she said. She bent down and untied her shoe, pointing to the Target box near him as she spoke. “Grab me my slippers out of there. The Squidward ones are yours, grumpy.”

Nathan rolled his eyes and walked over to the box. He untied it, grunting with every pull of plastic, and raised an eyebrow once he saw that there was a lot more than slippers inside. First, Nathan put on his own slippers, making a big show of it now that he had Max’s full attention, who was impatiently waiting for her own slippers with crossed arms.

“This is like Christmas in a single box,” Nathan laughed. He eventually tossed her slippers too her—which kind of looked like Goofy—and continued going through the box. There were games, handhelds, movies—and one enormous box at the bottom that Nathan was very, very excited to open.

Max put on her slippers and turned her attention to the food, as the smell had reminded her of just how hungry she was. She turned and began uncovering the trays while Nathan wailed about their loot.

“What the heck is Overwatch?” Nathan asked.

“It came out a couple years ago,” Max replied, licking her finger. “Warren and I would sometimes play on computer. I was really bad at it, though.”

Nathan shrugged and set the bag down, suddenly feeling very hungry. Max was scooping some potatoes and eggs into her bowl. Her long hair had fallen out of its bun, and she flipped her ponytail over her shoulder and licked her hand as she spilled coffee into her mug, and still Nathan just watched. Everything she did seemed so relaxed, and it made him mad. She was so beautiful, and it seemed effortless, and it made him feel even more annoyed.

“What?” Max said accusingly. “Did I do something?”

Nathan snapped out of it quickly and grabbed a bowl from the cabinet behind her, trying to hide his embarrassment. “Nothing,” he said, “actually, I’m wondering why YOU got Goofy slippers and I’m stuck with these.”

Max took a bite from a crispy-looking slice of bacon and took a slip of black coffee while Nathan looked on and stuck out his tongue. She sat down on tall chair by the bar and pat the seat next to her. “There’s aren’t Goofy,” Max said, putting her feet on his lap as he situated. “They’re Goofy’s son.”
“Yeah, and?”

Max ate some eggs and glared at him. “What’s Goofy’s son’s name?”

Nathan stared up at the ceiling and groaned. “Max. His name is Max,” he said.

Max grinned and wiggled her feet. “Exactly.”

Nathan looked at her, laughing. “Okay. Whatever. Why do I have Squidward?”

“Because of your incessant whining,” Max answered. “And now that I’m watching my genius at work, I know I made a good choice.”

“I should have been Pearl,” Nathan grumbled, turning back to his food.

“Pearl? Why Pearl?” Max laughed.

“Cause my dad is Mr. Krabs, with his old, greedy ass,” Nathan explained.

“Ooh, speaking of your dad,” Max remembered, scrambling to get her feet off him and get her butt out of her chair. She went past him and rounded the corner of the counter and began digging through her purse near the coffee maker. Nathan watched curiously, munching on some perfect potatoes, until Max pulled out a cream-colored envelop with a crimson wax seal. It was his dad’s “official” Prescott seal. What an asshole. “He told me to give this to you,” she said. “He said you’d know when to open it.”

Nathan grabbed the letter and rolled his eyes. “God, he’s so old and cryptic. Just say ‘open it when I’m dead,’ jeez. He put the letter on the counter, but he couldn’t pull his hand away. What could have possibly been inside? Probably an apology, right? Or maybe it was just another long letter expressing his utter disappointment in his murderous son? The anxiety was setting in now. What could his dad have possibly written that he couldn’t just say? Nathan needed answers, and the only way to get a hint of what was in the letter was to do something drastic.

“I should call,” Nathan said, wishing he didn’t say it out loud. He set his fork down by his bowl as Max got back into her chair. “I should tell him I got the letter.”

Max didn’t think it was necessary, but she wasn’t going to stop him. It was kind of nice to see Nathan take the initiative and put some effort into his relationship with his father, even though he didn’t have too.

If only Max knew his motives. Nathan pulled out his phone and dialed his father’s number, then set the phone down on the counter as it rang.

“Hello? Nathan?”

Nathan frantically scooped up the phone and put it to his ear. “Hey, yeah, I’m here.”

Max replaced her feet on Nathan’s lap as she quietly continued nibbling on her breakfast.

“I got your letter,” Nathan continued. “No I didn’t. I promise I didn’t open it, Max can vouch for me. No, no session today, we just woke up kinda early. Eating breakfast with Max. Oh, really? Tell her I said hi. No, we brought food home from the diner—there’s something I have to text you about. Yeah. Right, yeah, I should go, too,” Nathan said. His father said something more, and shock flashed across Nathan’s face. “Yeah…I…thanks. Okay. Bye.” Nathan set his phone down. He picked up his fork, shoveled in a huge bite, and immediately started choking.
Max waited calmly, patting his back until he was calm. “Is everything okay?”

“He told me that he loved me,” Nathan coughed, reaching and sipping some of Max’s coffee, only to spit it back into the cup. “He hasn’t said that too me since I was like six. And I said thank you? I said thank you!”

“Well, did you want to say it back?” Max asked plainly.

“Of course not!” Nathan croaked. “I don’t know.”

“Then thank you was probably for the beset,” Max said. “You wouldn’t say it to someone if you didn’t mean it, right?”

Nathan swallowed hard and turned to her. “What are my circumstances?”

Max glowered at him. “Have you really said ‘I love you’ and not meant it?”

“Hear me out,” Nathan said, taking another bite. He grimaced when Max sipped her backwash-coffee, but he didn’t say anything about it. “I once saw this girl crush a cantaloupe between her thighs and I just blurted it out.”

“Why?” Max giggled.

“cause…” Nathan mumbled sheepishly. “I started to imagine her doing that to my head. Then it got weird. This is weird. I don’t want to talk about this.”

Max laughed and pat Nathan on the shoulder. “I probably would have said it, too.”

Max returned to her food and kept her gaze from him. It was nice, but still kind of weird to be talking to him about these things, despite this being the level of comfort she’d been hoping for with him. There was something about it that just sort of…stung.

Max finished her food first, then cleared her bowl from the counter in silence. Nathan eventually wandered away from the counter and back into the enormous box from Target. He dug through the box for a moment, pulling out games here and there. Max walked back around to the bar side of the counter, peering into Nathan’s bowl, which was practically full. She grabbed it and turned the corner and headed toward the sink, only to be surprised by Nathan, who had walked over to her. He took his bowl from her and turned toward the island, set the bowl down, then began looking through the island’s drawers.

“Are you feeling okay?” Max asked, continuing her route to the sink. She turned on the water, wet a sponge, and got to work on her dish. “You barely ate.”

“Yeah,” Nathan said, finally finding out what he was looking for. He pulled a tube of aluminum foil out of the middle island drawer and spread a piece out over his unfinished breakfast. “I don’t really have an appetite so early in the morning. I’ll come back for it, I promise,” he finished.

“Okay, good,” Max said. She pulled up the sleeves on her shirt and began washing her hands. Nathan came up and stood behind her, unmoving and saying nothing. “Can I help you?” she asked, annoyed.

Nathan reached under her arms and wet his hands, then reached for the soap around her clumsily, bumping into her back and pressing her up against the sink. “You’re in the way.”

Max laughed sarcastically and ducked away from him, trying to glare him into wiping that smirk off
his face. Max turned and sat next to the Target box, and began digging.

Nathan rinsed his hands, dried them, then cocked his head toward his left shoulder as he watched Max grumble to herself. “Something missing?” he asked.

“Nope,” Max said, setting a small-ish box down next to her. “I’m just looking for something that’s gonna wipe that smirk off your face.”

“Well that’s just not gonna happen,” Nathan said confidently. “But I’ll help you try. What are you looking for?”

“Rhythm Heaven, and the other DS,” Max explained. “The blue one is mine, and the red one is yours.”

Nathan felt himself getting annoyed again. “Stop buying me red things!”

“I thought red was your favorite color!” Max shouted.

“It is!” Nathan said. He hated being so bothered by how nice she was. “Whatever, forget it. What is Rhythm Heaven?”

“It’s a game,” Max grinned. “You just have to have good rhythm. It’ll be easier to show you. Today is going to be so fun. I have a bunch of games, I got a PS4 for Overwatch, and some movies, including one of my favorites. You’re gonna LOVE Until Dawn, and I am about to be SO MUCH BETTER at Rhythm Heaven than you—”

But before Max could finish, Nathan ran upstairs, and Max felt her face sting and eyes burn once she heard a door slam. She bit her lip, but the tears came anyway, and she sat there alone, still digging through the Target box.

*                                                          *                                                          *

Nathan leaned against the locked door of his old room, staring at the bed he shared with Max last night, rocking back and forth and wiping his wet eyes on his sleeve. Max probably hated him now. He didn’t care. “I don’t care,” he whispered, but even he didn’t believe it. His eyes burned and he wiped the tears away, but he didn’t move. He stayed facing forward, a scowl on his face, willing himself to feel nothing. It was easier that way. Everything was.

He heard a bit of bustle outside, but he ignored it until he felt the door shake behind him.

“Nathan?” he heard. It was Max, of course, probably sitting on the other side of the door. “Please come out.”

He scoffed and quietly rested his head on his arms. He wasn’t going to come out. They weren’t going to spend the day together; that would only complicate things, and Nathan had had ENOUGH of “complicated.” He wasn’t coming out! Spending the day together was stupid and pointless! She would be gone soon and it didn’t matter how much fun they had or how much he—

“We were supposed to spend the whole day together,” Max whined. “But now you’re being all weird and holing yourself up in your…my…the room.”

Nathan remained silent.

“I’m sorry, that was mean,” Max said. “I got your DS all set up. You can have the blue one if you want. I’ll take the red one.”
Nathan wiped his eyes and suppressed laughter when he saw the blue Nintendo DS slide into the room from under the door.

“It’s fun,” Max said. He could hear her tap her DS a few times, then a frustrated sigh, followed by the closing of the handheld. “One of my biggest regrets,” she began, “was not staying in touch with Chloe for those five years. When I came back and spent that week with her, I kept asking myself, ‘Why didn’t I do this sooner?’”

Nathan turned and faced the door, sure that he’d heard her sniffle.

“I missed out of four years of helping you,” she continued shakily, “but this last year—the fifth year—I’ve tried to make up for it. I really have.”

It was true. Max never missed a visit and he felt a lot less alone when she was around. Nathan wasn’t sure if it was because she was the only person in the whole world who could truly understand his pain and the strain he went through, or if it…wasn’t. There were fewer nightmares, better days and the kind of sleepless nights that made going to sleep almost seem unsatisfying, and he knew they had something special.

“I don’t want it to feel like it did with Chloe,” Max went on. “I miss her so much, Nathan. And I would give anything to go back and fill those five years I lived in Seattle with phone calls and letters and visits and pictures—god, the fucking pictures I would have taken with her—but I can’t get the time back. It hurts. It’s always going to hurt. I don’t want that again. Not with you. Not with anybody.

“I care about you,” she said, and Nathan felt his heart skip a beat. “And I’ve told you a billion times that I’m not that going anywhere. I’m here for you—not because you asked me, but because I’m your friend. I want to be here for you.” She took in a deep breath and put her palms against the door. “Please, Nathan,” she went on, her voice barely louder than a whisper, “please don’t shut me out.”

Nathan yanked the door open and Max struggled to stand up. Before she could say anything, he pulled her into him so tightly, she almost couldn’t breathe. “I’m sorry,” he sobbed as they lowered to the ground. He didn’t know why being around her was so fucking hard. It was all he wanted, all he’d ask for, but sometimes too much to bear. Max was always trying so hard. She was so good so effortlessly, and one day she’d realize that she was way too good for him. “I’m sorry for everything. And I’m sorry that I didn’t tell you that you drank my spit-coffee.”

“Oh, I knew that,” Max said. She pulled away and tossed her purse into the room, where it landed near the bed. She didn’t want to be checking her phone every few minutes—she wanted no distractions. “I drank it as a power move.”

Nathan glared at her. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah. And I thought you still not saying anything after I drank it was your response power move.”

Nathan laughed as he helped her up. The two of them headed down the stairs. He felt better now. “So what’s first on the menu?”

“Teenage Cocktail,” Max said. Nathan gave her a lock of utter shock and she quickly followed up with, “One of my favorite movies.”


Max rolled her eyes. “It’s about two girls falling in love and then getting into trouble with a married guy.”
“Yawn.”

“There’s a sex scene in it!” Max defended. “Okay, maybe not, but I know you’re gross enough to not be able to deny wanting to see two girls kissing.”

Nathan gave her a loving look and placed his hand on his chest. “You are truly a woman after my own heart,” he said.

Max rolled her eyes as she took his hand and led him down the stairs.

*                                                          *                                                          *

“So…what did you think?” Max asked. “And don’t hold back. I want to know how you really feel, be honest.” The two of them were sitting on the couch in the downstairs loft. The loft was enormous, with a TV on the wall unit in front of them. There were two tall windows letting the light of the day flood in, and the door to the room was behind him. To the sides of the room were a foosball table and an air hockey table, respectively, both top-of-the-line. Max had her feet on the cushion as Nathan’s hand rested on her knee. A pillow sat in his lap.

“The whole bedroom party-scene was a little weird,” Nathan commented. “I mean yeah, tons of kids were doing coke and shrooms and drinking, but we fucked in our dorms like adults.”

Max laughed, not exactly genuinely, more due to nerves. “You’ve never done anything like that before?”

“Been naked and made out with my male best friend? Can’t say I have,” Nathan laughed. “I mean I took a bath with Victoria once, but I was like three.”

Max’s face went red. “I’ve done something sort of like that.”

“No shit?”

“Yeah,” Max said, taking Teenage Cocktail from the PS4 and returning it to its case. “I was twenty-one. I had this boyfriend, Matt. He invited me to a party at this girl Margot’s house and we all just sat around drinking and talking all night. Eventually the party died down a little and we all moved into Margot’s room—I think there ended up being six of us—and they all just started taking their clothes off and I was losing my mind.”

Nathan laughed out loud. “You were in a different world.”

“I was,” Max laughed. “I didn’t want them to think I was weird, so I took my top and bra off and just hung around in my underwear with them. Then it all came to an end when Margot brought out an old, dirty syringe. Then I got dressed and got the hell out of there.”

As Nathan laughed and asked questions, Max opened Overwatch and stuck it into the Playstation. It was still popular, so Nathan would be able to play on a headset with other people. While he played, Max would unlock levels in Rhythm Heaven. She knew the blue DS would end up embedded in the wall if Nathan tried to play through it by himself. While the game downloaded, Max handed Nathan the PS4 controller and explained how the game was played and what the heroes’ powers were as best she could.

“But there’s a tutorial, I’d do it a few times. Oh, and you have to pick an ID for the game and your PS4.”

Nathan put his hand over his heart. “You’re letting me keep it?”
“Duh,” Max said. “It’s a gift. So anyway, what’s your PS4 ID going to be?”

“PS4 is gonna be TeenageCocktail for sure,” Nathan laughed. “For the game…you’ll see. I’m excited. I haven’t played a game in a long time.”

Max smiled sweetly and turned her attention to her red DS. She started Rhythm Heaven up as Nathan relaxed into the couch and got comfortable. He leaned back as the game start, and was very surprised when Max laid across the couch, over his lap.

Nathan lifted his hands and the controller, not wanting to touch her. “Um…what are you doing?”

“This is how I concentrate, so get used to it,” Max said. “Call Victoria if you don’t believe me. I laid on her like this when I was editing for me second photo book. Josh, too.” Max continued tapping along with the music quietly playing on her DS without breaking to look at him.

“Where am I supposed to put my hands?”

“Just pretend I’m a table, I don’t care,” she fussed. “Now shush. You’re distracting me.”

Nathan sighed and rested his arms on her, a little surprised by how comfortable she was. He typed in his tag for Overwatch and adjusted the headset, making sure one ear was out so that he could hear Max.

Nathan got through the tutorials easily, and soon navigated his way to the arcade. “What’s ‘Mystery Heroes?’”

“No matter—who you pick—you’ll usually end up—playing as someone else,” Max spoke between DS screen taps, careful not to break her concentration. She readjusted herself over his lap, pursing her lips as she finally completed her least favorite Rhythm Heaven level, The Dazzles.

“Who should I play?” Nathan asked.

“It really doesn’t matter, Nathan,” Max said, turning to look at him. “The different sections are the different types of heroes, like I said before. So, you should remember who’s offense or defense, tank or healer. I play healer or defense when I’m not in Mystery Heroes. Usually Mercy or Junkrat.”

“Well Junkrat looks like shit,” Nathan said. “And I’m not playing healer. I’m gonna be the blue girl. She’s got her tits out. She knows what the fuck is up.”

Nathan rolled her eyes and turned back to her own game.

Nathan unmuted his mic, unbeknownst to Max. “Hey,” he said. “Are there any kids in this game?”

“Maybe,” Max replied.

“I was not talking to you, I’m talking to the group chat, Max. How old are you?” Nathan continued, facing the TV. “What the fuck! Shit, sorry. Okay, listen kid, I’m gonna try, but I’m making no promises on clean language here. Also, why the FUCK—heck—is your name Babyblast?”

Max giggled as she continued with her own game. Initially, Max had been worried about him playing with other people. His potty-mouth didn’t bother her, but she knew that he seemed kind of… abrasive. Max closed her game, deciding to watch him play. He turned up the speaker in the headset so that she could hear both the game sounds and the other players talking to Nathan. Max scoot back over him, and Nathan rolled his eyes as he lifted his controller and she slid over him and situated herself next to him on the couch.
“You need to pick a spot and stick to it,” Nathan grumbled.

Max glared at him, then playfully stuck her tongue out.

“Put that thing back in your mouth.”

“Why don’t you make me?”

“HA!” Nathan shouted. “You don’t want me to do that.” He turned back to the screen, and Max could hear the other players giggling as they slowly picked their characters. “What? No, dickfuck3000, Max is not my girlfriend. She’s a pain in my ass.” He shielded himself and laughed as Max grabbed a throw pillow and belted him with it. “TOMCAT63, HURRY THE FUCK UP AND PICK.”

“Wait,” Max said, pointing, “are you seriously, SERIOUSLY going to keep your gamertag ‘DaddyPrescott’?”

“Yes, MommyCaulfield,” Nathan said bluntly. “It’s a good name. It’s a perfect name.”

“Whoa, did you say Max Caulfield?” Babyblast’s little voice came through. “Like the photographer?”

Nathan and Max made startled eye contact. She leaned in close to his face, and for a split second, she saw his lips twitch. Ignoring it, Max pulled the microphone closer to her mouth. “Yeah, I’m that Max Caulfield.”

“Oh my god!” Babyblast yelled. “I’m Kieran, I’m ten years old and I have your ‘Arcadia Bay Wildlife Series’ photo book! I can’t believe I’m talking to Max Caulfield! You’re a lucky guy, DaddyPrescott!”

Nathan covered the microphone and winced. The name didn’t seem as funny anymore. “Can I change my battletag from this menu?”

“Why don’t you have your GIRLFRIEND Max tell you?” dickfuck3000 said through the headphones.

“She. IS NOT. MY GIRLFRIEND!” Nathan screeched.

Max laughed and pulled up the settings mini-menu, an option she wished they’d had when the game first game out two years ago. She got to the screen for him, and hand to hold her stomach while she laughed as she typed in his new battletag: dickfuck3001.

“Aww, you’re an asshole,” dickfuck3000 said. “I was just kidding about the girlfriend thing!”

“Your actions have consequences. Now, if Tomcat63 is still here, pick your goddamn character—sorry Babyblast—so we can play!”

“I HATE THIS FUCKIN’ GAME!” Nathan shouted as he resurrected and came back as Junkrat for the third time in a row. Nathan mistakenly threw out the bomb that launched things into the air, not a grenade like he meant to, and shot himself into the air, just in time for Pharah’s rocket barrage to rain down justice and send Nathan back to the spawn room.

“No offense,” Kieran giggled, “but you kinda suck at this game, 3001.”
“This is hilarious,” dickfuck3000, whose name they learned was Marcus, laughed. He sounded young, but opted not to share his age. However, his mentions of “his bus” or his “crappy anatomy teacher” made it obvious that he was still in high school. Max automatically wondered if he was a student at Blackwell. “You are giving me GREAT footage for my youtube channel. Thank you, ’3001.

“Choke on my di—uh, never mind,” Nathan censored, not wanting to face Max’s glare.

“You sure whine a lot,” Marcus said.

“If I end up healer, I’m letting you die,” Nathan replied.

“You’re so petty.”

“Damn right,” Nathan said. He came out of the spawn room as Genji, and a reflected an oncoming bullet from Widowmaker. “A guy once cut me off on the freeway, so I followed him home and took a shit in the sun roof of his car. Sorry, Babyblast. Uh, Kieran.”

Max couldn’t contain herself and laughed so hard she nearly fell off the couch. She could imagine nineteen-year-old Nathan, eyes squinting with rage as he most likely tailgated the poor soul home. Then she imagined the immediate guilt Nathan DEFINITELY felt afterward, then his decision to accept that guilt as his punishment and get the hell out of there before he got caught. Nathan was so wild, and Max found herself wishing she’d taking up Hayden or Dana’s offer of partying with him in the Vortex Club.

“You don’t have to apologize every time you curse,” Kieran said. “I do have an older sister, you know.”

“What’s that got to do with anything?” said Marcus, who jumped of the edge of the map as soon as he saw he was playing as Torbjorn.

“Shut up, Marcus, you’re like twelve,” Nathan said, reflecting a sleep dart and eliminating an obnoxious Soldier 76. “What about your sister, Kieran?”

“She says curse words all the time,” she said.

“Just because SHE says them doesn’t me I should,” Nathan said. A moment passed and Nathan looked over at Max, confused. He quickly muted his mic. “What the hell is ‘high noon’?”

But before Max could tell him to find cover, McCree’s bullets took him back to the spawn room.

“That’s high noon,” Max giggled as Nathan grabbed her hair and covered her face with it.

Nathan unmuted the mic and returned to the game, a grin on his face as he came out of the spawn room as Lucio. He shouted some obscenities, apologized, then tailed Kieran, who was playing as D.Va and being ganged up on by the other team. A pretty aggressive Ana was shooting her with sleep darts, then dancing around, then shooting again before Kieran even had a chance to stand. Marcus took care of the Ana as Widowmaker from afar, while Nathan used his sound wave to blast the remaining members on the other team over the nearby wall to their eliminations. A few seconds later, the match ended, and Nathan laughed proudly while Marcus rolled his eyes when the words “Play of the game: dickfuck3001” flashed across the screen with a replay of the blast.

“Good game,” Kieran laughed. “I sent you both a friend request!”

“Yeah good game,” Marcus said.
Max felt her heart leap when she saw how happy Nathan looked. He thanked everyone for the game, then exited, excited to add both Kieran and Marcus as friends. Much to Max’s surprise, Nathan shut off the playstation, then turned to her, producing the blue DS from his jacket pocket. He leaned back and retrieved the red one from where Max had left it on the other side of the couch. He quickly switched the games, and started Rhythm Heaven from scratch on the red DS while Max hid a smile and resumed her level on the blue one.

“Show me how to do this,” Nathan said impatiently.

“There is an entire tutorial AND a tutorial for every level, you don’t need my help for this,” Max grumbled. “Now shh. I need to concentrate. You can play on mine once I unlock all the games.”

“But Max,” Nathan whined playfully. She was lying against the arm of the couch, her feet resting on his lap. Nathan knocked one of her feet off the edge of the couch and rested his elbows by her waist on the cushion and then rested his DS on her stomach. She ignored him, of course, right up until he started tickling her mercilessly. Her knee jerked up dangerously, narrowly missing his still-bruised nose.

Nathan pulled himself up, both laughing wryly at the close call. “Show me how to play,” he said again. He sat up on the middle of the couch and waved her over. Max rested against him, knees to her chest with her feet on the couch, and he put his arm around her waist, locking her position next to him and aligning his DS with hers. While Max walked him through the first level’s tutorial, Nathan tried to focus. He wouldn’t be distracted by the sweet scent of her hair, the little freckles on her neck, or how good she felt cuddled up against him.

*                                                          *                                                          *

The day pretty much went on in that pattern; a movie followed by some gameplay. Max enjoyed a few quickplay games on Overwatch with Kieran, Marcus, and a recent new friend, Quinn, while Nathan grit his teeth and nearly snapped his stylus and DS in half playing Rhythm Heaven.

They ate pizza and Nathan judged Max hardcore for choosing to watch something as weird as “Sausage Party” while they vegged out on the couch. Everyone had had their fill of breakfast food, and Nathan had really enjoyed Max scooting closer and closer to him as they played through some of Until Dawn in the dark.

They were just finishing up “Moana” and Max stood from the couch and stretched. A yawn escaped her mouth and Nathan eyed her from the right side of the couch. “What now?”

“I’m actually a little sleepy,” Max said. “I haven’t woken up that early in a while.”

“Oh,” Nathan replied, sounding a little disappointed. “Gonna head up?”

“Yeah,” Max yawned again. “You coming?”

“Nah,” Nathan said, reaching and grabbing the playstation controller. “I’m gonna play Overwatch for a little bit.”

“Okay, have fun,” Max said.

“Good night,” Nathan said, turning his attention to the TV.

Max stretched again. “Good night,” she said, just before leaning in and kissing him. She pulled away
quickly, unable to speak, then hurried behind the couch and out the door toward the stairs.

Nathan stayed on the couch, his heart pounding, eyes wide and locked on the TV. He was content with her doing it out of habit. He was content with ignoring it and pretending it never happened, right up until he heard Max’s footsteps running from the stairs and the door to the downstairs loft open and slam. She tore the controller from his hands and threw it onto the cushion next to them while he pulled her into his lap, and she leaned in and kissed him again.

It was sloppy; their lips mashing together, teeth clicking, tongues lingering but not quite knowing where to go, but god, it was so right, and Nathan couldn’t help but think that this was the “progress” he’d been waiting for.

Max, on the other hand, had way too much going on in her head to try to focus on a singular thought. It was hard enough to focus on kissing when he winced any time her nose touched his—which was a lot—not to mention the swirling thoughts of “this is bad” and “fuck I hope nobody comes in here right now.”

It all came to an abrupt halt when Max felt Nathan's cold fingers under her shirt, fiddling with the hook of her bra. She leaned back as far as she could go, using all her might to get out of his reach, but began to fall backward off the couch. Nathan snapped to it, summarily noticing the fear in her eyes, but it was too late to catch her, so the best he could do was go down with her.

They hit the ground with a thud, looking into each other’s eyes as they both ran through what had just happened. Nathan hovered over her, shaking while she looked up at him from the floor, the both just staring at each other, unable to move. Max’s eyes darted left and right, trying to look at anything but him but she couldn’t. She couldn’t believe this was all happening, and she especially couldn’t believe that they were both leaning in so it could happen some more.

“Max? Nathan?” Kristine called from the other side of the door, knocking. “I’m going to bed, good night!”

In her anxiety-fueled haste to not let Kristine see them in such a compromising position, Max shot up, jabbing her bruised eye onto his tender nose. They both grunted, with Max standing and walking to the right side of the couch and covering her eye while Nathan cupped his nose and took a seat on the left side.

Max uncovered her eye once the stinging subsided and she heard Kristine’s door close upstairs. She looked at Nathan, clearing her throat and tucking her hair behind her ears, having come to her senses. “Yeah, so,” she croaked, prompting her to clear her throat again, “good night.”

“Good night,” Nathan replied as she bolted from the room and up the stairs.

Max closed the door to his old room harshly before leaning against it and sliding down with her knees to her chest. “Why did I do that?” she repeated to herself over and over, even after she gathered the strength to walk over and start digging in her bag for a tank top and shorts for pajamas.

She threw off her long-sleeved shirt and was shrugging her bra off when she realized in complete shock, that Nathan had been successful in unhooking it. The thought of how easy it had been embarrassed her even more, and she laid on their palette on the floor, covering her eyes, still wondering why she had kissed him in the first place.

Nathan, however, had absolute clarity. He stared at the blank TV screen, watching his life flash before his eyes. Here he was in his old house, reliving the day they brought Sergeant home, reliving his very first kiss, every Christmas Eve and summer break, every birthday and Halloween, the way
his dad treated him, Rachel’s death, and he realized that every single thing that had happened in his life was leading up to the moment he kissed Maxine Caulfield for the very first time.

Max’s eyes fluttered open and she quickly flipped onto her left side, only to meet Nathan's gaze as he gently tugged on her long hair, out of the ponytail. She reached for her nearby purse, digging around for her phone, only to disappointedly withdraw her hand. The house was silent except for their breathing, so Max knew it had to be late.

Nathan reached out and caressed her cheek with his thumb, absolutely silently. He felt her move closer to him, and he touched his other hand to her other cheek, and scooted closer and closer until their lips were touching as well.

It was better this time now that, with the door locked, their chance of being interrupted was slim. His tongue rubbed over her lips, and she parted them as he lifted himself on top of her. He positioned himself between her legs, drinking in her sighs, as his very eager hand found his way up her thigh. Nathan squeezed, causing her to buck her hips in surprise. The sensation of her rubbing against him was almost too much, so he put a little weight on her, kissing her more deeply to try to distract himself as she ran her fingers through his hair.

Much to Max’s dismay, he pulled away without warning, only to have her disappointment melt away once she felt him undoing the tie on her shorts. He got onto his knees and lifted her hips, slowly pulling her shorts down left—right—then all the way down and up into the air triumphantly before throwing them behind him and snickering when he heard them hit the wall. He hooked his thumbs under her underwear.

Max gripped his forearms and lifted her hips a bit more, only to be surprised again when he pulled his hands away, gripped the bottom of her shirt and lifted it, only to completely baffle her with an exasperated, “What the fuck?”

Had she heard that right?

Nathan placed his hand firmly on her left breast, squeezed for a second, then pulled his hand away with a downhearted sigh. He poked and prodded some more, his left hand cupping her hip while his thumb rubbed over her nipple, then his index finger slid agonizingly slowly over her belly button.

Max bit her lip as she felt her underwear dampen, and Nathan leaned down, still balancing her on his lap. He got a good grip of her shirt with his right hand and kept it up over her breasts and under her armpits while he leaned in so close to her chest, his hair was touching her chin.

“This sucks,” he said, just before reaching and poking her nipple a little too hard.

“Okay, okay, I’m not a fucking Bop-It,” Max seethed, putting the base of her palm up under his chin in an attempt to push him away and tilt his head back so he wouldn’t see the tears forming in her eyes. “And if it sucks so much, you can leave,” she whimpered.

“Holy shit, Max, are you crying?” he asked, his genuine concern confusing her and making the hurt sting even more. “Fuck, Max, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, please don’t cry,” he said so tenderly it made her entire body hot. “I can’t see anything, at all,” he explained, rolling his finger over her nipple a lot more gently this time. “And I really, really fucking want to.” She moaned and he gripped her hip again, leaning down and pressing his lips against her neck. He grinded against her, feeling more confident with every sigh, and she felt his lips curl into a smile against her skin.
He trailed soft kisses down her collarbone, then drew her breast to his lips, smirking again when he felt her nails dig into his shoulder.

Nathan continued trailing kisses down her stomach, stopping once he got to the upper hem of her underwear. He grabbed at the top with his teeth and let the elastic snap against her skin. “Like right now,” he continued, returning his thumbs to her underwear, “I really wish I could see your face.” He pulled off her underwear in a single swoop, then sent them flying across the room, where they eventually joined her shorts.

Nathan rubbed his thumb between her legs, surprised by how wet she’d gotten so promptly.

Max could barely contain herself, and his touch was almost enough to send her over the edge, and it wouldn’t take much at this point. Nathan scooted way down and positioned his head between her thighs. His tongue barely touched her when her entire body spasmed and she slapped her legs shut, cupping his head. She released him a minute later, once she regained control of herself.

Nathan pulled away and cracked his neck, then wiped the edge of his bottom lip with the tip of his thumb. “Did you just—”

“Yes,” Max blurted, closing her legs once he was out of the way. She covered her face in embarrassment, rolled over onto her side, and said nothing. She only prayed that she’d either become invisible or disappear altogether.

Nathan was thankful she couldn’t see him, because he knew his face was red. He pulled his shirt off over his head, then gently rested himself against her again. Her bare chest against his felt fucking amazing, and with how close he was to her face, he could see very clearly that she was enjoying herself, too. Her eyes almost glowed in the dark of the room, and Nathan pressed his lips against hers again, unable to stop himself. He wanted to enjoy this, to savor every single second, but he couldn’t help it. His hand found its way back between her legs and she cried out his name, and covering her mouth with his other hand was just about the hardest thing he’d ever done because fuck: he wanted to hear her say it more.

“We have to be quiet,” he whispered as he slowly moved his hand away from her mouth. His other thumb worked over her sweet spot gently, as he tentatively slid a finger inside her. Her hips bucked again and he grinned. “If it makes you feel better,” he whispered. “I know I’m not gonna last long.”

Nathan pulled away from her then, no longer touching her. The sudden absence of brought back that same dissatisfaction, up until she realized he was fiddling with the tie on his own pants. He slid them down just enough to be comfortable, but not all the way, just in case Kristine decided to become a lock pick in the middle of the night.

Eventually he got back on top of Max and pressed his lips against hers, all the while grinding between her legs, bare, hard, and ready. Max closed her eyes and cupped his face. She knew this was a bad idea, but she didn’t care, at least, not right now. She was past the point of stopping—they both were—that is, until she felt Nathan's tip move a little lower and press against her.

“Wait, wait, stop,” Max said, pushing up on his chest.

Nathan immediately did what he was told and hovered over her, making sure no part of them was touching, despite how fucking badly he wanted them to be. “Are you okay?” he asked as she twisted her upper body toward her purse.

“Yeah, lemme just,” Max started. “Gimme a second.”
Nathan waited patiently while she eventually found what she wanted while digging in her purse, and she turned back to him.

“All good?” Nathan asked.

“Oh, yeah,” Max managed, getting comfortable under him again. “Just…um…just wanted to grab a condom.”


“I can tell,” Max smirked. She brought the corner of the condom wrapper to her teeth and carefully tore it open.

Nathan reached out his hand, only to be surprised when she didn’t hand him the open wrapper. He twitched when he felt her fingers on his tip, almost annoyed by how sensitive it was.

“Oh,” Max said, pulling her hand away, thinking she’d hurt him. “Did you want to—”

“Nope,” he interrupted with a staggered breath. “You’re, uh…you’re doing great.”

Max felt herself swell with pride as she rolled the condom down his length and he breathed out her name. He laid her back down onto the bed with more gentleness than either of them believed he had. He rose and lifted her hips onto him, trying to make the position better for her. Nathan pushed into Max so slowly she almost wanted to tell him to go faster, but she couldn’t deny how good the anticipation made it feel.

“Jesus Christ,” Nathan grunted. “Fuck,” he continued, falling forward and catching himself with his arms at her sides before he could knock heads with her. He let out a low, guttural growl and pushed in a little more, bending and resting his head on her chest while she tried to hold in her own moans and tangled her fingers in his hair. He finally lifted himself enough to look at her and let it sink in that they were doing this. “It’s in,” he panted. He couldn’t believe how difficult that was. It wasn’t that she wasn’t ready—she was plenty turned on. The sensation, the way she was squeezing him had been very difficult to get through, but she didn’t need to know that. “When was the last time you god laid?” he deflected crudely, trying to think of ways to last more than sixty seconds. “Never?”

Max wasn’t having it. She could feel him throbbing inside of her, and her excitement only grew. She pulled him back down and parted his lips with her tongue, kissing him slow and demanding, forcing him to feel what he was trying to not to.

And he felt it, all right. He could feel her fingertips igniting every single cell in his body, and if she wanted this to be more than just being attached at the hips, he’d have to get her to stop, or it was going to end a lot sooner than it needed to. He pulled away from her lips and bent down and grazed her nipples with his teeth greedily, only stopping when she squeaked. He was sure he didn’t hurt her, but still he pulled his mouth away, replacing it with his palm.

He thrusted cautiously until he picked up a suitable rhythm, and smirked in satisfaction when he heard her moan his name. She was saying all kinds of great things about him but he barely heard her; he was far too focused on pushing just a little deeper and feeling just a little bit more of her around him every time. It had been so long for him, and he did NOT want to mess this up.

Max still couldn’t believe this was happening. Well, she could, but she couldn’t believe it was happening with Nathan Prescott. It didn’t feel wrong or bad, but she had an inkling feeling that it only felt that way because he was just so good at this. She knew a fucking shitstorm of proportions more epic than the tornado was coming for them, but it was hard to focus on bad things when she felt
so incredible. She was very much aware of how she tested his girth, and it made the experience that much more memorable. Nathan rolled his thumb over her sweet spot and rocked his hips in such a way that all Max had to do was lie back and enjoy herself.

Nathan got bold and thrust a little bit harder, and she squeezed his arm and threw her head back as her entire body shook.

Nathan stopped immediately and looked over her. “Did I hurt you?” he breathed.

“No, no,” Max gasped, propping herself up on her elbows. “Keep going.”

Nathan grinned, his ego floating up in space. He delicately wrapped his arm around her and laid her back down onto their makeshift bed and lifted her hips once more. He pulled her toward him with an insane hunger, aching to somehow get closer to her than he already was. He could feel her tightening around him with each thrust and her soft moans were driving him wild.

It hadn’t been very long but he was close, god, so fucking close, and he suddenly cursed his OWN dry spell. Eventually he slowed to a stop, desperate to try to make himself last longer.

Through the years, Nathan had gotten good at getting what he wanted, and the thought that it might not happen tonight pissed him off. He wanted her to be shaking, screaming his name, and begging him to bring her closer to sweet release. He’d done this plenty of times; he knew what worked! Nathan made a hasty trail of kisses along her collarbone and up her neck. He rested his ear between her breasts, listening to the calming rhythm of her heartbeat and thrusting into her in perfect sync.

“Max, you’re perfect,” he sighed.

Max opened her eyes, but the face she was seeing wasn’t Nathan’s.

It was Mark Jefferson.

“Yes, Max, so perfect,” she heard Mark Jefferson’s voice say.

Nathan felt Max seize up under him and he stopped his thrusting, very sure that he must have hurt her this time. “Max?” he said softly, reaching for her.

“No,” Max broke down. She felt Nathan pull out of her and shuffle to get his clothes back on.

“No what?” Nathan panicked. “Max?” He threw his shirt on and fixed his pants.

“He killed me in the dark room,” Max continued wailing. “He said I was the perfect spectacle and he killed me!” Max slammed her eyes shut, put her nails to her neck, and scratched hard enough to draw blood. “The needle. In my neck. He put the needle in my neck! It’s still in my neck! It’s still in my neck!”

Nathan ran to the door and slowly lifted the light switch near it, letting a very dim light fill the room. He flew into action upon seeing the little red droplets of blood on Max’s neck grow. He clumsily wet a wash cloth in the bathroom, keeping his eyes shut tightly so he didn’t suddenly imagine Sophia Isley there. He went to Max and gently moved her nails away, pinching her neck and instantly seeing her calm, even if it was just a little bit. “I pulled out the needle, Max,” he said. “He just took pictures. You’re alive. You’re okay.” He put the towel on her neck as she laid there in the fetal position, heavy sobs coming from deep in her throat. Nathan didn’t want to make it worse by touching her again, but he knew she’d be horrified if she woke up pantsless next to him tomorrow morning. He threw the blanket over her and tucked it under her neck with minimal contact, then rested his hand on her head as he sat next to her. He pulled his knees to his chest and rested his chin on them, still
massaging her head and soothing her with a chorus of “Mark Jefferson can’t hurt you anymore.”

Max’s eyes shot open, her pounding heartbeat waking her up. Her head was buried in Nathan’s chest, and he was lying uncomfortably on his right side while his left hand was still stroking her hair. His eyes were half open, and he was mumbling something Max couldn’t make out.

“What time is it?” Max asked, discreetly pulling her shirt down while she was under the blanket.

“Nathan?” Max whispered.

“I’m awake,” he shouted, opening his eyes. “I’m awake, I’m awake,” he repeated, slapping his face lightly to try to convince her that he hadn’t been asleep.

“Wait,” Nathan said, lifting herself up.

“Wait,” Nathan said, holding out his hand. He crossed the room, picked up her shorts, and tossed them to her, all while facing the door. “Get dressed.”

Max rubbed her neck, only to feel a hardened towel roll down her shoulder and onto the floor next to her. Noting the small red patches on the towel, she felt her throat go dry. Max lifted the covers and stuck her feet through the holes of her shorts as Nathan rocked back and forth by the door, determined to keep his gaze off her. He’d spend the entire day doing that if he had to. Late as it was, Nathan realized that this had all been a mistake. Two minutes of passion and pent up sexual tension had ruined everything. The only saving grace was that now, he didn’t have to imagine it happening while keeping a straight face.

Avoiding it was going to be near impossible, but he was determined to try to pretend it never happened. Their friendship was complicated enough and the absolute last thing Nathan wanted to do was turn it into a complicated relationship. If she’d be cool about it, so would he.

Nathan almost laughed at the thought. Max didn’t do “cool”—she dealt with things, and he didn’t want to deal with this. Dealing with it meant he’d have to admit that to him, Max was not just a friend. For fuck’s sake, it was already hard enough right now not to turn around and see if they could pick up where they left off, and he hated himself for it. The thought of possibly losing her because of this locked his chest up in a way he’d never felt before. And he knew how he felt would only scare Max away. So he was going to do what he always did: bury it. He pushed everything down, down, down, until it reached numbness, and he vowed to do what he had to keep it that way.

Max caught her fact in her hands, far too humiliated to look at him. She thought she was over this. She’d never had an episode during sex before, and it was traumatic, to say the least. In her heart, she knew that it had been Nathan, but her head just couldn’t grasp it. Mark Jefferson had a nasty way of lingering, and Max couldn’t do anything about it, because in this timeline, her kidnapping didn’t exist. The only way she’d get help was if she sowed proof using her journal and even THEN there was no guarantee anyone would believe her.

“I’m sorry,” Max said, needing to fill the silence.

“Why are you apologizing?” Nathan asked.
“I don’t know,” she whimpered, tearing up again. “I’m so embarrassed…nothing like this has ever happened during sex before and—”

Nathan rolled his eyes and finally turned to her. He kept his distance, more so for himself, and sat down. There was nothing more he wanted to do than crawl over there and comfort her, but he couldn’t risk it. “Don’t be embarrassed,” Nathan said. “I…I get it. But please don’t think about me right now. Think about you.”

“I don’t know what to do, Nathan,” Max sobbed. “What he did to me doesn’t exist for anyone but me. And the thought that he could have done something more?” Max slowly trailed as sobs caught in her throat. She remembered how it was. The day Chloe died, Max did great. She talked to the police about the shooting, she spent hours at Joyce’s house trying to comfort her, only to end up at the hospital by herself while a nurse carefully tested her with a rape kit. She’d pressed for discretion, even after the nurse urged her to also contact the police. It’d been found that Max hadn’t been sexually assaulted, but it didn’t make her feel any better. She had been violated.

And on top of that, stupid as it was, she couldn’t help but feel like she’d hurt Nathan's feelings when they stopped last night. He could barely even look at her, keeping his distance and keeping his head down when he spoke.

It was hard to respond to that. “He’s in jail, Max. I mean, he and I are at the same fucking place and I don’t even see him. He can’t hurt you. Look, I’ve barely slept, so I’m going to go to sleep.” He stood up and didn’t look back to see her fact as he left the room, but he hoped that she’d at least stopped crying.

*                                                          *                                                          *

Max was in the kitchen days later, angrily typing a response to a bride from the past asking if she’d do professional baby photos. She wasn’t mad at the woman—she was mad at Nathan.

He’d been ignoring her since he went to bed that day, pretending like she didn’t exist. He’d locked himself in the loft all day the entire time, ignoring every text sent or knock on the door and shouting “I’m fine!” when she tried to talk to him. If she did something, the least he could do was tell her what it was. This cold-shoulder bullshit was childish, and it was making her anxious. They had just gotten comfortable—albeit a little too comfortable—and now she was back to walking on eggshells.

Max’s computer froze and she knew she’d hit it if she continued with how annoyed she was. She got out of her barstool and got herself a glass of water, not sure if she wanted to drink it or dump it over Nathan's head once she saw him heading toward the kitchen. Max quickly walked away from the refrigerator—which was near the kitchen entrance—and placed herself by the sink, far out of his way so he wouldn’t have to try so hard to dodge her.

Nathan stumbled into the kitchen groggily, opting to leave and sit next to where Max had been sitting at the bar. He looked horrible; his eyes were bloodshot and he was completely disheveled, still in his pajamas as he laid his head down on the counter. “Coffee,” he grumbled, “please.”

“Oh, so we’re talking now?” Max sneered, reaching inside the cabinet to the left of the sink to pull out his favorite mug—white with a blue whale on it. She filled the cup, then yanked the sugar canister over to her. “How much?”

“Four,” he said. How angry she seemed was almost flattering, but he wasn’t going to let that change anything. He’d been doing a great job of holding everything down and he wasn’t going to let her hurt feelings change that. He’d rather her be salty than have to talk to her about this.
“Cream?”

“No,” Nathan said.

Max turned and set his mug on the island. “You can come get it yourself, wouldn’t want our fingers to accidentally touch or something.”

Nathan gave her a dirty look and dragged himself out of the seat. He walked over to the counter and grabbed his mug. “What’s your problem?”

“I figured you were afraid of catching something from me since you’ve been avoiding me like the fucking plague,” Max said.

“Have I?” he said. “I hadn’t noticed.”

“You’re being a dickhead,” Max scoffed.

Nathan raised his eyebrows in agreement, annoying her even further. He took a sip of the coffee she’d prepared for him, only to spit it back into the cup in disgust. He didn’t know what sort of sleight of hand trick she used, but there was no sugar in his coffee. It was black. “What did you do that for?”

“Why are you avoiding me!” she shouted back.

“You’re delusional,” Nathan deflected, pacing to the other side of the kitchen, near the door to the backyard. Kristine’s purse was sitting on the kitchen table, and he wondered which of her vices lingered after five years. He walked over, testing Max’s patience, then dug around until he found what he was looking for. He slid a cigarette out of Kristine’s pack and tried to light it with the bic lighter he’d pulled out with it.

“Seriously? Smoking?” Max gaped. “In the house?”

“God, will you shut up?” Nathan spat. Noticing the look of hurt on her face, he softened his tone. Being away from her these few days had been fucking horrible. Sleep wasn’t the same without her sleep-mumbles, and he found himself panicking at every little sound. He was a wreck without her, but he had to be content with that.

Embarrassed about his attitude, he shuffled away, jerking the sliding door to the enormous backyard open, then closing just the screen door behind him. He lit the cigarette and took a drag, then instantly fell into a coughing fit. Looking at the cigarette, he realized that this would definitely be his last one. Something about smoking had been so attractive when he was hanging around Max and all her friends, but now, it made him want to throw up. “Happy?” he managed, turning and looking at Max through the screen door.

“Of course not,” Max surrendered, reaching or the screen door. She watched beads of sweat form on his forehead, but she hastily got outside before he could try to stop her. Every step she took toward him he matched with a step back. Max slid the door closed with her foot until she heard it click.

Nathan pushed past her to the door—the closest he’d gotten to her in days—and tugged on it, hard. “Great job,” Nathan said, taking a longer, easier drag, “you locked us out,” he finished, blowing smoke.

Max rolled her eyes and pulled her phone out of the pocket of her yellow flowy skirt. “I’ll call Kristine, but not until you talk to me,” Max bargained.
“You do realize I can just shout for her, right?” Nathan challenged. He took another drag and blew the smoke out, and Max just about lost her mind.

“I'm sick of this!” she screeched, furiously shoving her phone back into her skirt pocket. She put her hands on her hips and paced in anger while Nathan stood there looking like an idiot. “I have been scrubbing my brain trying to figure out what the FUCK I did to make you so angry at me and I just—can’t—figure—it—out!” She went up to him and grabbed the front of his shirt, her eyes pleading as she went on. “I know it was you when we were doing it yesterday, Nathan, and I’m sorry I just panicked. I’m sorry we even had sex, if that’s what you want to hear. I’m losing it here, Nathan. Please just tell me what I did. I won’t sit so close to you anymore. I won’t bother you with trying to spend time together. I’ll go home to Seattle and never come back if—”

“Don’t say that!” Nathan roared, gripping her shoulders. His hands had moved on her own, and he was surprised by how much it stung. Nathan let go once he noticed the genuine shock on her face. He rubbed his hands over his own face—narrowly avoiding a cigarette burn—then took one long, last drag. “Jesus—look, you didn’t do ANYTHING until you fucked up my coffee. I’m sorry, okay? I really am. Don’t ever fucking say that again. I can’t fucking survive without you.”

Max swallowed, clearly embarrassed. “Do you…do you really feel that way?”

“How I feel doesn’t matter,” he said. “Just don’t leave.”

Max looked at him, unsure of how to continue their conversation, or even if she should. She pulled her phone back out of her pocket. “Yeah, okay, I won’t,” she said softly. She cleared her throat. “I’ll text Kris—”

“THERE you guys are!” Kristine chirped from the other side of the screen door. “Oh, you got locked out? I’ve been yelling for you for the last—is that from my purse?”

“Yeah,” Nathan said sheepishly. “I stole one, sorry. I was messing around, chased Max outside, then I closed the door accidentally,” he lied quickly. It had seemed so easy and convincing, but Max smiled a small secret smile, because she could tell he prayed that Kristine hadn’t heard what he’d said.

Kristine smirked and opened the door. “Thank goodness, you guys have been acting so weird the last couple days, I thought you’d gotten into a fight or something.”

The three of them shuffled into the kitchen and Max grabbed Nathan's mug and dumped his black backwash coffee into the sink. She refilled it and put in four spoonfuls of sugar, trying not to gag. She brought the mug over to him as an offering of peace, and smiled when he purposely touched her hand when she handed it off.

“When were you looking for us?” Nathan asked, dazed, taking a sip of his coffee.

“I’ve got to drop a photo album off at Mom and Dad’s. I wanted to know if you guys wanted to ride with me—you won’t have to get out, I’d just like the company.”

“I’ll go,” Nathan said, much to their surprise.

“Yeah,” Max smiled. “Me too.”

* * *

“How much longer?”
Kristine remembered why she didn’t drive him around—Max had the patience of a saint, but she did not. “The drive is the same length it’s always been, Nathan.”

“You didn’t answer my question,” Nathan snickered, in classic little-brother fashion. “Why does Dad want the scrapbook anyway?”

“There’s some picture of you that he wants,” Kristine explained. “He, um…he wants it with him if we end up at the hospital next Friday.”

“Oh, that’s when it’s scheduled? We only have a week?” Nathan said. Concern drifted in his tone, but Max couldn’t tell if it was genuine or came out of surprise.

“Yeah,” Kristine said. Judging by her tone, she didn’t want to talk about it anymore. Max had never seen such a weird rift in emotions about death. Kristine had a great relationship with their Dad, and watching him slowly wither away had to have been very painful for her. It was sad to see how rapidly Sean Prescott had deteriorated, unable to feed himself or breathe normally without oxygen. He didn’t have long, and he probably wouldn’t make it to the assisted suicide.

“Shit,” Nathan said. “I’m sorry, Kristine.”

“What are you saying that for?” she chuckled wryly, stopping at the end of the driveway “He’s your dad, too.”

Nathan didn’t say anything, but the look he gave Max screamed “could have fooled me.”

If Kristine had noticed the look, she pretended she didn’t, opting instead to get out of the car and deliver the photo album. “I won’t be long,” she promised.

“Hold on,” Nathan said, fumbling to get out of his seatbelt. “I want to say hi.” He turned to Max. “Stay here,” he said, making it very clear that he wouldn’t be long.

Max was waiting in the car, half smiling as she played Tetris on her phone, trying to keep busy and not think about Nathan hovering over her. She wanted to put it behind them, but she knew she had to talk about it to get past it—and he wasn’t interested in that. Dealing with things was not his forte, and when he could be bothered to sort things out, it was often years after the conflict. And Max had her own questions to answer: How did she feel about Nathan Prescott? Had she kissed him because it was the heat of the moment or was it because—

“BOO!” Nathan shouted, banging hard on the window and nearly giving Max a heart attack as she screamed in fright. Her phone hit the roof of the car before it hit the ground, and Nathan cackled as he opened the door. “I’m sorry,” he laughed. He hadn’t meant to scare her that badly. He hopped into Kristine’s car and closed the door behind him. He invited his head onto Max’s lap, and she accepted, right up until he decided he preferred her bare thigh under the back of his neck and the length of her skirt over his face.

“Okay, one at a time under the skirt please,” Max said, pulling the skirt off him and tucking it under his head.

“You’re no fun,” he laughed again, smiling up at her.

Max didn’t get it. How could he be so affectionate, so subtly intimate, but completely unwilling to discuss how he felt about her? Odd at it was, Max liked when he was like this. She liked the hugs and the smiles and the constant touching, and she knew talking about it would change everything. And she couldn’t deny that she wanted to finish what they’d started a few days ago.
Nathan laid on her lap, still smiling. Smiling back, Max leaned down and kissed him. He was surprised at first, for his lips tightened for a moment, but he didn’t deny her, accepting the kiss.

Max pulled away not much later, suddenly remembering that Kristine could come back any minute. If she saw them, who knew what kind of reaction she’d have?

“What was that for?” Nathan asked, breathless.

“I…don’t know,” Max admitted.

“Okay,” Nathan said. He covered his eyes and Max saw red growing on his cheeks. “Don’t ever do that again.”

“I’m sorry,” Max said.

“It’s okay,” Nathan replied, uncovering his face. It was still red. “Kissing’s just a little too intimate for me.”

Max raised an eyebrow, absentmindedly stroking his hair. “More intimate than you wearing me like a pair of headphones with your face buried in my hoo-ha?”

“Hoo-ha? What are you, twelve,” Nathan laughed. Max laughed with him, then he cleared his throat and explained. “You can go down on anybody, Max. You can fuck anybody and not have it mean shit. But a kiss? A kiss can change your whole fucking life.”

Max found herself wondering if she’d changed his life when she first kissed him or if she’d been filed neatly into his “fuck anybody” category. It would have been easier to just accept that she as confined to that section, but she had to know. Was their kiss a spur the moment thing, or did it mean something?

And shouldn’t she have been able to answer that question on her own?

Nathan sat up and looked at her intently. Before she could try to ask him, he commanded, “Lift up your shirt.”

Max instinctively crossed her arms over her chest.

“Wait, I didn’t mean that,” Nathan said. “I want to see that tattoo you lied and said you didn’t have.”

Max considered it. “What about Kristine?”

“You didn’t seem worried about her a few seconds ago,” Nathan smirked, puckering his lips. Max furrowed her brows at him and looked away, pulling on her hair and saying nothing. Nathan sighed. Pushing her buttons was always fun, but he hadn’t been good at it today. He was doing what he could to avoid talking about what had happened between them, and he could tell how much it was bothering her. He was trying to be funny and keep it light, but it was only making things worse. “Kristine likes to chat and visit with Mom and Dad,” Nathan said, touching Max’s arm. She looked back at him and, much to his relief, wasn’t upset. “We have at least fifteen minutes,” he figured.

“How was your very brief visit with them?” Max asked, untucking her white, button-up blouse.

“My dad tried to hug me,” Nathan said. “It was weird. He looks like he’s dead already.”

“You know what I mean,” Nathan pouted. “He’s so skinny and his talking sounds…horrible. I don’t
know how he managed to get through an entire dinner with you guys away from the house. He feels like a bag of bones. He's dying, Max. My dad is dying. And I don't know how to feel about it."

"Here it is," Max said, lifting her shirt, just far up enough for him to see the tattoo.

"Holy shit, that looks badass," Nathan said, thankful for the change of subject. He reached out and touched the tattoo with his fingertips. "What's the whale for, though?"

"Are you shitting me?" Max asked, not realized she'd said it out loud until she saw the astonished look on his face. "Let's see, who listens to whale songs, has a whale-shaped night-light thingy in his room, and a teeny little whale stuffed animal attached to a teeny little blanket that he thinks I don't notice him sometimes stuffing under the bed when he realizes I am awake?"

"You leave Monstro out of this, bitch," Nathan joked. Finally, Max laughed. "So it's for me?"

"Duh."

"Oh," he continued, leaning a little closer. "What's this?"

"What's what?" Max said, trying not to look at him. He was so close his nose was practically touching her stomach, and all she could think about was his sweat on her skin, the way he felt pressed up against her, and how badly she wanted it to happen again. And again, and again, and again. "What is it?" she half panted.

Then Max was overcome by her own booming fit of giggles as Nathan pressed his open mouth to her stomach and exhaled with all his might, tickling her.

"Okay, okay, okay!" she shouted. "No more, no more! I promise I won't make fun of Monstro!"

"Damn right," Nathan said. He pulled away and gave Max a chance to calm herself and fix her outfit. Once everything was replaced, Nathan returned his head to her lap. He made sure to face the front of the car and not look up at her. He wasn't sure he'd be able to stop if she tried to kiss him again.

Max ran her fingers through his hair, and Nathan heard her sigh. She sounded a little defeated, but unusually content. "I don't know if I'll ever understand you," she began, "but you have got to stop punishing me for trying."

It stung, but it was fair. Bias always stopped him from being able to be himself and let her see him be himself. He'd had to kill the one person he'd ever let all the way in, and he thought that he could avoid ever having to hurt Max if he kept her at a distance—but it wasn't working. The further he pushed her away, the more resilient she'd be, and the act was exhausting. But the thought of her being unable to accept his truest self scared him. Fear always stopped everything.

Nathan sighed the same way she had and hoped it'd serve as an acceptable response. Eventually he sat up and leaned his back against the seat, his hand finding her thigh. They both watched Prescott Manor until Kristine came out of the front door, slowly finishing her conversation with Melinda. She smiled and waved at the car.

"Nathan," Max said softly, enthusiastically waving back to Melinda. "When I kissed you—"

"You changed my life way before you kissed me, Max," Nathan said knowingly. He swallowed hard and faced the window to his right. His face was on fire and he wouldn't be able to handle it if Kristine or Max could see it. "If... if you hadn't kissed me that day, I would have figured out a way to kiss you. And... and that day was fun. The WHOLE day," he added quickly, hoping she wouldn't
think that he thought only their late-night bedroom activities were the fun part.

As Kristine got into the car, Max smiled while looking down at her phone, her face red, and Nathan chuckled, sneaking a peek.

In those few days that he’d avoided her, he’d been on Overwatch nonstop. It wasn’t only to play, but to ask Marcus-dickfuck3000 how he should proceed with Max.

“You grow the fuck up,” Marcus had said.

*  *  *

The trio had been home for a few hours now. Nathan disappeared upstairs to get caught up on some sleep and Max had been looking on as Kristine rearranged the kitchen, exasperated.

“Is there something on your mind?” Max asked her after she’d reorganized the silverware drawer three times.

Kristine sighed and sat down on the floor next to the refrigerator. “I’m stressed,” Kristine said, running her hand through her hair. Max walked over and joined her. “I’m getting this huge teaching award and my dad said he won’t be able to make it.”

“You’re a teacher?” Max asked.

“Yes, an ESL teacher,” Kristine said. “I told him I was totally fine with it, but it just got me thinking. He’s not going to be there when Nathan gets out of prison. He won’t watch either of us get married or meet any of his grandchildren. He has so little time left and I feel like I’m not a big enough part of it. I suddenly feel like I’ve missed out on so much and I don’t think I can make up for it.”

“You can try,” Max smiled. “Why not stay the night?”

“Will you and Nathan be okay?” Kristine asked, concerned. “You guys have been acting really strange the last couple of days.”

Max shouldn’t have been surprised that she’d noticed. Kristine wasn’t around all the time, but she wasn’t an idiot. Max and Nathan had gone from best buddies to strangers over nothing, and it rightfully worried Kristine. “Yeah,” Max said. “We just…we had a disagreement and needed time to cool off. But everything is fine now. We’re fine.”

A grin spread across Kristine’s face. “Thank you, Max!” she squealed, throwing her arms around Max’s neck. “I’ll be back RIGHT after breakfast tomorrow morning, I promise. I have to pack a bag!”

*  *  *

Nathan languidly opened his eyes, yawning as he awoke from a deep sleep. He didn’t know how long he’d been asleep, but he felt a lot more rested than he had earlier. His shoes were still on the side of the bed, and it hadn’t looked like Max had been into the room at all, so he couldn’t have been asleep more than a couple of hours. He felt a little bad with how quickly he’d excused himself upstairs when they’d returned home, but it was either that or continue sleeping on the kitchen table—and he obviously preferred the bed. He rubbed his eyes, then crossed his arms over them.

The doorknob to his old room started to turn, and none other than Max walked in. She had a sly grin on her face as she closed the door behind her. Nathan hadn’t noticed who’d walked in, nor had he noticed that Max had locked the door.
“Sissy,” he begged. “Sissy, I just woke up, give me a second.”

“Kristine isn’t here,” Max said, crossing the room.

“Oh, Max,” Nathan realized, uncovering his eyes and lifting his head. “Where’d she go?”

Max sauntered over to the side of the bed and stopped with one knee propped on it. “I convinced her to spend the night at your Mom and Dad’s,” she said. “It’s just you and me.”

“Okay?” Nathan said, confused. He was struck with even more confusion and a hint of shock when Max crawled into the bed and onto his lap. “Whoa, okay, hello,” he said, readjusting her so that she wasn’t crushing his bladder and getting a more comfortable grip on her hips. Her hair was down and her shirt was slightly unbuttoned, and fully untucked. Nathan's hands rose under her shirt, but she stopped him before he could get it over her bellybutton.

“I have a proposition for you,” Max said.

“I think I can guess what it is,” Nathan remarked.

Max pushed her hair out of her face and put her hands on either side of his head. He fell silent and she lifted back up, and pulled just the corner of her shirt down, revealing a familiar, lacy black strap. It was “The Bra.”

Nathan swallowed and gripped her hips a little harder. “I’m listening,” he croaked.

“We’re…we’re adults,” she began. “With an obvious mutual attraction.”

“You didn’t have to sit on my lap dressed like a naughty school girl to tell me that,” Nathan said.

Max put her finger to his lips. “We can’t put this to rest until we get this out of our systems. So I say we do this—just give in to it for a bit, then we won’t have to worry about it anymore. We talk it through, then it’s dead. And we can’t talk about the actual act, no comments about anything. Think we can manage that?”

Nathan kind of liked aggressive Max. It was a nice change of pace. He didn’t understand what point she was trying to make, but he knew for sure that he wanted this to happen. If they had an understanding, it’d be okay, right?

“If we do this, there’s no going back,” he explained. “There’s no rewind, no alternate timeline to jump to. Are you willing to risk that?” he finished, grabbing the bottom of her shirt.

“Yes,” Max said confidently.

“Then so am I,” he replied, lifting her shirt. He stared wide-eyed for a few moments, then covered his mouth with his hand. It was a really, really nice bra, “Goddamn,” he gasped. “Those are…that’s impressive. Okay,” he said, regaining his composure. “We have to set up some rules.”

“We don’t need rules as long as we have common sense,” Max said.

Nathan pulled the pillow out from under his head and belted her with it. “There better not be any surprises.”

“What kind of surprises could there possibly be?” Max asked incredulously.

“I don’t know!” Nathan shouted. He just didn’t want anything weird to happen. “Wait, get up,” he said. He didn’t wait for her to get off, he just sort of tipped her onto the bed next to him and went
into her purse that was lying on the floor near the bed, not having been moved since the first time they tried this. “How many condoms you got left in here?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Max said. “I…um…had just opened the box. So nine, probably.”

“Good,” Nathan said. He threw the small box onto the bed next to her and crawled back over. He laid back down, resituating her on his lap, then smirked as he slowly unbuttoned her shirt.

“Good?” Max wondered aloud, shrugging her shirt off while simultaneously unbuckling his belt. “Good why?”

“Cause we’re probably gonna use them all.”

*                                                          *                                                          *

Max sat on the left side of the bed, pulling her underwear up. “Where’s my shirt?” she asked Nathan, not turning to look at him.

“On the floor, where I threw it,” Nathan responded.

Max twisted her hair around her finger, waiting. “Can you hand it to me?”

“Come here,” Nathan said, turning and grabbing for her waist. The blanket was thrown over his bare lower body, and if he moved any further, he’d be embarrassed.

“No, come on,” Max said. “My shirt.”

“Just lie with me, please?” Nathan begged. “It’ll be the last time. The only time.”

Max couldn’t say no. she turned around and crawled over to him, greeted with open arms. She had her arms crossed over her bare chest while Nathan twirled The Bra around his finger. Eventually he threw it onto the ground, bored of it, and rubbed Max’s back as she laid against him. He smirked, making sure she wasn’t looking at him, and took some time to revel in what had just happened between them. He looked at his chest, smiling down at the hickeys Max had left on him, and said nothing. They needed this, to just enjoy the nothing, but the longer the nothing lasted, the harder it’d be to come back from.

“Can I just say one thing about it?” Nathan asked.

Max rolled her eyes. She didn’t want to humor him, but after what had just happened she felt like she HAD to. “Fine. ONE thing.”

“I didn’t know your knees could touch your shoulders like that,” he blabbed, earning a pinch to his cheek. He quickly slipped on his boxers while keeping his private parts under the covers, then reached down onto the ground where he grabbed Max’s shirt and then handed it to her. She put it on and they laid back down next to each other, unsure of how to start their conversation, so they didn’t. instead, Nathan turned to her, and ran his thumb over her bottom lip. They both leaned forward, and he kissed her with every fiber of his being, because he knew he’d never get to again.

They pulled away some long time later, and Nathan kissed her on the forehead before getting back into their old position and staring up at the ceiling. “This can’t happen again.”

“I know,” Max said solemnly.

“We figure it out before we leave this room,” Nathan demanded. “We leave it all in here.”
“Agreed,” Max said, unbuttoning her shirt again. She faced him and mimicked his “storytelling” seating position.

“Why are you taking off your shirt?” Nathan asked. He sat up and matched her position, resting his elbows on his knees and looking up at her.

“I figured since this is the last time we’ll ever be this intimate, I should be comfortable,” Max clarified. “Where do we even start?”

“Why did you kiss me?” he asked.

“Because,” Max started, rolling her head back and staring up at the ceiling. “I really, really wanted to.

Max and Nathan had no idea how much time they spent in that room talking, but at the end of the night, they’d both ended up in the loft, playing their respective handhelds. They stopped and looked at each other and smiled, sure that they’d made the right choice and set the right rules. The handhelds were put away, and Nathan started up Netflix on the playstation with one hand while the other rested on Max’s thigh.
Revelations

Chapter Summary

Max and Nathan try to enjoy their last few days together before Max has to return to her life in Seattle.

Chapter Notes

Always late but worth the wait, right? /sweats

This chapter 39,155 words. SIX MONTHS! AND I AM SO SORRY FOR THE WAIT! BUT I PROMISED I'D COME THROUGH! This chapter takes place right where chapter 12 left off!

Thank you guys for sticking around and being so patient, seriously. Aside from work and random depressive episodes, I lost an old friend and an aunt while working. Everybody’s excitement for the story was very uplifting, and I am so thankful for it. Thank you.

Again, I have NO IDEA when the next chapters will be posted, but I will work diligently every day until they are done. The last two chapters will be posted at the same time; it'll be a final chapter and an epilogue. I can't wait for you guys to see how it ends :')

Please leave feedback! Let me know what you thought!

EDIT 5/13/2018: HELLO ALL! I am finally off of my hiatus and am finally back to working on this fic! I'm hoping to have both chapters done before school starts--because I've gotten my certification and I'll hopefully have my own classroom for the 2018-2019 school year!

EDIT 9/14/2018: HELLO YES I AM ALIVE AND EVEN THOUGH IT DOESN'T SEEM LIKE IT, THE FANFIC IS AS WELL!!

Recently I have become a third-grade teacher so my life has become my work and my students. There will be no updates on my blog because I deleted it—tumblr became toxic and I left for my own mental health.

Chapter 14 is done and I have BARELY started on chapter 15, but both will be posted late November. Thank you all so much!!!!!

EDIT 11/25/18: A big long long sigh. NO I AM NOT ABANDONING THE FIC! After much, much consideration and feeling awful for leaving you guys on the hook,
I've decided to reveal why the last two chapters have taken me over a year to write. Aside from my third-graders taking over my free time, I am also about to move house and I don't know when I'll have time to finish the last chapter. Now, the reason as to why they have taken so long is going to be posted below--I think it's a major spoiler; but it doesn't reveal anything that happens in the last two chapters. Read at your own risk!

The reason this fic has taken so long to end (aside from you know, LIFE) is because it is going to have two endings.

Ending number 1 is chapter 14, while ending number 2 is chapter 15. I wanted to stay true to the spirit of the game, but trust me--I have felt horrible this past year thinking about how much I still have to finish and I don't feel good about leaving you hanging. I can't tell you when the fic will be finished, but it WILL be finished. And I hope you LOVE the two endings. Wish me luck! Thank you thank you thank you a billion times over for your patience, your continued reading, your uplifting comments and your enthusiasm for the fic. Now I gotta get this bitch done!!

Max stood in front of the mirror in the bathroom, deciding whether or not to button the top button of her blouse. Nathan was asleep on the floor in the bedroom, mumbling some nonsense as he clutched a pillow for dear life. It was a little surprising how quickly things had gone back to normal between them—at least when it came to Nathan. Max wanted to believe that neither of them were tempted by the other anymore, but she couldn’t.

Things hadn’t changed much for Nathan at all. He was still as affectionate as ever, lying on her lap, kissing her forehead before bed, touching her thigh, but it was always just to remind her that he cared about her. There was no ulterior motive on his part, but Max wasn’t sure she could say the same thing for herself. They were supposed to talk about this and not have any weird fluffy leftover feelings that’d make things difficult, but amazingly, they’d both managed to not tell each other how they felt during their entire conversation. She’d even come right out and asked him how he felt, but he managed to avoid answering easily. Max knew her answer, but trying to get the words “I like you” out of her mouth had been fucking impossible. Their conversation had gotten them nowhere, and Max wondered if they’d ever get around to talking about it. Max didn’t want to discuss how she felt unless he did, so she forced away the spark she felt every time he looked at her, every time he touched her, every time she remembered what they’d gone together and how it changed everything. But right now, with him asleep, Max didn’t have to worry about anything except for hiding one of the hickeys that he’d placed a little too high on her neck. It’d been a few days since she’d gotten it, but the stupid little thing wouldn’t fade—even after the spoon trick and trying to hide it with makeup. It was her last Monday in Arcadia Bay until she resumed her monthly visits, just over the next year if Nathan kept his nose clean and earned his parole. This was it. In one year, Nathan would be free, and Max would be able to resume her wedding photography in Seattle.

It should have been what she wanted. She missed Brooke and Daniel and being able to go to Italy at the drop of a pin, but she couldn’t deny that Nathan had planted a piece of Arcadia Bay a little too close to her heart for her to feel one hundred percent content with leaving. Part of her wanted to be where he was, but a bigger part of her knew she never wanted to make a life in Arcadia Bay. She wasn’t a tree; she was a bird, and flying always seemed more attractive than being planted in a place she knew she wouldn’t grow. At the end of this week, Sean Prescott would be dead, Nathan would
be back in an orange jumpsuit, and she’d be on a plane back to Seattle, taking all her thoughts and
feelings with her.

The thought made her eyes burn, and once she realized she was crying, she covered her reddening
face. Everything was complicated now and she’d ruined their friendship. She should have just been
honest with him when they talked the other day, but how could she tell him that she’d kissed him
because she knew she’d regret it if she didn’t? Max could see it now: her pulling him aside to
encourage him to share his feelings by revealing her own, only to be rejected, or to end up naked
next to him again, back to square one, and Max knew it was going to be the latter. It was obvious
that they were both lacking in self-control, and any admission of a feeling would eventually restore
his hostility, and Max knew she didn’t want to go through breaking down that wall again.

Max replayed parts of their conversation in her head, wondering why she hadn’t just been honest in
the first place:

“You really wanted to kiss me?” Nathan had asked. He’d been twirling a ponytail holder he’d found
on the nightstand around his index finger as he raised an eyebrow. “Was it the heat of passion? Or
have you been thinking about it since Blackwell?” Max said nothing, and he took her silence as
contemplation as he brought the ponytail holder to his teeth and pulled it with his finger.

“Don’t put that in your mouth!” Max shouted, plucking the elastic from his mouth.

“I got nothin’ else to put in there,” Nathan smirked, grabbing it back. “So, it’s either that or you.”

Max was not about to be challenged. “That’s over,” Max said firmly. She pulled the elastic away,
then quickly used it to tie up her hair before he could try to grab it again. And he tried, but she pulled
back and let herself fall onto the bed and he crawled over to her, resting his elbows at her sides as he
looked up at her. “That’s what the deal was, and that’s what we agreed on,” Max continued.

Nathan sighed and trailed his nose down her midsection, smiling secretly to himself as she winced
under him. He got back into his storytelling position while simultaneously pulling her up so she was
sitting up with him. “Seriously,” Nathan said. “Why did you kiss me?”

“Why did you kiss me back?” Max blurted. “Why did you come upstairs and come straight to my
room instead of your room, hmm? Why won’t you just tell me how you fee—”

“Because how I feel about you doesn’t matter, I told you that already,” Nathan snapped. He assessed
the hurt in Max’s eyes and softened his tone. “Look, we’re getting nowhere. We need to figure this
out. Now.”

And despite his demand, it went nowhere. Max offered no further explanation for kissing him aside
from “because I wanted to.” It wasn’t a good reason and she knew it, but she was afraid that the truth
would lead them both to something they weren’t ready for.

Frustrated, Max decided to give up on hiding the hickey and restyled her hair, hoping nobody would
notice. It wasn’t the only one showing, but it sure as hell was the most noticeable, and that tiny fact
had lead Max to believe that Nathan had put it there on purpose. Sighing, she looked down into the
sink, only to feel Nathan’s familiar touch around her waist. He rested his head on her shoulder and
his face was touching hers, and his eyes were still closed.

“What time is it?” he grumbled.

He had no idea how hard this was for her. It was taking everything she had not to react to him. “It’s
seven,” Max said. “Go back to sleep,” Please, she thought.

Max swallowed dryly and pulled away from him a bit, hoping he’d catch the hint, but it was pointless. If anything, it only made him want to hold her tighter.

“Your session isn’t until nine,” Max reminded him. “I’ll wake you in an hour.” She turned around and faced him, hoping that he’d let go. Instead, he pressed her up against the edge of the sink, balancing his hands near her hips.

Nathan blinked sleepily, then lurched forward unexpectedly and placed a soft kiss on her forehead. He then turned and staggered back into the room, barely managing to catch himself after tripping on the floor blankets, and threw himself onto the bed instead of resuming his spot on the floor.

Max turned back toward the sink and exhaled sharply, trying to make it as quiet as possible. After calming some, she came back to the room—tiptoeing carefully so she didn’t wake Nathan—and began getting her purse together. She made sure her camera and phone were inside, then put in her journals—old and new—and tacitly walked out the door before slowly closing it behind her.

Nathan waited a few moments, and once he was sure Max was gone, he turned and laid on his back, staring up at the ceiling with his arms crossed over his head. This was his last free Monday for an entire year, and it was hard to accept. There’d be no more late nights talking at the spot, no more visiting friends, and no more sleeping in the same room as Max. It was time to finish paying for what he’d done, then figure out what the fuck he was going to do as a twenty-six year old with blood on his hands. His dad, of course, had pulled some strings that allowed him to finish high school and snag an associate’s degree, but once people saw his record, he was screwed. He’d have to find a job as soon as he was out, but who would hire the spoiled brat of a literal demon, especially when he had a well-documented history of violence? Nobody. And there was no way in hell he’d work for his dad. The only way he’d have anything to do with the company is if his dad handed it over with a red bow on top.

Nathan chuckled to himself. Where did this even come from? He used to never think about how things would be after prison, hell, he outright avoided it. Or rather, he’d had a set plan that Max made him feel ashamed that he even used as an option. It’d been made before even her first visit, back when he’d been a man of very little faith. He’d planned on killing himself in the junkyard once he was free, which seemed pretty fitting at the time. He had no reason to stick around, he’d felt, and now it felt weird that he’d ever felt that way. He couldn’t imagine not hugging Melinda again or not hearing Kristine’s nagging, and, he especially couldn’t imagine never seeing Max Caulfield again. But, that already seemed to be the case—that was made clear during their post-sex discussion.

“What’s wrong with Arcadia Bay?” Nathan had asked. He was lying on his back, his head by her feet and his hand on her thigh as he propped his head up with a pillow so he could see her better. She was propped up as well, twirling her hair on her fingers, wearing only her underwear and his jacket.

“Nothing,” Max answered. “I just prefer the city.”

“There’s a city here,” Nathan said, sitting up. Why was she acting wo weird? Didn’t she want to be close to Joyce and Stella and Warren and…and him?

“It’s not the same,” Max said, staring up at the ceiling. She’d been dreading this part of the conversation, because she’d been avoiding it ever since they’d reconnected. She knew it’d hurt him,
but she wasn’t going to lie and say that returning to Arcadia Bay was a possibility. True, a little part of it would always be home, but that “home” was embedded in her memories, so it didn’t need to be a concrete stay. “It’s too stagnant here. I need growth, I need change, I need spontaneity, but Arcadia Bay doesn’t have that. It’s been Arcadia Bay for years and that’s what it’ll always be.”

“But…but I’m here,” Nathan said. He crawled over to where she was lying and rested his arms by her sides, inside the jacket, and looked down at her. “Are you still gonna visit?”

“Of course I am.”

“Then why not just stay? It’s only a year,” Nathan said.

“I can’t,” Max replied. “And I don’t want to. My life is in Seattle, Nathan. I’ll never miss a visit, but you have to understand—I’m not living here. I’m not going to build a life here. In a year, I’ll still want to stay in Seattle, and I’ll still want to visit you, too, but what if I want to be in Japan for a month? Do a photography book signing or a tour in Canada? Get wasted in Spain?”

“But in a year, I could go to Spain, too,” Nathan said softly. “Would that change things?” Max fell silent. The hurt in his tone wounded her, and her throat went dry. She sat up, forcing him to fall back into his storytelling position, and matched him. She reached out and touched his face as if it would stop the tears welling up in his eyes from falling. He shrank away from her, covering his eyes and trying to make himself so small, maybe he’d disappear and she’d forget all about this. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, that wasn’t fair,” he sniffed.

“It wasn’t,” Max said. She pulled his head into her chest, locking it under her neck so he couldn’t see her face. But it didn’t take him long to figure out why she didn’t want him to look at her right now—the tears on her thigh betrayed her. “But it’s moot.”

She held him like that for a while, and once he’d calmed some, he looked at her again, hoping that he’d find something in her eyes that’d make him feel better. He usually did, but today, there was something different. It almost looked like pity, but he’d seen that look before, and he couldn’t figure out what this one was. “It’s hard, Max,” Nathan said. “Being away from you is so fucking hard.”

And it’d been hard to admit that to her. There was so much more he wanted to say, but neither of them said it; they just opted to let things be and hope that throwing a sheet over everything would smother their tiny spark and not catch flame. If he couldn’t speak properly to Max about this, he had to find someone else to talk to—someone who had to stay objective and never tell a soul, and he knew someone who was legally bound to do just that: Dr. Stella Hill.

*                                                          *                                                          *

“Waiting for you to get to this car is giving me a migraine,” Max grumbled into her phone. Nathan was still inside the house doing god-knows-what while Max sat in the truck, ready to put the pedal to the metal. If they didn’t leave in the next five minutes, they’d be late, and Stella would be whining about it in the group chat for the next month.

“How long do you think it took me to dig my phone out of my pocket to answer your call?” Nathan shot back. Max said nothing. “Yeah, thought so. Quit bitching.”

Rolling her eyes, Max hung up her phone and shoved it into her bag. If Stella complained to The Peanut Gallery, Max would be forwarding each and every message to Nathan. What was taking him so long anyway? All he had left to do when she had walked out was put on his shoes! How on
EARTH had that managed to take twenty minutes, and counting? She had half a mind to lay on the
horn until he walked outside, only to soften when she saw Nathan hurriedly lock the front door and
dash down to the car, two coffee cups in hand.

Nathan yanked the door open and closed it behind him, then handed one of the two cups to her.
“Here,” he said, attempting to pass the cup off while he reached for his seatbelt. He struggled to get it
on with one hand while Max stared at him. “Are you gonna take it or what? It’s got nothing in it, so
I’m not drinking it. It’s going out the window if you don’t take it.”

“Sorry,” Max murmured, quickly grabbing the drink and throwing the car into gear. “Thank you.
Sorry.”

“Shh, drive,” Nathan said, sipping his coffee. He glanced over at her as she sipped from the cup,
looking away when she brought her attention back to him. She looked a little flustered, and he
reached for her leg as he asked, “You okay?”

“Hm? Yeah, sorry,” Max said. “Sorry I snapped at you.”

“Max, a year ago I threated to break your wrist if you moved,” he reminded. “I’m fine.”

Max chuckled. “Okay, I remember that, but still,” she said. “Can you believe how much has
changed?”

“What can I say,” Nathan said, smiling to himself. “Being around you is good for me.” Silence
thickened as Max slowly rolled out of the driveway. Nathan sipped his coffee and cleared his throat.
“So, what’s this Love Lab bullshit anyway?” he asked, pulling his DS from his jacket pocket.

“Hey, that’s my favorite Rhythm Heaven level,” Max complained, turning onto the freeway. “It’s
cute.”

“Cute? You’re funny,” he said. He brought his finger to his lips, feigning innocence. “Ooh, Mr.
Professor, after you shake your flask, I’ll shake it, too.”

“And then some dude with a bear head will come and clean it up? Just like in the game?”

“I mean if they’re into that sort of thing,” Nathan laughed. He paused for a moment, returning his
attention to the game, then clutched his stomach as he fell into a fit of riotous laughter. “Fuck,” he
breathed, wiping a tear, “I’m fuckin’ hilarious.”

Max smiled to herself, then quickly replaced it with a frown. “It’s a euphemism, Nathan. They’re
making love, Nathan!”

“And then some dude with a bear head comes over and cleans everything up,” Nathan blurted,
earning the mother of all eyerolls.

“Okay, maybe you haven’t changed very much.”

“God, I hope not.”

They returned to silence, enjoying the soft hum of Nathan’s game as they headed to his session. He
tapped along, doing his best not to explode with anger when he made a mistake, as Max did her best
to focus on anything but him. Every time he moved or spoke, all she could see what him hovering
over her, kissing her, whispering things to her that she was far too embarrassed to repeat. Max wasn’t
much of a romantic, but god he was, which made dealing with it that much more difficult. She
couldn’t help but wonder if she was getting special treatment or if he’d been that way with a bunch
of other girls, but Max knew she was wondering about one girl in particular.

“Did you ever sleep with Rachel?” Max asked.

Nathan stared at her, a blank expression on his face. “That came out of nowhere,” he almost chuckled, more out of embarrassment than actual humor. “And no…not really.”

“Not really?”

“I don’t want to talk about it, Max,” Nathan said firmly.

Knowing that pressing the issue would only upset him, Max shrugged, dropped it, and continued driving in silence.

Nathan returned to his game, facing the window, and prayed that Max couldn’t hear the sound of his pulsing heartbeat. Max somehow always knew when he was lying, but he couldn’t decide if that had been a lie or not. He never had sex with Rachel, but there had definitely been some interaction that Max didn’t need to hear about. He didn’t like keeping things from her but…but wasn’t it better to spare her feelings?

*                                                          *                                                          *

Nathan had met Rachel at a party. He ditched a Vortex Club “meeting” early, around ten or so. Victoria was already blowing up his phone, texting obscenities about what she was going to do to him if he was going to meet “that slut Rachel” right now. He lied to her, of course, assuring Victoria that he’d be back in a couple hours, as he was making a pickup from Frank. Victoria calmed some, and Nathan smirked as he turned his phone off for the night. He’d tell Victoria later that he’d run out of gas, or maybe that Melinda wanted him home. It was a bad lie that he knew he wouldn’t be able to back up once Vic went all detective-mode and nosed the story out of him, but it didn’t matter. He’d still have his night with Rachel, and he’d buy Victoria a sweater or something to apologize.

Nathan walked into the party, earning a few glares here and there from partygoers who knew he didn’t belong there. Still, they tried to be friendly, but he wasn’t interested in making friends with anybody anymore. After refusing a ninety-five-percent-foam beer, a smile found its way onto his face once he heard Rachel’s distinctive laughter. She was in the archway of the kitchen, her teeth on the edge of a red solo cup, looking up at some guy who truly thought he was much more interesting than he was making himself out to be.

Rachel forced a laugh, and pretended to listen as she eventually made eye contact with Nathan. She was in a black see through top that hung off her shoulder and her favorite pair of ripped black jeans. Her long hair was slightly tousled and hanging over her covered shoulder, while her favorite blue feather earring hung in her ear, along with a smaller earring: a pink heart. Nathan was a little annoyed that she never wore the earrings he bought for her, but he should have known that chunky, expensive jewelry did nothing for her. Still, it stung that she wore the little pink ones that Chloe had picked out, even when she was supposed to have her attention on him. But it all melted away once Rachel gave Mr. Talkative a dismissive wave, then made a beeline over to where Nathan was standing. She threw her arms around his neck, dumping what smelled like vodka out of her cup and onto the floor behind him.

“Hello, stranger,” she smiled, pecking him on the lips. He leaned in, wishing for once that she’d let him kiss her the way he wanted to, but of course she wouldn’t let him. She was already dragging him by the wrist back the way he came, past foamy beer and sweaty dancers until they were by his truck. He walked over to the driver’s side, surprised when she followed, then knowingly handed her the keys. Once they were in the car, Rachel looked at him and giggled, then climbed over to him into the
passenger seat while he slid in next to her, situating himself behind the wheel. “What say you drive my toasty ass to this amazing new spot I found?” she asked.

“Will there be other people there?”

“God, I hope not,” Rachel laughed, pulling his jacket off his arms and trying to put it on. “head toward the Hilltop House and we’ll go from there, Daddio.”

“You do realize I could kill us, right?” Nathan shouted frantically. He was still driving, swerving all over the road while Rachel screamed with laughter, her hands over his eyes.

“Shh, slow down, turn right,” she giggled. “We’ll be fine. Don’t you trust me? Plus, there is NOBODY over here. Now slow down, and put this baby in park and don’t you dare open your eyes until I say so.”

“We’ll die before then, you fucking psycho,” Nathan seethed, finally slowing to a stop. His eyes twitched as Rachel reached for her door and slammed behind her, but he didn’t dare open them. Rachel was a lot to handle, but she was so fucking worth it every time, and no one could come close to how great she was at surprises.

Nathan got out of the car, guided by Rachel, and smiled once he felt her hands back over his eyes.

“Okay, okay,” she giggled, tripping over a rock as they shakily walked together. Gradually she tilted Nathan's head up, and finally, she removed her hands. “Open.”

Nathan opened his eyes, and there in the sky was a line of frosty stars: the edge of the galaxy. He deliberately pulled Rachel’s hands down his face, where they eventually rested on his shoulders. No matter how he tried, he couldn’t tear his eyes from the sky. “I,” he started, trying but totally failing to find the words, “I just…I can’t…”

“Leaves ya kinda speechless, don’t it?” Rachel quoted, laughing as she ducked away as he pushed her hair into her face.

“God, I hated that fucking movie,” Nathan whined.

Rachel glared at him, then pushed past him to get to the bed of his truck. Nathan followed, just like she knew he would, and he was met with her classic glare. “You only hate it ‘cause I brought Chloe when we watched it. AND because you’re just like Darla Dimple.”

Nathan gripped her waist and hoisted her into the bed of the truck, then followed once she was situated. “You really think I’m that evil?” he asked, trying to hide the hurt that peppered his tone.

“I don’t think you’re evil, I just think you’re rich,” Rachel explained. “But you seem to think you’re that evil.”

“Can you blame me?” Nathan said. “I’m killing you at the end of the fucking week.”

“Ugh, don’t remind me,” Rachel said firmly. It wasn’t something she could joke about, but he always found a way to try. She knew it was for a good reason, but she couldn’t deny that blindly putting her faith in a girl she’d never met—and one that could still very likely kill everyone in Arcadia Bay—left a bad taste in her mouth. It couldn’t have been an easy choice for Max to make, but in Rachel’s eyes, if the end of Arcadia Bay meant Chloe continuing her journey, she couldn’t be mad. Sacrificing Chloe seemed like the noble choice, but Rachel, selfishly, felt like it was wrong.
But she’d never tell Nathan that.

“Anyway,” she said finally, breaking silence, “this is yours.”

“You?”

“No, smartass,” Rachel laughed, “this place. It’s quiet and beautiful. It’s just what you need.”

Nathan didn’t know what to say. He’d gotten tons of gifts, but nothing like this…and none for such a shitty reason. Nathan didn’t know what to think about all this. Rachel was so great, and he desperately wanted to tell her he loved her, but all the other times he’d said it, she’d just tell him he didn’t know what he was saying and glide over it. And there was something that he’d suspected, but something he’d never said out loud. Nathan wanted Rachel all to himself, bathed in monogamy, but that wasn’t Rachel’s thing. Rachel liked having the freedom of an open relationship, and was soon growing fond of multiple romantic relationships. Chloe seemed to be okay with it, Nathan assumed, but he knew he couldn’t ever have Rachel the way he wanted.

His eyes glistened as he looked at her, and he tried to hold back the tears that threatened to fall. Here Rachel was, his favorite person in the whole wide world, and soon she’d be gone. He’d eventually sit through Chloe’s crying abuse, hear her beg him for money to print all those missing person posters, and watch her hang those posters in vain. He’d seen the other realities, and there was no way to avoid it all. She’d be dead next weekend, by his hand. They’d already decided to use a used syringe, so Jefferson would DEFINITELY be implicated. Everything would go as planned.

He’d never see Rachel again, if Max did her part. He’d shoot Chloe, then everything would be okay. But nothing was.

“Thank you,” Nathan breathed, catching his face in his palms. “God, how am I gonna get on without you?”

“Don’t,” Rachel said. “You’ll have Kristine. Melinda. Stella. And Max. You’ll have Max.” She reached out to him and he rested his head on her shoulder, trying to muffle his quiet sobs. It wasn’t going to get any easier. Max wouldn’t be here for months, and Rachel had no fucking idea how he’d cope until then. She knew he had Victoria—or maybe Zach, when he could be bothered—and they didn’t know about the other realities, so could they really even help him?

“Fuck, sorry,” Nathan said. “Look, thanks Rachel, but can we go? We can watch movies in my dorm. JUST watch movies, I swear,” he finished.

Rachel smiled back at him. “Of course,” she said.

Something wasn’t right. Nathan wasn’t quite awake, but he knew those definitely weren’t his hands fumbling with his belt buckle. He shot up, only to meet the gaze of a calm, cool, and collected Rachel. Without skipping a beat, Rachel knocked him back with a kiss, and she knew he wasn’t getting back up.

“This doesn’t change anything,” Rachel said staunchly, keeping her focus on his pants until the belt was open. “We’re just friends.”

The implication already stung, but the confirmation fucking hurt. “Wait, wait, wait,” he said, as she slid his pants and underwear just past his hip bones. She paused. “I don’t wanna do this if you’re drunk,” he panicked. “And I don’t have any condoms.”
“First, I’ve sobered up—and second, we’re not having sex. If you want me to stop, I’ll stop,” Rachel said gliding her lips just over the tip of him. “But if not…”

She didn’t have to finish. Nathan looked at her for a moment, knowing full-well that he would definitely be lying back down, but still contemplating. “Can I kiss you?”

He asked, watching as his pants, underwear, and Rachel’s shirt and bra were thrown to the couch.

Rachel hesitated, happy he couldn’t see it with how dark his room was. She wanted to kiss him—not because she loved him or anything, but because this would probably be the last time they’d do this, and the last time she’d see him, and probably the last time she’d kiss him. “Of course you can,” she finally answered. So, Nathan leaned forward and kissed her with everything he had in him. He knew it wouldn’t be enough—it was never enough—and he laid back down.

He felt the warmth of Rachel’s breath between his thighs and he closed his eyes, giving himself over to ecstasy.

“Fuck!” Nathan heard.

Nathan jolted awake and turned to see Rachel, still in his dorm, her pants half on and her bra inside out. “What’s wrong? What’s the matter?” he breathed groggily.

She scrambled to grab her phone off of the floor, knowing that the eleven missed calls flashing on the screen were from Frank. “It’s Frank,” she sobbed. “God dammit, Nathan, I was supposed to meet him an hour ago!”

“Rachel,” Nathan said softly.

“Fuck he’s gonna be so pissed, he’s going to be so mad if he finds out I was here with you,” she cried. “He’s going to hate me.”

“Rachel, no—”

“He probably already does. All I’ve done is jerk him around. He hates me. He fucking hates me,” Rachel sobbed. Nathan didn’t say anything. Swiftly he slipped on his underwear, then pulled her over to him as she tried to calm herself. “I’m scared, Nathan. I can’t leave her. Chloe won’t have anyone left. She won’t have me. She’ll be all alone. And Frank, Frank will be a wreck. And you, you—”

“Rachel,” Nathan said sternly, holding the sides of her head. “Frank has Pompidou—he’d never leave that fucking dog by himself. Chloe will have Max either way—and I will fucking manage. Now get dressed and get the fuck out of here.”

Nathan waited a moment while she got dressed, turned toward the door so he couldn’t see, and once she was finished, she took a deep, calming breath. “Nathan, I—”

“Bye Rachel,” he said, grabbing her arm and guiding her harshly do his door.

“Please, Nathan I—”

“Get the fuck out of here,” Nathan repeated, still making a beeline to the door. “You need to leave.”

“Nathan, please,” Rachel whimpered, “please…”
“Fuck off!” Nathan shouted, shoving her out the door. He locked it behind her and turned and sat on his bed as she stayed on the other side, knocking, knocking, knocking. He covered his years and huddled into a ball, trying his damndest to drown it out, but it was no use. Knocks segued to kicks as pleas became demands, and Nathan knew his dad would lose his shit if he heard about his. Defeated, Nathan opened the door, and much, much to his surprise, Rachel kissed him—and it wasn’t her normal, half-there kiss. This was needy, this was raw, and Nathan felt like he finally understood her and god, nothing was ever going to be the same after this.

Rachel pulled away some long time later, and stared at him, waiting. He was going to ask her to say, right? Just like he always did, and she’d smile and say she couldn’t, right?

But he didn’t.

“You should go meet Frank,” he breathed.

And Rachel left.

*                                                          *                                                          *

Nathan didn’t like thinking about that night. It made him think about Max, and how when she kissed him, he felt everything, all at once, and how that “everything” really didn’t matter. Max had a life to live and appearances to keep, and he just KNEW it’d make her look bad if they were together. It was a fucking hassle that he felt how he felt, and there was nothing either of them could do to change it. It hurt, god, it hurt so fucking badly, and he wanted her to feel it. He wanted her to know how his heart ached every time he looked at her and he wanted her to feel it.

“Max,” Nathan whispered.

She knew that tone. Immediately, Max pulled over, put the car in park, and gave him her full, undivided attention as other cars sped by. “What’s wrong?” she asked.

“I can’t,” he whispered, tears falling from his eyes.

“You can tell me,” Max said, slowly edging closer to him. “You can tell me anything.”

“I love…d her,” Nathan sobbed. “Rachel,” he clarified, unsure whether he was doing it to remind himself to keep up the lie or if he was doing it to hurt Max so she’d never even THINK about him as anything other than a fucking criminal. “I loved her. I loved her so much and I can’t even tell her.”

Max swallowed hard and pulled him close to her, resting her head on his. This had been hard enough to hear with Chloe, and she couldn’t have imagined that going through it again would hurt just as much.

*                                                          *                                                          *

“We’re here,” Max forced, after nearly twenty minutes of silent driving.

But Nathan didn’t move, and he hadn’t said anything since they’d returned to the road. He was looking straight ahead at the facility, knowing very soon Max would drop him off and not be here waiting for him when he was done. This was the last time she’d drop him off. It didn’t feel good. It brought up an ache that made his heart burn and his stomach drop. It was so painful to bear, but he had to embrace it. He had to feel it. Soon, he turned to her, making sure she couldn’t look away from him, holding her head between his palms.

“Nathan?”
“I mean it, I swear to god,” Nathan promised, “this really will be the last time.” And before Max could ask what, Nathan leaned in and kissed her. She didn’t protest like he’d expected; she accepted it, closing her eyes and drinking him in for the last time. Her hair tie was long gone, having been slid out of her hair as Nathan knocked her into the seat and pressed his weight onto her. He pulled away from her, finally, hovering, looking her right in the eyes. Max tried to read him, but he looked away too quickly for her to see what he was trying to say. She fixed her hair with shaky hands while Nathan fumbled with the door, and she wondered just what the hell he did that for.

Max turned to look at him, her face vulnerable. Her cheeks were bright red, and fuck, he knew she was on the verge of tears. He knew that face. He HATED it, especially when he was the cause. “That’s the last time,” Nathan repeated. He jumped out of the car and turned back to her only to say, “Don’t forget how you feel right now.” And with that, he faced the facility and walked too fast for her to reach out and stop him.

So instead, Max sat there and took his advice, but she was sure that what she was feeling was immensely different than what he thought it was.

* * *

Max’s alarm sounded on her phone, muffled by all the crap she’d thrown into her purse. She was outside of Stella’s office, waiting for her session with Nathan to finish. Eventually they both came out, Nathan looking like he was ready to seize the day and Stella hobbling out looking grave. Her eyes met Max’s and she didn’t look away.

Stella removed her glasses, still glaring at Max almost menancingly. “Nathan” she said, ushering Max in while simultaneously pushing Nathan out, “go talk to David about your return process. I have to ask Max about some future plans.”

Nathan gave Max a “should I go?” look, and trusting her responding nod, said, “Sure, okay, be back…soon, I guess,” and left the room.

Stella barely took the time to make sure he was all the way out before she closed and locked the office door behind him. She turned and walked away from Max, where she stumbled woozily and caught herself on the corner of her desk.

“Stella,” Max said, concerned, “are you okay?”

Stella pulled herself onto the edge of the desk, having caught her breath, and tried to keep her cool. “Max,” she finally panted.

“What is it?” Max asked, reaching out.

Stella dodged Max’s fingers and crossed the room, her back to the door. Stella’s breathing was coarse, and beads of cold glistening sweat virtually glued her hair to her cheeks. “Max, listen, she said seriously, pressing her hands together and touching her fingertips to her lips. She was trying to figure out how to say it. “Max…okay, there’s this thing called Doctor-Patient Confidentiality. It’s a rule. Everything I discuss with my patient must stay between me and that patient. If I ever broke that rule, I could lose my license.”

Max didn’t know what to say. What was Stella even talking about?

“So,” Stella continued, “I am asking you this as a friend, not his doctor: did you have sex with Nathan?”

Max swallowed audibly, but she knew she had better keep her mouth shut. She wanted so badly to
think of a lie, but she was coming up short, and the look on her face betrayed her the moment Stella asked. She was sweating profusely, and her throat was dry, but still, she croaked an arid, “Yes.”

Stella was angry—livid, really—but she wasn’t at all surprised. “You’re serious?”

Max nodded sheepishly.

“Are you KIDDING me, Max?” Stella fumed, her eyes burning with rage. She pinched the bridge of her nose, trying to convince herself that this was all a dream and that Max hadn’t said that. “You DO realize he’s in love with you, right? That he’s spend the last entire year falling in love with you?”

Max had no idea how to respond to that. If he was really in love with her, why didn’t he just say so when they talked?

Was he back to keeping secrets from her?

“Did he tell you that?” Max asked.

Stella thought for a moment, wondering just how far this breach of Nathan's privacy should go. “He didn’t. But he didn’t have to,” Stella settled. “It’s in his words, his gestures. I wouldn’t have said anything about it if I wasn’t sure. Nathan Prescott is in love with you, Max Caulfield.”

Max could feel her face getting hot, and it wasn’t long before she was stumbling over to Stella’s couch, holding her burning face in her hands. She was silent, staring at the ground, not knowing how to proceed. Stella soon joined Max on the couch, gently stroking her back and she tried to process it all.

“So,” Stella said meekly, breaking the thick silence, “how was it?”

Max raised her head, dropped her hands, and gave Stella the dirtiest scowl she could muster. “Are you cereal right now?”

“I can’t help it!” Stella shouted. “If you were me, wouldn’t you be curious?”

Max hesitated. “Well, the first time—”

“YOU HAD SEX WITH HIM MORE THAN ONCE?” Stella blurted, followed by a loud shushing from Max.

“Yes, okay?” Max said, embarrassed. “The first time, he accidentally triggered my PTSD—”

“Wait, what?” Stella said, her tone falling from playful to concerned. “What PTSD?”

Max shouldn’t have let that slip—usually she could keep a tighter lid on it, but damn, Stella sure made herself easy to talk to. Max almost wanted to laugh—Stella had picked the right profession. “From when Mark Jefferson shot Chloe Price in the head in front of me, drugged me, kidnapped me, then took photos of me in the dark room,” Max decided, pulling her old journal out of her bag. She didn’t know why, at first, she’d grabbed it his morning, but maybe this was why. Maybe it was time to tell Stella the truth. “We don’t know when Nathan will be back. It’s not that long of a story if you don’t interrupt me.”

“But I thought—”

“Stella,” Max said softly. “Listen.”

So, Stella got comfortable on the couch as Max started the story, both of them silently praying that
Nathan wouldn’t be back anytime soon.

“Wow,” Stella said, her nose red and her eyes puffy from tears.

“I know,” Max replied knowingly. “Sometimes it feels like it was all a dream. Then I see Nathan and….”

“I wish I’d known,” Stella said, obviously full of guilt. “Sean Prescott’s evil truly knows no bounds. I could have based our sessions around this. God, that poor Nathan.”

“I should have told you a long time ago,” Max said. “I just…I didn’t think you’d believe me.”

“I don’t blame you,” Stella chuckled, pausing to blow her nose. “Jesus, Max, this is all a huge mess, and as much as I’d love to continue, can we PLEASE get back to our earlier conversation?”

“I cannot believe you,” Max said flatly.

“I NEED to know!” Stella whined. “Did he choke you? Did he slap you? Did he make you wear a ball gag? Did he tie you up and hang you from the ceiling?”

Max glared at Stella, wide-eyed nearly speechless. “Now I really can’t believe you.”

“Hey, I saw the pictures he used to have in his dorm room,” Stella shot back. “I know what he’s about.” Max sighed in defeat. She wanted to keep it as private as possible, but she also couldn’t deny that she desperately needed to talk about it. Hadn’t she kept enough secrets over the years? She stood up and began unbuttoning her shirt. “This can’t ever leave this room, and I swear if this ends up in the group chat, I’ll disappear, and you’ll disappear with me, got it?”

“You think I want to be caught up in Victoria’s wrath with you if she found out? I got it, I got it!” Stella said excitedly. “Now tell me!”

Max opened the front of her shirt and covered her ears. Stella was hollering at what felt like thirty-thousand decibels. Not only did Max have an array of hiccups on her neck, they were also scattered across her collarbones where they eventually took a trip down and gathered on her breasts and ribs.

“Wow,” Stella said. “Um, they’re hardly noticeable?”

“Oh please, I look like a fucking Dalmatian,” Max laughed. “You should see the ones on my legs.”

“Dang, you really let him have at you,” Stella mumbled, her cold fingertips dabbing one of the hiccups on Max’s chest. “Did he say anything? Like…like…like did he make you call him ‘Sir?’”

“Gross, no, no,” Max said. She blushed. “I dunno…there was talking but like…” she sighed again. “Look, at some point he was being so gentle and it wasn’t doing anything for me so I said something like, ‘you’re not gonna break me in half’ and he just goes, ‘I might.’”

“OH MY GOOOOOOOOOOOOD!” Stella yelled. “What else, what else!”

“For the love of—”

“Shh!” Stella whined. “It won’t leave the room, I promise!”

“Well…,” Max hesitated. “He didn’t really talk dirty, he just kept randomly saying things and they ended up becoming kind of dirty…kind of.”
“How so?”

Max explained.

They’d been going at it for a while now, Nathan with his hands under Max’s knees, pressing them into her shoulders as he thrusted into her. It was a splendid view, and he was absolutely loving it. He hadn’t had this much fun since Blackwell! Nathan leaned forward and changed the position, releasing Max’s legs and resting his hands by her waist, and she pulled him in by his cheeks for a kiss. He closed his eyes and eventually reached for her breast, upon which he placed another hickey. He pulled back some long time later, wanting to grin and admire his work, but instead, he got to pull a five-inch hair of Max’s out of his mouth.

“Hey,” he said, tossing the hair onto the floor. “What, what made you—fuck—decide, decide to keep your hair long?”

“What?” Max said. “Is this really—EEP!” she squealed. Nathan had surprised her by pressing his thumb right on that sweet spot between her legs. “Is this—really—the time to be—asking this?”

Almost as if he were angry, Nathan quickly pulled out and then tapped her right shoulder. She didn’t move, and she looked annoyed. Softening the mood back up, Nathan leaned down and kissed her nice a long, long enough for him to feel the sheets dampen beneath them. “If you don’t tell me now, I’m just gonna keep asking,” he said. He tapped Max’s shoulder again.

Catching the hint, Max flipped over onto her stomach, only to shudder when she felt Nathan’s lips drag across her back. He gently moved her hair off of her shoulders and clutched her hips as he slid back into her with some ease. He pressed down on the middle of her back and she arched a bit, and he let out a sound that made her smirk. Embarrassed, Nathan leaned forward onto her and put his hand back between her legs, taking in her soft moans as he caught his breath and panted, “Hair?”

“I guess—ah, I guess I just—I just stopped—I stopped cutting it,” Max managed. She hoped it’d be the last of his inquiries for the day, at least while they were clearly preoccupied. “Why—oh—why are you asking?”

“No reason, ah, really,” Nathan said, still moving his hips at a comfortable rhythm. He gathered up her long brown hair until it was in a mock-ponytail held together by his hand, then steadily tilted her head back. It was a bit of a stretch for her, but not uncomfortable, and the angle was PHENOMENAL.

Nathan was still thrusting, and he was looking Max RIGHT in the eyes while he did it. “I love long hair,” he grinned.

“God, what a pervert,” Stella said. “Jesus, it makes me miss Justin.”

Max laughed, and despite her effort, Stella could tell it was forced. As much as they both wanted to celebrate the end of Max’s dry spell and have a good laugh, they couldn’t. it was funny for a second, but they knew that Max may have seriously derailed Nathan on his road to recovery, not to mention Stella’s recent discovery of the alternate timelines could prove to be a problem. Now that she knew Nathan’s trauma was much more than “severe emotional and physical abuse,” she’d have to find a way to incorporate what she now knew into their sessions, but there were problems. First, she only had a year before Nathan would be eligible for parole—she’d have to re-do a year of planning and
go over all of the notes she’d taken that proved he was well again. Secondly, they’d have to tell Nathan that Max had spilled the beans. Max felt terrible for talking about their private encounter, but she also couldn’t help the relief she felt. She hadn’t told anyone about the dark room and the time she spent there in a long time, and Stella’s professional input was immensely helpful. Max wondered if Stella would one day be up to doing skype sessions.

Max tried to be strong and pretend this whole situation didn’t bother her, but she couldn’t and there was no rewind power to make Stella forget the whole thing. Stella rested her head on Max’s shoulder and patted her back as she slowly rebuttoned her shirt. Once she was finished, Max returned her head to her hands, her eyes to the floor.

“Max, what are you going to do about all of this?” Stella asked. “Aside from your PTSD—we can set something up about that soon—do you feel the same way about Nathan?”

“I…don’t,” Max said honestly. “I mean…I…like him…but love is a big step. And I don’t know if I’m there. I could be, someday, maybe, but for fuck’s sake, Stella, he’s still got a year in prison to go. What if after that year he realizes he’s only in love with me because I’ve been around? What if he realized he wants someone else? I can’t pursue anything until he’s free. And by that time, who knows if I’ll still want to? What if I meet someone? What if I break his heart?”

Stella offered a sad smile and took Max’s face in her hands. “I don’t have all the answers, Max. but you’ve shown what you can do with an impossible choice. I can’t imagine how hard it was to choose Arcadia Bay over Chloe, nor do I know Chloe’s influence on your choice. But you knew what you had to do when the time came. And when the time comes,” Stella paused, pressing her forehead to Max’s, “you’ll make the best choice you can.”

Just then, Nathan walked into the office, juggling a pot of coffee and a box half-filled with donuts. “Holy shit,” he said, quickly setting the food down on Stella’s desk, beaming. “Were you guys about to kiss? Please, don’t let me interrupt.”

“You pig,” Stella scolded. Max knew she was trying to sound serious, but she could sense there was something else in Stella’s tone, especially with the sneaky grin on her face.

Max didn’t know what to say or thing about anything anymore. Stella knew the entire truth about everything now, and Max knew it’d be near impossible for her to keep that secret. Nathan had shared what had happened with Stella in confidence, and now Max knew that he was in love with her. Max also knew she wasn’t in love with him—but she could eventually be, and realizing this came with the suddenly epiphany that she was, indeed, completely over Talia.

Max wanted to turn and tell him so, to sit down and have a real conversation about their feelings and what they meant to each other, but it wouldn’t happen. She turned to look at Nathan. Upon seeing the satisfied look on his face—his eyebrows raised, the corners of his mouth turned up in that aggravating grin that she’d become so fond of—all she could do was laugh. She stumbled over to Stella’s couch, holding her aching stomach, only managing to laugh harder when Nathan joined in.

Stella glared at them both, pouting in between whines of “we were having a moment, Nathan” and “you guys are SO immature!”

Eventually, Max was able to stand again, and she went to accept one of the coffees on Stella’s desk, only for Nathan to snatch it away and push the other one into her hands. Confused, Max cautiously sipped her coffee, wondering what he’d done to the other one.

Nathan jokingly turned up his nose, pushed past her, and handed the coffee she’d tried to take to Stella. “You hate good coffee,” he fussed.
“I don’t hate non-black coffee, I just grew accustomed to it because I was always running LATE in the mornings back at Blackwell, and I rarely had time to put anything in it. I take it black as a courtesy to you,” Max explained.

“Whatever Max,” Nathan rolled his eyes. “Anyway, if either of you take the chocolate glazed donut, I will lose my shit.”

Stella sipped her drink, pleasantly surprised that he remembered she preferred tea over coffee, knowing there had better be a custard-filled donut inside the bag if Nathan knew what was good for him. She rummaged through the bag only to find something utterly offensive. “Nathan, is there a custard one in here?”

“They didn’t have any, so I got you a jelly one,” Nathan said proudly.

Stella frowned and sipped her tea. “I HATE jelly donuts.”

“Well I hate the barfy pattern on your ugly couch, so there,” Nathan spat back. He snatched the bag and dug a little, only to pull out the donut Stella wanted. “Here’s your ugly donut, so quit bitching.” Nathan laughed, losing his serious tone.

The three enjoyed their donuts together, Nathan commenting snidely on Max’s BORING glazed donut, Stella’s DISGUSTING custard-filled donut, and reveling in his perfect donut. He and Max were reluctant to leave when it came time for Stella’s next client, clinging to her with a group hug. Stella nudged Max in the ribs with her phone, and Max knew she’d have a lot of questions waiting for her when she returned home.

Max and Nathan returned to the car, buckling their seatbelts in silence until Max spoke. “You love Stella,” she told him.

“What?” Nathan asked incredulously. Had he banged Stella in his old room a few days ago? Did he almost kiss Stella while she was drunk? Did he squeeze the life out of Stella’s thigh any chance he got? No! How could Max even say that? “No, I don’t!”

“You do,” Max said, smiling and nodding. “She always puts you in a good mood and you memorized her coffee—”

“Stella doesn’t drink coffee,” he corrected. “Just tea, no sugar, lots of honey and lemon. So, what?”

Max glared at him. “How does Kristine take her coffee?”

“Fuck if I know,” Nathan replied.

Max nodded, still smiling as she started the car and pulled out of the parking lot. “Exactly,” she said. “Okay, okay,” Nathan chuckled. “Maybe I do, but not like I love—” he stopped himself, and, upon seeing the shocked look on Max’s face, blurted, “Victoria.”

“Right,” Max said, trying to hide that she wasn’t buying it. “Stella told me you were progressing really well, Nathan. She’s so proud of you.”

“I mean, I haven’t punched anyone in over a week, I thought the progress was obvious,” Nathan joked. “Ah, shit.”

“What’s wrong?”
“I wanted to spend the rest of the day playing games, but isn’t Kristine’s thingy tonight?”

Max laughed out loud. “Her what?”

“Her thingy.”

“Her thingy?”

“Shut up, you know what I’m talking about,” Nathan laughed, grabbing a handful of her hair and playfully throwing it toward her face. “What’s she even winning again?”

“It’s…it’s some award,” Max answered. She felt so bad, she’d just been talking about this with Kristine the other day, but she couldn’t remember if Kristine had mentioned what she was winning. “I…I don’t remember.”

Max had asked her about it a dozen times since then, too, but Kristine either answered too quickly in passing or she told Max it wasn’t a big deal. She made it sound like she didn’t deserve the award, constantly backing it up with, “I was just doing my job.”

* * *

“Will you hold still?” Max whined, frustrated. She and Nathan were inside Feast, possibly the nicest restaurant in Arcadia Bay—owned by Sean Prescott—standing near a table in its enormous ballroom. Max had been sipping some water, passing it off to Nathan when she noticed his bowtie was tied incorrectly. He was in a fitted, navy blue tux with white shoes. His hair was slicked back and he had a boutonniere pinned to his chest, and Max thought she’d faint if he flashed a grin. He looked like the devil, and Max couldn’t believe how much she liked it.

“It doesn’t matter, it doesn’t matter!” he complained, but he didn’t move or swat her hand away. “I HATE wearing this shit,” he whined.

“It’s a shame,” Max said, plucking her drink from his hand. “You look good,” she smiled.

Nathan tried to hide his blush, but he couldn’t. “You, too,” he choked out. Max turned away, admiring the decorations on one of the ten tables in the room, and she didn’t see him checking her out.

Max was in a black, backless halter jumpsuit with a high neckline and a small, teardrop shaped cutout right where her cleavage was. Her hair was pulled up into a tight, curled bun with a few wayward curls flirtily hanging along the back of her neck, tattoo somewhat obscured. On her feet were a pair of open-toed short heels, in a nice velvety pink, with a strap across her ankles. Nathan had been ready to complain about everything since they left the car, but once Max took off the jacket she’d been wearing earlier, he shut up real quick. He was loving the gratuitous side-boob she had going, but he didn’t like that many of the other guests had noticed it as well. He pulled her over to him, his hand brushing against her bare back as he rested it on her hip. He really wanted to tell her how fucking amazing she looked, but he knew he couldn’t do that. Tonight, he’d have to be content with sneakily copping a feel and basking in everyone else’s jealous stares.

“Nathan,” Max said softly, pulling away from him just slightly, “boundaries.”

“What?” he said, but it didn’t take long for him to notice what she was talking about. His thumb had slid under the outer edge of her jumpsuit, and they’d agreed on little skin-to-skin contact, save for the occasional thigh-touch. “Sorry,” he said, removing his hand and putting a few inches of space between them. God, this was so fucking hard, but he’d rather have this over the brutal rejection he’d face if he ever told her how he really felt about her.
Mac didn’t respond, she only smiled. Talking made things worse, they always did, despite how desperately she needed to talk to him. She put a few more inches of space between them, then looked toward the stage. “So… did we ever figure out what award Kristine won?”

“Teacher of the Year,” a very, very familiar voice answered. Max swallowed hard and turned to see none other than Talia Hajali approaching them.

Max swallowed hard and walked backwards into Nathan, who glared at her for almost stepping on his shoe. He caught Max by her shoulders, then calmed some when he realized how badly she was shaking. Max sneaked her arm around his, then forced a smile once Talia was closer.

“Long time no see,” Talia smiled. She offered her hand and smiled. “You must be Nathan. Nice to meet you, I’m Talia.”

Nathan shot a glance at Max for silent permission to shake her hand, and she only blinked in response, wondering why he was so shaken. He reached out and shook Talia’s hand.

“Ooh, that’s a business grip,” Talia flirted, winking at him. “You must be good with your hands.”

“So I’ve been told,” Nathan flirted back, much to Max’s dismay.

Talia sipped the drink in her other hand—vodka soda, her favorite, Max knew—and smiled her perfect smile. She still had the green nose stud. She was in a white sleeveless turtle-neck top with long black slacks that touched the ground, despite her four-inch Louboutins. Max was annoyed—they were basically wearing the same outfit. “So,” she said, sipping her drink. “You guys are here for Kristine?”

“Yes,” Nathan answered proudly. “She’s my older sister.”

“Aww, I wish she was my sister,” Talia smiled. She flipped her long black hair, which was all pulled back into a sleep black ponytail that sat atop her head. “I meet her a week ago and just about fell in love.”

Max tried to stifle it, but she couldn’t, scoffing as she took a sip of her water.

“She’s single,” Nathan joked.

Max furrowed her brows and then swallowed. She slammed her drink down on the table, halting the banter. “I want to dance. Nathan, let’s dance,” she said, offering Talia only a small wave as she dragged Nathan to the dancefloor.

Once they were there, Max’s breathing was fast and dry.

“What was that about?” Nathan asked, putting one hand on her waist and the other holding her hand. Max dug her fingertips into Nathan's shoulder. “What was that about?” he repeated.

“Nothing,” Max breathed. “I want to dance, so we’re dancing now.”

“Max, your lies are shit,” Nathan said bluntly. He put his finger under her chin and tilted her head up, and he noticed how badly her head was shaking. “Are you okay?”

“It’s been so long,” Max panicked, trying to keep her voice low. “I haven’t seen her since—it was weird. God, she looks so good. Was I rude? I was rude, I was so rude,” she said frantically.

“Hey, hey,” Nathan said. “It’s okay.” He pulled Max’s head to his chest, careful not to smear her
makeup or ruin his outfit. “Max, it’s—”

“May I cut in?” Talia grinned, tapping Nathan’s shoulder.

Nathan wanted to tell Talia to leave, but he couldn’t. He knew if he said anything, he’d end up making a scene, so he gave Max an apologetic look and walked to their table, hoping Talia didn’t somehow get into Max’s head. He felt weird about being so protective, but he knew that what Talia had done really hurt Max, and he’d die before he saw her hurt like that again. But it was so hard to resist Talia’s charm. She was gorgeous, obviously smart and successful, and that’s what Max needed. Talia was great for her—despite her little having-a-husband mishap—so Nathan decided he’d stay out of her way.

But he didn’t feel good about it.

Meanwhile, Max and Talia were swaying on the dancefloor. Max kept her eyes to the floor, doing her best not to look Talia in the eye.

Talia, on the other hand, had cleared her throat three times trying to get Max’s attention. Eventually, Talia rolled her eyes once she realized that the subtle approach wasn’t going to work. “Come on, Maxie, look at me,” she cooed.

“Do NOT call me that,” Max said sternly, looking up at Talia and stopping all movement.

“Okay, okay, Max, I’m sorry,” Talia said. They resumed their dance, with Max careful to keep a foot of space between them. “I’ve missed you.”

“I didn’t miss you at all,” Max said. It was harsh, and Max knew she missed their late-night conversations and the time they spent together, but any inkling of that door being open would lead to Talia trying to barge in. Still, Max felt bad. “I’m sorry,” Max said.

Talia laughed. “Maxine Caulfield, you are full of surprises,” she said.


“Oh, M-a-x,” Talia said. They continued swaying for a moment or so, until Talia smacked her lips and tried to make small talk. “So…are you seeing anyone?”

Max glanced at Nathan, who was sitting at their table, playing on his phone. “It’s complicated,” she said quietly.

“What was that?” Talia asked, amused.

“What?”

“That look,” Talia smirked. She looked over at Nathan, who waved off an attractive girl when she tried to take Max’s seat. “Aww, do you have a crush on your little Prison Friend?”

“It’s not just—” Max stopped herself, not only because Talia wasn’t entitled to that information, but because Talia was laughing at her. Max’s vision went red with anger, she hated when Talia did this crap. She was always discounting how Max felt, turning it into a joke, and Max was tired of it.

“Ahh, I don’t blame you,” Talia said, calming some and flashing her smile at Nathan, who waved in response. “He’s cute. Still, it’s probably just because you’ve been spending so much time together.”

Max squinted at her. “I lived with my roommate and I don’t feel that way about her,” Max shot back.
“Geez, Max, why are you being so defensive?” Talia chuckled, glancing back at Nathan again. She turned back at Max and lowered her eyelids and her voice. “It’s not like you slept with him,” she giggled, just before turning and looking at him again.

Max went silent and froze. Despite throwing on her best poker face, the redness spreading up her cheek to her neck and face betrayed her. She swallowed hard as Talia’s eyes widened. Surprisingly, though, it wasn’t shame she felt—it was embarrassment, and that same, unbridled anger.

“Oh my god, Max, really? Him?” Talia asked. “He’s a criminal, Max.”

“Yeah, but at least he was single when he fucked me. What about you? I seem to recall a marriage in the mix while we were fooling around,” Max spat. She wanted to curse herself for being so crude, but she also needed to make it abundantly clear that insulting Nathan was off-limits.

Talia swallowed hard, dumfounded and embarrassed, and looked down at her feet. “I deserved that,” she said quietly.

Max tried to feel bad about it, but she didn’t. Talia was overstepping the line. Did she really think Max hadn’t taken what Nathan had done to Chloe and Rachel into account? She’d never be able to look Joyce in the eye again! Not to mention how quickly Victoria would practically have her excommunicated if she ever found out. And Max knew she couldn’t help how she felt about Nathan, so she accepted her guilt about it as her punishment. She already knew she couldn’t ever pursue Nathan—despite how he felt about her—and it stung, but she expected it. Accepting it was another story. “My relationship with Nathan Prescott is none of your goddamn business,” Max said coldly. The song came to an end and Max dropped Talia’s hand. “Find a new partner, I’m done dancing,” she said.

Max began to walk away as Talia stifled tears, and Talia called out, “You think he’d dance with me?”

“You’ve got two legs and a heartbeat, ask him yourself,” Max said, turning on her heel and walking away. Once she was back at the table, Max plopped down in her seat next to Nathan and flagged down a nearby waitress. “Rum and coke, please. Make it a double,” she said, digging in her small, pastel pink clutch and passing the waitress a fifty-dollar bill. “Keep the change,” she said.

“Guess I’m driving tonight,” Nathan laughed. Max wasn’t laughing. She sat at the table, arms crossed, watching as Talia walked over to the side of the dancefloor. “You okay?” Nathan asked her.

“Will you please dance with Talia?” Max said once the waitress had gone to the bar to put her order in. “Please. Or she won’t leave me alone.”

“Yeah, yeah, sure,” Nathan said softly. “He placed his hand on her thigh, feeling her calm some. “It’s okay, Max.”

Nathan smiled, then left her at the table and headed toward Talia, who was still standing off to the side of the dancefloor looking dejected. Her eyes were wide—not because she was shocked, but because if she blinked too hard and those first tears fell, she’d never be able to stop. Nathan gently touched her arm, startling her, and she looked away as the tears began to fall and the song began to play.

“Do you want to dance?” Nathan asked. “Max, uh, Max said you wanted to.”

“Sure,” Talia said, taking his hand and leading him to the dancefloor.
Oh, oh, oh, oh-whoa

Oh, oh, oh, oh-whoa

I forget all my dreams

I forget everyone’s name I meet

I forget about time and space

But I can’t stop thinkin’ ‘bout your face

I can’t stop thinkin’ ‘bout your face

Talia and Max swayed to the music for a moment. “Do you love her?” Talia asked confidently.

The look on his face said it all, but still he felt the need to clarify. “Yes.”

Clouds are rolling by

I open my mouth and breath ‘em right in

All my thoughts slip away

But I can’t stop thinkin’ ‘bout your face

I can’t stop thinkin’ ‘bout your face

Talia squeezed her eyes shut, trying to stop the tears, but knowing they wouldn’t no matter how hard she tried. “God, me too,” she sobbed. “But she hates me.”

“She doesn’t,” Nathan said as they swayed. “She’s just…hurting.”

Oh, I won’t stop

Til you knock on my door

Won’t stop

Til you knock on my door

Oh, oh, oh, oh-whoa

Oh, oh, oh, oh-whoa

Talia forced a laugh. “How long did it take her to forgive you, Nathan?” she asked.
Nathan hesitated. “I’m not sure she has.”

Talia rolled her eyes and clutched his arm, pulling him a little bit and making him look her in the eye. “Do you really think she’d be here if she hadn’t?”

*I forget this and that
I forget about the shit that doesn’t matter
My memory could be erased
And I’d still be thinking about your face*

Nathan hadn’t thought about that very much at all. He’d been more concerned about someone else’s forgiveness.

Joyce Price’s.

*Oh, I won’t stop
Til you knock on my door
Won’t stop
Til you knock on my door
Oh, oh, oh, oh-whoa
Oh, oh, oh, oh-whoa*

As a new song started, Nathan and Talia continued dancing, both sneaking glares at Max, they laughed at each other when they noticed it, and made it a game, wondering if Max was oblivious or just playing along as she sipped her drink.

“I really messed up, Nathan,” Talia said, wiping away her tears and tossing her ponytail off of her shoulder. “Max was the second woman I ever dated. I married my high school boyfriend when we were in college—my second relationship. I wasn’t ready to marry him, then I got pregnant and—”

“What the fuck?” Nathan asked, quickly covering his mouth once he noticed Talia’s shock. Nobody else seemed to notice, as he hadn’t been too loud, but he was embarrassed nonetheless. “You have a kid?”

“Ah,” Talia said. “Max must not have told you everything. She never talked about my daughter, even after she met her.”

Talia separated from her husband, Brandon, after eight years of marriage. She had moved to and was
living in Seattle temporarily, renting an apartment for a year, fully intending on working their marriage for her daughter. Brandon had custody of Aylin, their daughter, and Talia visited Aylin and Brandon every other weekend. She’d fly to California, where she usually lived, every other Friday, right after work.

Living in Seattle was great. She got the space she needed away from her husband, but she desperately missed her daughter, eventually going out and trying to make some friends even though she knew her stay in Seattle would likely end them.

Then, she met Max, and everything changed.

Talia had arranged a charity event for Max, and as a thank you, Max treated the entire staff to dinner at a popular sushi restaurant, Krazy. After dinner, Talia and Max went out for drinks, and they hit it off instantly. Talia had casually mentioned that she had recently gone through a separation, making it clear that she had no intention of getting back together with him, and Max believed her. Within two weeks, Max and Talia were inseparable. They were spending most of their time together, texting, rendezvousing, until Talia eventually decided that she wanted to leave her husband. She hated how mundane her life with her husband had become. He’d accepted the fall into routine, and was a wonderful dad, and even though she was a great mother, Talia wanted more than their pretty quiet life in California. Max was interesting, had so much spirit, and she showed Talia that she didn’t have to stay at home, playing board games every Saturday night, which she had become accustomed to doing.

And Talia felt the need to express this to Max, right after a passionate night together, all the while still neglecting to let Max know she had a child. When Max found out about she was the other woman, she was furious, going so far as to arrange a meeting with Talia’s husband behind Talia’s back. He brought Aylin to that meeting, and Max discreetly let him know that she had been sleeping with his wife, something that made her feel rotten inside for doing in front of his six-year-old daughter. She was as nice as possible, expressing how sorry she was, and how embarrassed she was for trusting that Talia was truthful when she said she was separated from her husband. Not only did Max dump Talia, she also offered her testimony if Talia tried to sue for full custody in a divorce court hearing.

“I had to ask him for the divorce,” Talia said. “Max was livid, and Brandon was heartbroken. He wanted to keep our family together so badly, but neither of us wanted to accept that I’d fallen out of love with him.” Talia forced a laugh and took a deep breath. “Thanks for listening, kid. And let me tell you, if you EVER get Max, never let her go.”

Nathan swallowed hard and whispered, “Noted.”

“Ah,” Talia murmured, distracted, making eye contact with one of the members of the staff. “It’s time to start the award ceremony. Thanks for the dance, Nathan,” she finished.

Nathan nodded at her, then he let go of her waist and headed back to the table where Max was sitting. Her mood was already boosted, having downed half of her rum and coke, leaning against her chair, smiling at him. Nathan moved a little closer to her, making sure he caught her eyes as he went to rest his hand on her thigh. Max didn’t react, so Nathan took his usual spot, smiling at her as all the award recipients gathered on the stage. Talia kept her distance, disappearing once or twice, eyeing Max and Nathan obviously, though she was trying to hide it.

Talia looked great on stage, her best smile plastered on her face while the tears she’d had were gone completely, hidden either by her charm or a layer of makeup, Nathan couldn’t tell. Each teacher
received their various awards, until Talia smiled and announced that Kristine Prescott had been chosen as teacher of the year.

“It is an honor to accept this award,” Kristine began. “I am humbled. Teaching English as a second language started out at just a job, but I realized much later it was so much more. I’ve had the opportunity to travel all around the world, learning new customs, getting advice from other teachers—who are far more deserving of this award than I—and of course, meeting so many bright and wonderful children. Thank you for this award—I’d like to dedicate it to Sean and Melinda Prescott, the loving parents who raised me, and my little brother, Nathan, whom I love with all my heart. Thank you,” Kristine smiled.

She walked off the stage in her long silver gown, then later joined her friends at her table. She giggled with them for a moment, setting her plaque down, then headed toward where Nathan and Max were sitting. Nathan stood up with open arms, awaiting her hug while Max sat down, much calmer, smiling to herself. Kristine hugged Nathan and then kissed him on the cheek. She whispered something in his ear and he pulled away, a sad look present in his eyes. Kristine wiped away a tear and held him again, much tighter this time, before leaving their table and rejoining her group.

Nathan sat back down next to Max, leaning to her while covering his mouth. “Kristine wants to get the hell out of here,” he started. “Apparently, the food is shit.”

“Really?” Max asked. Kristine had just sat down back with her friends at her table, and she didn’t look like she had any intention of leaving. “We just…walk right out?”

“No,” Nathan said. “I just wanted to see if you would believe me. She said she was going to miss me.”

Max closed her eyes, trying to figure out what to say. She put her hand on Nathan's shoulder, and before she could say anything, Talia walked up again, offering Max a sprite. It was her usual gesture for a truce. She'd tried it after Max had met with Brandon and Aylin, but it ended badly. Max ended up ruining an eight hundred dollar coat that Talia had recently purchased, another attempt to buy Max’s forgiveness.

“Hey,” Talia said calmly, setting the drink on the table when it was clear that Max wasn’t going to take it, “can we talk outside for a minute?”

Nathan straightened visibly, giving Talia a look that somewhat scared her. Talia wasn’t a horrible person, she was just selfish, and he didn’t know what Talia’s intentions with Max were.

“Nathan,” Max said, before he could do anything. She touched his shoulder reassuringly and calmed him. “I’ll be right back.” She cocked her head toward the door in the wall to the outside of the building, and Talia gladly followed.

Once they were outside, Max leaned against the wall while Talia paced in front of her, towering over Max in her heels.

“…are you okay?” Max asked, making sure her hand was on the door handle. Talia liked to fight—meaning, she liked to throw words and argue, but she’d never been physical before. Talia’s anger was quiet and mean, and she rarely let it show. But here she was, stroking her ponytail harshly as she nearly wore a pattern into the concrete sidewalk they were standing on.

“Did you really sleep with him, Max?” Talia asked directly. She turned to glare at Max, her face not of anger like Max had expected, but more of hurt and confusion. “I mean, if you did it to get back at me—”
“I slept with him because I like him, Talia,” Max started angrily. She dropped her grip on the door, and that rum and coke had given her a lot more bravery than she usually had. She came at Talia, finger pointed so hard Talia was afraid it would go right through her. Max’s voice wasn’t calm, but she was firm, and that scared Talia more than anything. She had never seen Max so angry before, not even when she found out about Talia’s daughter. “It has never, ever been about you. Nothing I do is about you! When are you gonna get it through your thick skull that I—don’t—love—you—anymore? What’s it going to take? What’s it going to take for you to stop thinking about yourself for ten—fucking—seconds—Talia?” Max was sobbing now, her hand back on the door, clutching the handle so hard, her hand stung.

Talia was shocked. Max had never screamed at her like this before. She couldn’t bear the thought of this ending badly and resulting in her never seeing Max again, so Talia regained her composure. She didn’t know what to say. There was no way Max had genuine feelings for him—Talia knew her better than anyone, she thought. It had to have been just a ploy, a fling, a mistake—anything but as real as Max was trying to make it seem. Nathan sounded genuine when he admitted to Talia how he felt about Max, but Talia was sure it was fleeting. His love would never be enough, and she was trying to prove that hers was. “I love you, Max,” Talia said. “I love your face, the way you talk, how you curl up in a chair to read a book—I love it all, and I want to be with you.”

“I’m done with this,” Max said sternly, realizing that Talia would never understand what was going on with her and Nathan. Talia believed Max was the best she’d get, so she was going out of her way to keep the relationship alive. “It’s over, Talia, FOREVER. Now stop making a goddamn fool of yourself and spend some time with your daughter for a change.” Max anxiously turned the door handle and sped inside, leaving Talia to her own tears and thoughts.

The room was hot and the pressure felt like it was crushing. Max scanned the room for Nathan, her eyes welling up with tears when she noticed he wasn’t at their table. Upset, Max turned toward the open arch entrance to the room, only to end up in Nathan’s arms.

“Hey, hey,” he said. “It’s okay…are you okay?” he whispered. “Are you okay?”

Max clutched his sleeve, eyes open and glaring at the door she’d just come in, praying Talia would fuck off and stay outside. “Can we go? Please?” Max said, pulling away and looking up at him. “I’ll talk to Kristine, I’ll apologize for everything—”

“We can go,” Nathan said. “Kristine came and told me she was leaving when you went outside. She went out for drinks with her friends. I’ll drive. It’s okay, Max.”

“What happened back there?” Nathan asked. They were in Max’s rental car, parked in the driveway of the Hilltop House. Max always seemed a little tense when Talia came up, but it hadn’t been quite this tense before. She was sitting cross-legged in the front seat, shoes thrown onto the floor in front of her, makeup destroyed from the crying, and her hands were shaking uncontrollably.

As hard as Nathan tried to be there for her, he couldn’t help but think about how pretty she looked that night and how he wished he could hold her while she cried, calming her with intimate touch, but he knew better. He hated that she was so upset, and so overwhelmed, and he hated even more that he had to wait for her anxiety to run its course before they could really talk about it. Reassurance seemed to help, but it wasn’t enough. God, why wasn’t he ever enough?

“I told her off and left her there,” Max said. She was pissed, speaking through clenched teeth. She pressed her hands into her thighs and scowled. “I can’t believe her. She’s so full of herself. I don’t even know what I saw in her.”
“You don’t mean that,” Nathan said softly.

Max shot him a look, and he looked back at her. He looked guilty, and Max didn’t like it. “Oh, don’t do this,” she said, squinting at him incredulously. “Don’t you dare.”

“She’s smart, gorgeous, and successful,” Nathan said. “And she made a mistake, not telling you about her kid.”

Max rolled her eyes and gathered her shoes. She should have known Talia was going to tell him about Aylin. She’d purposely left it out because deep down, she wanted to save face for Talia, but she realized she didn’t deserve it anymore. Nathan only saw Talia on the surface. He didn’t know how manipulative she could be, how downright selfish she was. At the end of the day, Talia was only out for Talia and no one else. “We’ve been over this,” Max grunted, zipping the backs of her short heels and grabbing her purse and jacket from the back seat. “I don’t want to be with her, ever. I’m one-hundred percent sure of that now.”

She pushed her door open and stepped out of the car, feeling her eyes begin to burn with tears. Why was Nathan being like this? Why now? He had always been so understanding and supportive, and now he was trying to push her back into Talia’s arms? She sped to the front door, unlocking it with her key and taking a deep breath once she was inside. She threw her jacket onto one of the couches in the living room, her purse on the floor, and hastily got out of her shoes, hoping to calm some standing on the cold marble floor.

“Max,” Nathan said softly behind her. He’d locked the car and closed the front door behind them, walking toward her slowly.

“No,” she gasped, holding a finger up at him while she held her tears back as best she could. “I don’t want to hear it. What brought this on? Did she tell you to pull this crap?”

Nathan tried to stay calm. She hurt his feelings, but he was sure he was doing the right thing—he was doing it for her! However she felt about him, she needed to let it go—and he was going to do the same with how he felt about her. It was just easier that way. “I’m just saying,” Nathan said. “She’s not a monster, she just made a bad call.”

“She abandoned her marriage and daughter for pussy, Nathan,” Max barked crudely. “She IS that bad.”

“But she’s sorry, you know she is.”

“Why are you pushing this?”

“Why are you fighting it?”

“Because I like you!” Max shouted at him. Taken aback, he swallowed visibly, and instantly Max regretted saying anything. But she knew it was going to come out sooner or later. They’d avoided talking about it long enough. She avoided how she felt long enough.

Nathan stood by the door, dumbfounded, trying to figure out how to proceed. Part of him was elated. He’d never thought Max would ever admit how she felt. The image he’d clung to of her at the lighthouse with a kid popped into his head, hopeful and bathed in gold. But he knew he couldn’t force that reality—if the kid was even his—and he owed it to Max to not let her have any attachments to him. He’d done horrible things, and at this point, forgiveness didn’t matter to him as much as freedom did. She didn’t need to be tied down to him, to Arcadia Bay—Max needed to be free. So he was going to let her be, whether she liked it or not. “I think…” Nathan started hesitantly.
“I think we should go to bed,” he suggested.

“No,” Max said firmly, walking back toward him. She grabbed him by the lapels on his jacket and made him look at her. “We are done dancing around this. You know how I feel—I like you. I’ll say it until you get it into your head. I told you, now you have to tell me—tell me how you feel! Right now!” she demanded.

Her voice was raspy and she was desperate. Her grip on his was strong, and Nathan knew he couldn’t just walk away. So he’d do what he had to. “You’re my friend,” he rasped. “You’re just my friend.”

He closed his eyes, not watching as Max gasped quietly and finally let her tears fall. He was being stupid. She knew how he felt. She knew Stella wasn’t lying, HE was. It hurt, but even more than that, it pissed her off. “Fine,” she said. She loosened her grip and turned toward the stairs. “I’m going to bed.”

“Max?”

She stopped on the last step and turned to forcing a smile while her eyes were closed with tears still flowing. “Look, Nathan, I’m trying really hard not to hurt your feelings,” she said. “But you hurt mine, and I want to be alone. Sleep in your own bed tonight.”

Max was exhausted. She’d been up half the night, angrily messaging Stella and packing her things. Eventually, her rage put her to sleep, and by the time she woke up, it had faded to sadness. Her eyes were red and puffy, tears dried in a hundred tissues. Sighing, she let herself cry as she cleaned up her room, clad in only her underwear after a long, hot shower. She bent to pick up from the mountain of tissues, only to be startled by a knock on the door.

“Max?” Kristine said softly. “Can you take care of Nathan for me? My friends want to take me out for morning mimosas to celebrate.”

Max groaned and rolled her eyes up to the ceiling while her tears still fell. “Yeah,” Max sniffled. She blew her nose and cleared her throat. “You can go ahead, Kristine. I’ve got to get dressed.”

“Thank you, Max,” Kristine squealed, already sounding like she was far away. “You’re a life saver, I don’t know what he’d do without you.”

Once she was sure Kristine was gone, Max scoffed. Nathan didn’t seem like he was all that interested in her. She threw her hair into a bun and pulled a pair of blue shorts and a long-sleeved gray shirt out of her suitcase. Underneath her toiletry bag was a comfy black Calvin Klein bra, which she slipped on before the shirt. Once she got the shirt adjusted, she realized it was Nathan’s—probably mistakenly thrown in with her clean laundry. She kept it on anyway—with the way she felt right now, he could stand to lose one shirt. Max calmed herself, slowly trudging to his room in a pair of blue fuzzy socks. She wiped her tears on his sleeves, wishing she didn’t smell him on the shirt. She should have just worn a different goddamn shirt.

Ma stopped in front of his door and wiped her tears, shimmied a bit, then gathered the courage to knock. “Nathan?” she said. “It’s me.” He didn’t answer, and Max sighed and looked up at the ceiling, wishing she didn’t have to do this or see him right now.

“Come in,” she heard after a moment. Max opened the door and looked at him, trying to scan the severity of his sickness. His eyes were red, and she could instantly tell that he hadn’t slept—it was
hard for him to sleep alone. He was propped up by a bunch of pillow, wearing a pair of black boxer briefs and a white t-shirt. His blanket was bunched up next to him—he rarely used them—and on the nightstand was a Gatorade and a bottle of Ibuprofen. “Is that my shirt?” he asked, raising his eyebrows playfully.

“I’ll wash it when I’m done with it,” Max grunted. She closed the door behind her and walked over to the bed, rolling her sleeves up, ready for business. “Kristine said you’re sick?”

“Yeah,” he said, scooting over on the bed and giving her a small space to sit. “I threw up, twice.”

Max scooted closer to the headboard and pressed her hand against his forehead. “You feel a little warm.”

“One-hundred point eight,” Nathan said matter-of-factly. “I haven’t taken anything yet; Kristine said I should wait for you.”

“Of course she did,” Max mumbled under her breath. Looking at the bottle of ibuprofen, she opened it and poured three liquid-gel pills into her hand. “They’re two-hundred milligrams each. It’ll help get your fever down.” She stood up and turned away from him, handing him the Gatorade after she’d opened it and turning to head back to her room. “I’ll come check on you in a little bit,” she managed, barely hiding her quivering voice.

“No,” Nathan groaned. “Stay.”

“No,” Max said firmly.

Nathan reached out for her, gently pulling her closer by her hips. “Please stay.”

“No,” Max said again, shaking off his grasp and sliding down the side of the bed. She held herself, making sure not to let him see her face while she cried. “I don’t want to be in here right now,” she whimpered. “You don’t get to pick and choose when you want me.”

Nathan sighed and swung his legs onto the floor and sat down, cramping himself between Max and the nightstand. She couldn’t help but chuckle, scooting over to stop the pressure he was putting on her leg. She quickly remembered how upset she was once she noticed that he had laughed, too.

Nathan leaned back against the bed, trying not to show how exhausted he was. He hadn’t slept, not just because Max wasn’t there. His stomach had ached all night, but he knew it wasn’t food poisoning—it was anxiety. “Can we talk?” he asked.

“Now you want to talk?” Max gasped, turning to face him. Her nose and cheeks and eyes were red, and she’d stopped relying on tissues to stop her tears, opting for his shirt sleeves and her hands instead. Her face stung and it felt raw, but she knew she couldn’t stop. “I was willing yesterday,” she cried. “I laid it out while you were acting weird about Talia, and you completely dismissed me. I told you how I felt, and you didn’t. You didn’t care about how I felt at all.”

“Of course I care,” Nathan blurted. He thought he had prepared for this, but nothing could have done that for him. He wanted to push her away only to hurt her feelings—not break her heart—so she’d eventually leave Arcadia Bay with no obligations other that visiting Chloe. Even so, he didn’t want their last few days together to be like this. He put his hand on her thigh, half expecting her to push it away, but she didn’t. She just kept her gaze off of him. “I’m sorry,” he said. He hung his head, then turned to look at her. “But you’re an idiot if you think you don’t know how I feel about you.”

“You just keep saying that it doesn’t matter!” Max croaked. And she was tired of hearing it! It did matter! It mattered to her! She turned to look at him, like he expected, and he cupped her face in his
hands. He looked intense, blue eyes staring her down, lips straight and calm, hands gentle and steady. “Because how I feel doesn’t matter. It doesn’t. But you know how I feel about you. You know.”

Max didn’t know what to say. She closed her eyes, letting more tears fall as Nathan touched his forehead to hers. He was completely right. She knew how he felt, and at this point, trying to make him say it was selfish and pointless. Part of her thought she needed to hear it for it to be real, but it’d been real for a long time. And neither of them could do anything about how they felt, but still, she had to be sure. “What do we do?” she asked, pulling away so she could better see his face.

His eyes were closed, and he was wearing a faint smile, almost laughably calm. “I don’t know, but I know I’m gonna kiss you right now.” Nathan got closer, that delicate grin still on his face.

Max swallowed and wiped her tears. “But you said,” she paused, her lips moving against his, “you said that last time was the—last—time.”

“Fuck what I said,” Nathan blurted, lurching forward and pressing his lips against hers.

Max should have pulled away. She really should have, but she didn’t. His hands were tangled up in her hair, destroying her bun while she had her hands on his face, matching his roughness with a gentleness he appreciated.

Suddenly, much to both of their dismay, Nathan pulled away from her. “Shit,” he grumbled. “Fuck—sh—” was all he could get out before running away and leaving a trail of saliva all the way to the bathroom. Max covered the mess with tissue, chuckling to herself as she joined Nathan in the bathroom, sitting on the edge of the bathtub. She absentmindedly stroked his hair, trying to ignore the retching. “This seems like a euphemism for our relationship, doesn’t it?” he asked.

“A metaphor,” Max corrected.

“What. The fuck. Ever,” he yapped, turning back to the toilet.

Max rubbed his head and stared up at the ceiling in the bathroom “What do we do now?” Max asked again. “I want to know. Cause we can’t…we shouldn’t…”

“We won’t,” Nathan heaved, spilling a little more into the toilet. “We just…do ourselves.” He paused. “Wait.”

“I know what you meant,” Max laughed. Nathan flushed the toilet and Max handed him a mound of toilet paper. She grabbed the mid-sized trash can and held it against her chest, waiting as he rinsed his mouth with the mouthwash by the sink.

Nathan turned and leaned against the sink, trying to think about anything other than his throbbing head or how much the room was spinning. He focused on Max and found himself getting upset. He focused on Back in prison, he’d have Stella to help him, but there was a void he had that he believed only Max could fill, and he prayed that a phone call or a letter would be enough. “Hey,” he forced, almost turning to the sink and gagging again. “If you wanted to hold me, you could have just asked.

“What?”

Nathan pointed to the trashcan.

“Ha, ha,” Max forced, and she passed him on her way out of the bathroom. He stayed by the sink for a moment, laughing at his own joke, hoping he wouldn’t have to throw up again. He tried to keep up the humor, thinking about how funny he was, but he knew it was just a deflection—for Max, his
biological mom, his dad—everything. It was all floating above his head, and he knew it’d all come crashing down and he’d have no choice but to deal with it. Nathan caught his head in his hands and slid down the front of the sink, resting his back on the brown cabinets under the sink.

As Nathan's clammy, cold hands shook, he tried to compartmentalize. The smaller he made things, the easier it was to deal with them—but nothing was small. Everything was a massive roadblock, and he was riding in the middle of the street on roller skates. Fuck, what were his exercises again—what had Stella said? He had the breathing down—in through the nose, out through the mouth—but there was something else, he was sure of it. Was he supposed to calm by naming five things he could see, or five things he could touch? Fuck, no, that wasn’t right. Nothing was right. Everything was messed up and ruined and—

Soon enough, he felt himself begin to calm. Max was on her knees in front of him, holding his head against her while she stroked his messy hair. “It’s okay,” she cooked. “I’m here. I’m here for you.”

His breathing was erratic as he rocked into her, doing everything he could to not let her see his face. He felt dumb. Maybe how he was feeling wasn’t real. Maybe he was faking it. It was fucked up. It was all so fucked up! “I’m sorry,” Nathan whimpered. He gripped Max’s hips a little hard, pressing his fingers into warm skin. She was here and here for him. She cared. Max made Nathan feel valued in a way he’d only thought he’d ever feel with Rachel. So things were complicated. So he was going back to prison. So she was going back to Seattle. He was going to miss her. It hurt. It stung. It sucked. It felt bad…but it wasn’t ALL bad. He wouldn’t get to see her every day, or wake up next to her, but she’d text Stella. She’d call him. She’d still visit.

And maybe that would be enough.

“I’m going to miss you so much.”

Nathan pulled away in shock and looked up at her. She was crying again, but not quite like before. She was sad in a different way, her eyes looking to the past month, reminiscing about all the time they’d spent together. “Don’t be a stranger, Max,” Nathan told her firmly, letting a smile creep onto his face once he realized his hands were no longer shaking. “You come back here and see me, you understand?”

“Oh what?” Max chuckled, wiping her tears.

Nathan thought for a minute. “I’ll break your wrist.”

Max and Nathan sat in the bed in the guest room—his room—watching Forensic Files on Netflix. Max had hooked the PS4 up to the TV, and Nathan was eager to eventually play Overwatch with Kieran and Marcus again. He had Max huddled up against him, lying on his chest while she played a violent racing game on her phone. He was trying to stomach a banana since he was practically starving, and he knew not to ask Max to get him something else to eat. He got the scolding of a lifetime after he goofed off too much and sent the bowl and rice onto the carpet, leaving her to clean it up. He should have just listened to her, but he had never been good at listening to anyone.

“Shit,” Nathan gasped after a particularly wild murder case. “I shouldn’t be surprised. If a chick is married, it’s always the husband.”

“And vice versa,” Max mumbled, followed by cursing once her cute Fun Run skunk was zapped with lightning on her phone. She exited the race and closed the app, tossing her phone on the nightstand, then turning and cuddling up to him.
Nathan rested his hand on her ack, surprised to feel her heartbeat pounding. Max got nervous, but it wasn’t like her to try to hide it. Or rather, it was so obvious, he could usually see right through it. She rested her hand on his thigh, and he had to will himself not to jerk away—she should have known she was playing with fire.

She didn’t seem to think so, stroking his leg as she wished her throat wasn’t as dry as it was. “Hey,” Max began cautiously, “I know you’re sick, but I have a favor to ask.”

Nathan swallowed and shook his head, prompting her to move her hand. “Spit it out,” he commanded.

“Can…can we go to the cemetery?” she asked. “I want to visit Chloe.” She felt bad for bringing it up—he’d never been to Chloe’s grave, and Nathan was pretty sure he wasn’t welcome there anyway. Max just wanted to pay her respects—Nathan didn’t even have to get out of the car if he didn’t want to. But he would have to sit there, staring at the gates, sitting at Chloe and Rachel’s final resting place. That wouldn’t be easy—and Max understood that she was asking a lot of him. She wondered if he still had animosity toward Chloe. Max almost chuckled, as she knew Chloe’s answer to that question. Chloe would proudly hold a grudge in the next life.

Nathan tried to hide how much he absolutely did not want to go to the cemetery. He wasn’t interested in spending any time around Chloe or Rachel or any other dead people pinned to the ground. Plus, what if today happened to be the day that Joyce decided to pay a visit to the ol’ flesh and blood? How fucked up would that be? Even so, Nathan felt like he owed it to Max to go. But he couldn’t deny that it’d be hard to handle. He hadn’t even been invited to Rachel’s funeral, nor Chloe’s—even though he couldn’t go, as he was already incarcerated at the time—and he didn’t know if he could face them. There was so much history there and—

And what? Nathan heard, but Max didn’t say anything, and he’d know Rachel’s voice anywhere. Leave it to her to become his voice of reason. Or maybe he was finally going insane.

I can’t, Nathan thought back. Yup. Totally insane.

That’s Sean Prescott talking. QUITTER TALK!

I’m scared, Nathan thought.

Boo-fucking-hoo, Prescott. That was Chloe.

“As much as I’m enjoying not wearing pants,” Nathan forced, “we can go.”

*                                                          *                                                          *

It wasn’t a long drive to the cemetery, but Nathan was determined to make it one. He’d taken his sweet time getting ready, feigning nausea every time Max asked if he was ready to go. He didn’t know how to answer that, because if he could, he’d make sure he was never ready. He absolutely did not want to do this. What were they even going to do? Some crying-kumbaya bullshit? Maybe he’d get lucky and barf all over the front patio and Max would leave him home. It was almost a solid plan, but he’d rather brave the graves than be alone without Max.

“We don’t HAVE to go,” Max shouted from outside his bathroom door. “We can just—stay—home.”

Nathan opened the door then, knowing he had to face her. He motioned for her to sit on the toilet while he reached for his toothbrush. Max rolled her eyes and made a show out of putting the toilet seat AND lid down, then got comfortable, resting her chin on her palm while she waited for him.
She was in the same shirt—his shirt—but she’d ditched her comfy shorts for a pair of equally comfortable black leggings. She was in her black chucks, her messy bun now much neater with a pair of sunglasses in the mix, and her purse was slung over her left shoulder. She stretched out her legs and leaned back, trying to hide her annoyance. If he didn’t want to go, they wouldn’t go—Max just figured it’d be easier to try to go now than to try to squeeze it in her last day.

Nathan spit into the sink and rinsed his mouth. He was in his grey joggers now, with a pair of sneakers slipped on. Now that his teeth were clean, there was nothing stopping them from leaving. He clutched the counter and bent his knees, balancing on his tiptoes. He began his breathing exercises.

“Nathan,” Max started, noticing the signs.

“Do you think Chloe would be mad?” he asked.

“What?”

“Do you think she’ll be mad if I go with you?”

Max stifled laughter. “No, I don’t think so, as long as you don’t like…spit on it, or something.”

“No, I won’t do that. There’s only one grave I’d ever spit on and that’s Mark-fucking-Jefferson’s,” Nathan said, letting himself fall onto the ground in front of the sink, using his arms to support his upper body on the floor. “If I had my way, I’d do something else with that psycho.”

“Oh?” Max asked, helping him up off of the ground. “Like what?” she asked. She turned and walked out of the bathroom and he followed, turning the light off as they exited.

“First, I’d pay off his family, then get the bastard cremated,” Nathan began. He picked up his pace and caught up to Max on the stairs. She was a step or two ahead of him, and he desperately wanted to reach out and hold her hand, but he knew better. Even more than that, though, he knew this was their last week together. He might never get another chance if he didn’t do it now—and there was no rewind power to help. It was innocent; he needed to be close to her right now. So he did it.

Max practically broke her neck, turning back to look at him while simultaneously letting him catch up to the step she was on so she wasn’t pulling him down the stairs. He was looking straight ahead, and she could tell it was taking every fiber of his being to do so. So she let him.

“Next, I’d dig a hole in the junkyard, and pour that bitch in there,” he said, helping Max down the rest of the stairs. He let go of her hand just long enough for her to get the car keys ready, then latched onto it again.

“Then leave him there forever?” Max asked, suddenly very aware of how sweaty her hand had become. They walked out the front door and got to the car, unsure of how to proceed. They freed their hands to get in, and instead of trying again, Nathan planted his hand on her thigh once they were inside.

“No, then I take a massive dump in the hole and leave him stewing in my shit for eternity,” Nathan said, proudly leaning his chair back.

Max rolled her eyes and started the car. She should have known it’d be something crude like that, but she thought Mark Jefferson deserved it. He was the scum of the earth, and Max often felt that lifetime imprisonment was too kind for him. She used to think she wanted to face him, to tell him he was a coward, but she knew she couldn’t—it wouldn’t have made sense in this timeline, and Max was pretty much positive that she never wanted to see Mark Jefferson’s face again. Mark Jefferson was a
sadist, and Max had no doubt his mind games only improved since being incarcerated. Aside from “killing Rachel” and practically pushing Kate toward suicide, Mark Jefferson had killed a total of six of the twenty-three girls he’d kidnapped. Pleading guilty got him away from the death penalty, and he could have gotten an even better deal, but he refused it. Two of the six girls he killed were never found. Their families had been willing to work with Mark—they wanted to give their daughters a peaceful final resting place, but he wasn’t budging. He took that chance away from them, with a charming smirk and a laugh. He was trash.

“That’s too kind for him,” Max murmured.

Nathan was surprised she’d said that out loud. “I know,” he answered.

Max slowly backed out of the driveway, intending to head to the flower shop near the cemetery. She hoped Chloe would like the morning glories Max planned on bringing. They weren’t Chloe’s classic blue, but she’d probably appreciate the sentiment.

Nathan knew exactly what he’d get for Rachel: nothing. He never bothered to ask her what she liked or if she even had a favorite flower—he used to buy flowers for her all the time, all different kinds, until she kindly told him that she didn’t want them anymore. She never wanted anything from him but his company, but that couldn’t have been enough. Rachel deserved the world and he wanted to show her that. As appropriate as it would be for him to bring nothing, he knew Rachel, somehow, would laugh at whatever he’d gotten her and set it on her dresser, just like she always did. The flowers would always end up dying because she didn’t take care of them, but it wasn’t for lack of trying. Rachel was so popular and so busy, she rarely spent the night in her own room. Maybe one would be enough, just enough for him to show a little appreciation while sticking to her tune. She only needed one flower, and he’d make sure it was perfect.

*                                                          *                                                          *

“You don’t have to wait for me,” Nathan pouted. He was leaning back in his seat, a scowl on his face. “I’ll just sit here looking at the ‘Sunny’ sky.”

He’d been pouting since the flower shop, where one of the nice employees there helped him out as best she could. Nathan was picky, but she was as accommodating as she could be, with a low, calming voice and waist length black hair. She wore a headband around her forehead, adorned with three small metal feathers, two red and one blue. Her skin was tan, and she was barely as tall as Max, with a smile that could have made Nathan melt, had Max not been there. He was embarrassed because he kept calling the Native American flower shop employee “Sunny,” as her name was spelled on her nametag: Sani. But, once Nathan and Max paid for their respective flowers, Sani opened the door and said, “I hope you like your flowers. By the way, Nathan, my name is ‘Sunnye.’ Hope to see you again soon. Have a wonderful day.”

“She told you how to say it like nine times, Nathan,” Max reminded him. Sani corrected him three times before she realized that he was too obsessed with finding the perfect flower for whom he told Sani was his cousin.

“I don’t even know why I did that,” Nathan said. Sani was so gentle and nice and admittedly, it freaked him how. She had moved to town barely a year ago, and she lived just far enough so the Prescott name didn’t quite reach her. Most people were cautious around him, either uncomfortably nice because they knew his violent history, or downright mean, because they knew what he’d done. It was rare that he got to interact with people who had no idea who he was, and she treated him like a person the entire time he was there. “I don’t even know Sani,” he said.

“Are you gonna sit here and be salty all day or are you going to give Rachel her flower?” Max asked
expectantly. They’d waited long enough.

Despite Nathan getting her name wrong a thousand times, Sani came through and helped him pick out the perfect flower: a single orange fire lily. He wanted a single red rose, but Sani insisted that it was super cliché and that it’d be far more original to give her the lily. Sani’s roses were beautiful, but her lilies were her pride. Eventually, Nathan agreed with her, and he bought the lily.

It was wrapped up in blue plastic that matched the blue of Rachel’s favorite feather earring. He clutched it, then scoffed and looked away from Max. he heard her shuffle a bit after that, then felt the weight of the car keys in his lap. Max wasn’t going to wait anymore, and he couldn’t expect her to.

Max closed her door and walked through the parking lot, the ground damp from a random rain, holding her bouquet of morning glories to her chest. She hoped Chloe would like them. Max felt somewhat ashamed—they were best friends and she’d never bothered to find out what Chloe’s favorite flower was. She missed out on so much, all because she ignored her for five years. She had no excuse—one day, it just got easier to stop responding than to think of a way to talk about William, or to apologize when the time to talk about him had passed. She intended to put Chloe on hold for just a few days, which stretched to just a few weeks, and before Max knew it, she was on a flight back to Arcadia Bay, belongings in tow, with five years of radio silence under her belt. Then she was a coward again, still out of contact upon return. She’d been given a chance to fix everything, though, to show Chloe how important she was for one single week, but Max still held onto some guilt. Visiting made it easier, but it wouldn’t ever go away. Max could work with that.

She walked up to the grave, surprising herself when she immediately began to cry. Chloe’s grave looked about the same—a small plaque near Max’s feet with Chloe’s picture, along with a medium headstone with the tattoo on her arm imprinted in the granite—except for a small glass box bolted to the top of the headstone. Inside the box were three things, together but divided, due to three small glass pillars. Inside the box, Max immediately noticed her hair on the first pillar—a long patch of blue. Next, she saw a very small snip of blue hair, somewhat faded—and Max knew it was Chloe’s. It had belonged to Joyce, and she used to keep it in a small ash tray that Chloe had made for her. Lastly, there was Rachel Amber’s blue feather earring—Max wondered how Joyce was able to get it from Rachel’s high-profile father. Either way, it was a beautiful display, and Max felt her heart lurch.

“Love what you’ve done with the place,” Max said, sweeping a few leaves off of the plaque. She set her morning glories near Chloe’s picture and rested her weight on her knees. There was always a lot she wanted to say, but the silence was nice, too. It reminded her of the long car rides with Chloe, windows slightly open, the cool October air blowing Chloe’s smell—cigarettes, and oddly, strawberries—toward her.

It reminded her of the night she stayed over at Chloe’s the week of the storm. She woke up first, as she often did, lying there, elated that she and Chloe were able to reconnect. Donning Rachel’s outfit, she and Chloe went on to solve the mystery of Rachel’s death.

As Max reminisced, Nathan had finally left the car, standing a few feet behind her, watching her on Chloe’s grave. He felt totally out of place. He had no business here, but he could practically FEEL the rays of “get-your-ass-over-here-and-say-something” emitting from Max’s body. At least, that’s what he thought he felt.

Then again, maybe it wasn’t Max sending them.

Sighing, Nathan walked over, passing Max and awkwardly standing by Chloe’s headstone, off to the left of her plaque and where Max was sitting. Nathan plucked a single petal from his fire lily and jammed it under the glass display box on the headstone, hoping the wind wouldn’t blow it away. His hands were shaking, and as he opened his mouth to speak, he and Max were both shocked into
silence when a blue morpho butterfly flew into view and landed directly on the flower petal.

Before Max could say anything, Nathan began to laugh, earning a look from her. He grabbed his stomach and inadvertently kind of squished the flower, then continued laughing, because he decided it looked better that way. The butterfly didn’t move, and Nathan finally calmed. “I can’t believe you,” he smirked, plucking another petal and shoving it under the box. “You fucking smartass,” he mumbled, shuffling away with what was left of Rachel’s flower.

Nathan started on the path to where she was laid to rest. She was a bit further into the cemetery. He crossed a little wooden bridge over a teeny pond with colorful stones at the edges until he was eventually standing at Rachel Amber’s grave. It was sort of like Chloe’s, what with a plaque on the ground, and a headstone, but there was no picture on it. Seeing her missing persons photo was emotionally taxing enough, and frankly, people weren’t able to handle seeing it. Nathan never got tired of seeing it. He missed her terribly, and tried to hush the whisper of regret that tugged at him.

“Fuck,” Nathan panted. His eyes stung as they filled with tears, and he fell to his knees, looking down at her name. He wiped his face, making room for fresher tears, then held his flower up in front of her. “This is for you,” he said. “I hope you don’t mind that I shared it with Chloe.” He put what was left of the flower on her headstone and sat down, dropping his head in his hands as he cried. Nothing could have prepared him for this. He had no idea facing everything would be this fucking hard.

Guilt sat in his stomach, twisting around and making him feel sick, but not quite enough to do something about it—wasn’t he doing enough? He’d bitched out his dad for twenty minutes trying to fulfill Joyce Price’s request, but nothing came of it yet, and the clock was ticking. There was so much he wanted to say to Joyce, but he didn’t even fucking know where to start. Stella suggested writing Joyce a letter, but even that backfired—it just ended up a mangled paper with “I’m sorry” written over and over looking just as incoherent as his “Rachel in the dark room” letter from a different timeline. This sucked. Facing Joyce was going to be near impossible. This was just… difficult. He could manage difficult.

Nathan breathed in, filling his lungs until it hurt, then slowly exhaled. He wiped a wayward tear off his cheek as he stared at Rachel’s headstone. “This is really hard,” he told her. Clearing his throat, he sniffled a bit before standing back up. “There’s no way to describe how much I miss you. You changed my life. You changed everything. You were my best friend.

“Not to say that Victoria wasn’t, too,” he added quickly. He laughed. “She was like my mom. Vic made sure I ate and that I brushed my teeth. She came and dragged me out of bed on the days I ignored her calls and texts. It’s weird that she hated you—and she HATED you. You guys would have been great friends. I think you weren’t because of me. I think she hated you because I was in love with you.

“I was so hopelessly in love with you. Or maybe I wasn’t. I know I felt…ah. I…when I first saw you, I thought you were smoking hot. Like, the prettiest girl I’d ever seen. And I knew EXACTLY where I wanted my dick to go…feels kinda shitty to admit,” he laughed again. “But then you let me know you. You believed me when I spewed my alternate timeline shit. You BELIEVED me. More than that, you made me feel important. You always called back and answered my texts, calmed my panic attacks when Vic wasn’t around. You took me out for cake and ice cream at midnight. You let me cry in your arms when Vic was really mad at me. You made me fall so hard in love with you—I couldn’t fuckin’ think straight.

“And you loved me too—but it wasn’t the same. Your love was…it was pure, and good. You reminded me how much I mattered. You spent time with me, despite what everyone said and despite
how fucked up I was. You forgave me for all the bullshit I tried to pull along the way—and you wouldn’t let me get away with SHIT. Everything was on your terms—and normally it would have pissed me right off—but it was different with you. You made me be patient. You made me stay calm. And fuck, Rachel—the first time you kissed me, swear to god, I felt my fucking soul leave my body.”

Nathan closed his eyes, making tears fall, as he slowly lowered to the ground and pressed his forehead against her headstone, resting on his knees and steadying himself on the stone with his right hand. “Sometimes, when it all got to be too much,” Nathan whispered, “you’d press your forehead against mine, just like this. ‘Focus on me,’ you’d say. ‘Focus on me and nothing else. Listen to my voice. Listen to me. Hear me.’ What I wouldn’t give…what I wouldn’t fucking give to hear your voice again.

“It doesn’t get easier, missing you,” he said. “That’s bullshit. It stings less, for a little while, but it always comes back. But it’s not all bad. I remember what you’ve done for me—the sacrifice you made, the effort put in to make me feel loved, everything. You were a fucking storm, Rachel Amber, and you will always, always hold a special place in my heart.” He pressed his lips against her headstone.

Finally, Nathan stood up and turned around, only to see Max walking off of the small wooden bridge over the small pond, her cheeks flushed, her eyes red from crying. His heart skipped a beat as she approached him, and he did his best to ignore it. She was almost to him, when he felt something wet against the back of his hand. Without looking, he let out a high-pitched scream and ran to Max, who was doubled over, laughing.

“What was that?” he shrieked, clutching her shirt for dear life. “What the fuck was that?”

Unable to breathe from the laughing, Max pointed to a small, somewhat startled deer near Rachel’s grave.

“What did it do to me?” Nathan screamed to Max. “I better not get rabies!”

“It’s a doe, not a raccoon,” Max managed between cackles. “She licked your hand, you’ll be fine.”

“It’s gross, Max.”

“It’s really not,” Max giggled. “This is odd, coming from a guy who lets his big, slobbery dog lick him on the mouth…in the mouth.” Max bent down and reached out toward the doe.

“You leave Sergeant out of this,” Nathan snapped. “Sergeant is not a WILD ANIMAL.”

Max only glared at him as the doe slowly approached her. Slowly she came to Max’s hand, eventually resting her face in Max’s open palm. “Wow, Nathan, she’s so crazy,” she said sarcastically. “Think she’ll bite my hand off?”

“Hope she does,” Nathan grumbled, crossing his arms.

The doe was friendly, but oddly, her gaze never left Nathan. Eventually, her head left Max’s hand, and she started toward Nathan. He backed away for a second, then calmed after Max gave him a reassuring nod. Still now, Nathan waited as the doe circled around him. She sniffed the pocket that held the car keys, then gently bit his shirt and began to pull.

“It’s eating my shirt, it’s eating my shirt!” Nathan panicked in a whisper. “It’s going to eat my shirt!”

The doe released him.
“She probably wants you to follow her,” Max explained. She couldn’t place why, but she felt nervous. Her rapid heartbeat flooded her ears and her hand were slick with sweat. This was unsettlingly familiar. Before Max could mention it, the doe wen to Rachel’s grave, circled around the headstone, then laid down next to Rachel’s plaque.

“Oh my god,” Max said frantically, immediately fumbling to open her purse. “Holy shit.” Quickly, she pulled out her old journal, then her camera.

“What is it?” Nathan asked, feeling his stomach rumble with budding anxiety. “What is it?”

Max handed him her journal as she got her camera ready. “October. Find a picture of trees in the junkyard. Find it,” she told him.

“Why?”

“JUST DO IT!” Max commanded. She turned her camera on and quickly snapped a picture of the doe relaxing on Rachel’s grave. Nathan was too slow, so Max reached for the journal, wanting to trade him the polaroid to shake while she found the junkyard picture herself. “Gimme that,” Max said.

“Not until you tell me what the fuck is going on,” Nathan said, holding the journal up just out of her reach.

Max sighed and explained. “When I was with Chloe in the other timeline, I took a picture of a doe in the junkyard,” she started, quickly snatching the journal from him and scanning for the picture. She opened up to it and showed him a picture of some trees. “The doe didn’t show up in the picture.”

Quickly, Nathan grabbed the polaroid from Max’s other hand and looked at it. “Max,” he said. “There’s no deer in this one, either.”

Max took the picture from him. It wasn’t that she didn’t believe him…she just…it did seem a little unbelievable. Despite the doe still lying on Rachel Amber’s grave, it was not present in the picture.

“Max, Max, she’s moving,” Nathan said, pointing. The doe was standing now. She circled the grave again, then took off running.

“Come on!” Max shouted, running as she clumsily re-stuffed her purse. “We have to follow her!”

Nathan hopped to it. He grabbed Max’s hand and bolted toward the deer, following closely as he smacked tree branches out of the way and hopped over rocks. The doe led them to a far, far corner of the cemetery, a small clearing surrounded by trees. The doe ran to the single headstone in the clearing, circled around it, then disappeared altogether. Nathan let go of Max’s hand and slowly made his way to the grave.

Max stayed back, resting her hands on her thighs as she caught her breath. Nathan stood by the grave utterly captivated, one hand reaching out to touch the headstone while he covered his gaping mouth with the other. His widened eyes filled with tears as he stood in shocked silence. “What is it?” Max asked. “Who is it?”

Nathan fell to his knees and dropped his hands. He closed his eyes, letting tears fall as he wore a smile of utmost contentment. “Sophia—Renee—Isley,” he whimpered, a proudness present in his voice. “It’s her, Max. It’s my mother.”

Silently, Max slowly started to back away, opting to give him some privacy.

Max smiled, surprised by the tears gathering in her eyes. She walked over to the grave and sat down next to Nathan, who quickly held her hand with both of his. The joy on his face was unreal, and Max wanted so badly to kiss him, but she knew better. Plus, she wanted to make a good impression. “Hi, Sophia,” Max said quietly pressing on through her tears. “I’m Maxine—Max—Caulfield.”

Nathan was giddy the whole walk to the car. “Can you believe that shit, Max? Rachel found her, Rachel Amber found my mom. No doubt my dad paid for her to be laid to rest all by her damn self. I can’t believe it! We found her!”

Max was happy, for him. Personally, the whole thing was a little unsettling. What else had Rachel guided them to? She was the reason Max even came to Arcadia Bay—her death shifted reality just enough to make it happen. Was there something more as to why Max was here?

“Do you believe in fate? Or, or destiny?” Max asked, stopping her pace by Rachel’s grave.

“Not really,” Nathan said. How could he? Fate was ninety-nine percent bullshit. Fate can’t be controlled—and Nathan had done that multiple times. Sometimes fate would have him six feet under at the calculating, clammy hands of Mark Jefferson, and other times he’d be at the lighthouse with Max and presumably, their son.

“How?” Max continued frantically. “What if it brought me here? To you?”

“You think it was fate’s idea to fuck in my old bedroom, too? Fuck that,” Nathan said, slowly getting closer to her. “YOU brought you here, not fate. Fate didn’t tell you to say yes, to stay for a month—it didn’t tell you to deal with me.” He stayed on his forward march, backing her into a tree. “Fate didn’t make you kiss me. It didn’t make me fa—it didn’t. If you can make a choice, you can skip out on fate. It doesn’t exist.”

Nathan was so close they were almost touching. Max could see his neck turning red—something that happened when he was holding something back. He was trying not to be bothered by what she said, Max could tell, but she couldn’t place exactly what it was that got him so heated.

Max cautiously reached out and touched his cheek. He covered her hand with his own. “Do you ever wonder what it’d be like if I’d said no?” Max asked softly.

Much to her surprise, tears immediately fell from his eyes, and then she realized what it was. He knew it was more likely that she’d let him sit and rot in jail than for her not to. He couldn’t imagine her not being here, because if she wasn’t here, he wouldn’t have been either. Back then, Nathan knew he would have chosen another way to cope—he wouldn’t. He’d off himself, and nobody would have ever had to think about him again. He’d end up forgotten, the dead, fucked up son of a dying rich man.

“I try not to think about it,” Nathan said. He pulled her hand away and started back to the car. “Can we go now? Please?”

Max followed him to the car, and the ride home was silent.

“Nathan, we’re here.”
Nathan drew a sharp breath and startled awake, his fist balled and ready to swing. Max had her hands held up in defense, and once he realized where he was and who he was with, he calmed and lowered his hand. “Sorry,” he mumbled, dragging his hands down his face. He looked at his palms while he rested his hands on his knees, and he tried to stop them from shaking. He couldn’t. Suddenly he had his hands full, a glass of whiskey on the rocks in one hand and a familiar brown bottle in the other. He was sitting in the dark room, watching as Mr. Jefferson posed Kate Marsh on the giant white sheet that hung from the wall.

She was still awake, but just barely. Why was this happening?

“Thank you for bringing Kate to me,” Mark Jefferson said to him. 

What was this? He wasn’t even there when this was happening!

“She’s here because of you, Nathan,” Mark said proudly. “You did this.”

Kate, who was lying on the floor, looked up at him. “I’m here because of you. You did this.”

“I’m sorry,” Nathan breathed. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s your fault,” Kate said. “It’s all your fault.”

“I didn’t mean to,” Nathan sobbed, dropping the glass to the floor. He stood up, and suddenly he was nineteen again, a whirlwind of ignored aggression, crippling mental illness, and feeling like a lost little boy whose only want was a little attention. “I didn’t mean to hurt you, Kate. I didn’t mean to hurt anybody.”

Suddenly, Kate stood up, hands still bound as the floor underneath them began to alter. She was standing on top of the girls’ dormitories at Blackwell, the tip of her toes at the edge of the building. Safe on the other side of the table, Nathan leaned and looked over the far edge of the table to see all the Blackwell students looking up at Kate. “I don’t want to hurt anymore,” she said, and she jumped through the hole in the ground.

“Kate, oh god, Kate,” Nathan blubbered.

Max had been trying to get his attention—he was practically catatonic. “Nathan, please,” she said for about the millionth time. “Cane you hear me? Listen to me. Nathan?”

“You did this,” Mark Jefferson continued. “You. You did this!” And by the time Mark Jefferson was close to him, Nathan realized he was looking at his own face.

“YOU DID THIS!” he shouted again.

And before Nathan could respond, he felt the warmth of Max’s forehead against his own.

“Hey,” she said softly. “Focus on me, Nathan. Focus on my voice. Can you hear me? Can you hear my voice?”
“Max,” he whined. He took her hands off of his face and held them so tightly it stung. “I didn’t mean to hurt Kate. I know it was wrong. I’m sorry.”

“I know,” Max said softly. “I know.”

“She has to know,” Nathan cried. “I have to tell her, she has to know.”

“Okay,” Max said softly. “Okay.” She stayed there, head against his, as she dug around in her purse for her phone. Once it was out, she handed it to Nathan, who immediately pulled away from her and found Kate’s phone number in Max’s contacts. He pressed it, held the phone up against his ear, and waited.

“It’s ringing,” he sniffed, staring straight ahead at the windshield of Max’s rented car. He was still holding her hand, fingers interlocked, gripping it so hard it was red. It hurt and Max wanted to pull away, but she was scared—not because she thought he’d hurt her, but because she’d never seen him like that before. He was completely frozen, paralyzed by fear, eyes wide as he went through whatever he went through. Max knew what it was like, the flashbacks, the sinking feeling that filled her when she felt the cool floor of the dark room on her skin. She knew how scary it was and how real they felt, but she didn’t know if she could help him cope. Trying to compartmentalize was hard for him, and Max couldn’t deny that thinking about what happened to Kate or any mentions of Mark Jefferson or the dark room made her sick. She knew what Kate had gone through, and she often wondered how Nathan would have acted had the time come to kidnap her as well. The only thing that saved her was not entering the Everyday Heroes contest—which made Mark Jefferson turn his attention to Victoria. Max knew, in her heart, that Nathan would never let anything happen to Victoria. But would Max have been doomed to be a casualty? She couldn’t answer that. It scared her. She didn’t want to think about it.

This Nathan? This Nathan would have never let it happen. But the other Nathan, the one who was a victim of his environment, a Nathan better left in the past…what would he have done?

“Hi, Max,” Kate eventually answered Nathan's phone call.

“Kate?” Nathan said, his voice wavering. “Kate.”

“Nathan? What’s wrong? Are you okay?” she asked frantically. “Max—is Max okay?”

“Kate, I’m sorry,” Nathan said, releasing Max’s hand. He pinched the bridge of his nose. I’m so sorry…for what I did…I’m sorry,” he croaked.

“Oh, Nathan,” Kate whispered sadly. “It’s…I forgave you. I forgive you.”

“I shouldn’t…you were gonna jump…”

Max took the phone from him then, leaving Nathan to catch his head in his hands. Max was the only person Kate “told” she had been thinking of ending her life back at Blackwell, but she didn’t mention how she planned to do it. Explaining everything that happened that week was not something Max wanted Kate to ever know. “Kate?” Max said, taking over. “Hey, Kate.”

“Goodness, hi Max. What’s up with Nathan? Are you okay? Is he okay?”

“I’m fine,” Max said. She looked over at Nathan, who now had his hands back to fists on his knees. “Nathan…he will be. He’ll be fine. I gotta go, Kate. Talk soon.”
“Okay, have a blessed day!”

Max chuckled, hung up the call, and gave Nathan her attention. “Hey,” she said. “What’s going on?”

“I’m scared,” Nathan said. “I’m scared that one day, I’m gonna be just like Mark Jefferson.”

Max was shocked—what the hell could have possibly brought this on? “You won’t,” Max said, gripping his face much harder than he was used to. “He is a psychopath. He is a bad person who did ab-fucking-horrrent things, and felt no remorse. Rotting away in a cell is what he deserves. You are not like him. Maybe…” Max paused, trying to find the right words. “Maybe once upon a time, you were a bad person. You did bad things—but the difference is that you…you feel bad about them. You’ve atoned for them. You’ve tried to fix them, as best you can. You apologize. You healed. You recognized your part played in Mark Jefferson’s twisted fucking lifestyle and tried to change. You’ve grown. You aren’t going to become him because you’ve spent the last five years making sure you aren’t anything like him. You are nothing like him, you hear me? Say it. I want you to say it. ‘I am not like him.’”

Nathan said nothing.

“I want to hear you say it,” Max repeated. “I am not like him.”

“I’m not like him,” Nathan mumbled.

“Again,” Max said.

“I’m…I’m not like him,” he said, a little louder this time.

“Again!”

“I’m not like him!”

“AGAIN!” Max shouted at him.

“I AM NOT LIKE HIM!” Nathan shouted. “I am not like him,” he repeated, more calmly this time.

“That’s right,” Max said. “You’re you.”

* * *

The room was cold. Nathan was cackling on Overwatch with Kieran and Marcus through his headset while completely hogging the blanket that Max had just brought down. She was playing Rhythm Heaven on her DS, sitting with her knees to her chest, opposite of him on the couch. He was nice and cozy, sitting cross-legged while staring intently at the TV.

Nathan glanced over at Max, noting her sour face and shaking hands. He muted his microphone and gave her a worried look. “You okay?”

“No,” Max spat mock-angrily. “You’re hogging the blanket that I brought down. My hands are as cold as yours now.”

Nathan rolled his eyes and pulled the blanket up, bundling it in his lap. “Then get your ass over here,” he said, patting.

Hiding her face, Max cracked a smile as she scooted over to him. She placed herself in the space next to him and covered herself with the blanket, earning a look of confusion from him. “What?” she asked.
Nathan sighed and unmuted his microphone for a moment. “Kieran, Marcus, gimme a second.” He muted again and turned to Max, continuing with the look, hoping she’d catch what he was trying to say. “Max, when I said ‘get over here’ I meant get—over—here,” he said, motioning to the space between his crossed legs. She swallowed, hard. He didn’t budge. Max sat there, staring with wide eyes, trying not to hear all the mistakes she was making during Glee Club in Rhythm Heaven.

Nathan rolled his eyes and took the headset off completely, leaving his team for dead in Mystery Heroes. He grabbed Max by the waist and sat her on his lap, recovering them both with the blanket. He wriggled his left arm out of cover and across her front while he juggled the headset and controller by her back with his right. He replaced them on his head, and focused on the screen, unmuting his microphone. “Shut up Marcus, I’m getting to the payload.”

“Nathan,” Max warned, squirming.

Nathan rolled his eyes, muted his mic again, then glared at her. “You afraid you’re gonna fall and suck my dick?”

“You’re such a pig,” Max answered.

“Then we’re fine,” Nathan smirked returning to the game.

Max didn’t know how to feel about all of this. There was something about it that was...comfortable. And wrong. It was all so wrong. As much as she’d like to let herself enjoy it, there was an enormous guilt that hovered over her, and she knew it wouldn’t ever go away. As long as Joyce Price was without a daughter, Max would feel bad about pursuing anything with Nathan. She knew she should have just gone and explained that it was her choice to kill Chloe and save Arcadia Bay. But it didn’t matter. The gun wasn’t in her hand. That’d be Joyce’s response to the truth, Max was sure of it.

Sighing, Max wriggled out under Nathan’s arm and got back to her far spot on the couch, leaving Nathan with the blanket. She attempted to warm herself with some of the decorative throw pillows that had accumulated on the floor near her spot. Expertly she ignored his looks of “what gives?” and he eventually—though somewhat sourly—turned his full attention to the TV and Overwatch. Max got through a level on Rhythm Heaven here and there, trying to forget about the whole situation. Maybe she’d hold on to just a little bit—the parts where they’d spend time together, on their phones or watching TV or Max editing pictures, saying nothing and enjoying each other’s company; the times he’d say things that made her feel like she was far more amazing than she really was, or the times he’d told her she made him feel normal...those could stay. But everything else? It was frightening. They let themselves give in to what they felt already, and it just made things more complicated. But...everything would always be complicated, and they’d both let on that they could accept that and work through it. But she’d still have to tell Joyce the truth.

She might have already known. Maybe David told her—Max hoped in vain that David would have done anything to soften the blow of losing both a husband and a daughter, but that wasn’t his secret to tell. David wouldn’t share anything about it with Joyce without Nathan's consent. She knew that for a fact.

Snapped out of it, Max wheezed uncomfortably when Nathan came and sat in her lap, wriggling under her arms, totally messing up her game. “Can I help you?” she squeezed out, closing her DS and setting it on the table in front of the couch.

Nathan shrugged. “You won’t sit in my lap, so I’m sitting in yours.” He’d pulled the blanket back and covered them both, crossing his arms and leaning his back against the arm of the couch. Max glared at him, pulsing her legs so he’d get up, but he didn’t budge. He was going to sit there forever if he had to.
“Ha, ha. Get us,” Max warned.

“Why won’t you sit on my lap?” Nathan asked, the amount of concern in his voice unlike him.

“Get up.”

“Answer me.”

“Get off of me, now,” Max demanded.

“Not until you talk to me,” Nathan said softly, holding his finger up to her face. “Why won’t you sit with me?”

“Because I like you,” Max answered honestly, and by the look on his face, she couldn’t tell if Nathan was genuinely shocked to hear it again or of hearing it was what he had wanted all along. “We’ve seen what that leads to and I’d really like for it to not happen again.”

Nathan’s shoulders dropped. “Because it was a mistake?”

“No, because it complicated things, that’s all,” Max said. “It wasn’t a mistake.” Max could feel his relief as he slid out of her lap and into the seat next to her. He looked angry, but it wasn’t his normal, red-hot anger—it was quiet. Contemplative, even. One foot rested on the couch while the other bounced anxiously on the floor. His arms were crossed over his chest, and he was wearing some odd pout that Max hadn’t seen before.

“Can I say something?” Nathan asked. “Like, sixty seconds, no filter?”

Max looked at him for a moment, trying to read what he might have wanted to say in his eyes, but he wasn’t giving anything away. “Don’t make me regret it,” Max whined. Secretly, she knew that no matter what he said, she wouldn’t regret hearing it.

“I mean it, Max,” Nathan said. “No filter.”

“Are you trying to make me change my mind?”

“I just,” Nathan said, running his fingers through his hair. He motioned at the both of them and said, very clearly, “This sucks.” Nothing the look on Max’s face, he backtracked. “Shit, no, wait. *Wait.* I just—we’re bad at…this. It shouldn’t be this hard,” he finally said. “Us—this,” he motioned again, “it should be easy. It shouldn’t be this hard. Also, you have the softest ass I’ve ever touched, ever.”

“Now I regret it,” Max blurted, trying her damndest not to laugh. “And you’re right: it shouldn’t have to be so hard. But it is.”

Nathan sighed and turned his head to face her. He put his hand on her leg, but he didn’t say anything. He wanted to, but it was better that he didn’t. Things were comfortable; things were safe now. It would be easier for the both of them this way. Eventually, when Nathan got out, they could be friends. The idea was nice. They could go for walks and take pictures together. He wouldn’t be able to hold her hand, which kind of sucked to think about, but he could manage. Maybe she’d be holding someone else’s hand by then. Maybe he would.

Before he got too distracted by her freckles, Nathan cleared his throat and turned his attention to the Playstation. He’d put it in rest mode before he’d made her his chair. “I think I’m good on Overwatch for now. You wanna play Until Dawn or something?”

“Absolutely not,” Max said. When they’d played Until Dawn, Max was on controller duty since
Nathan said the game made him too anxious to play himself. In between making all the decisions—which they’d agreed he’d do—and other backseat gameplay, he’d be clinging to her like a lifeline from start to finish. And despite scathing criticisms about her sense of direction, he refused to take over on controller duty.

“Oh come on, it’s scary, but it’s fun,” Nathan complained.

“How would you know?” Max laughed. “You had your eyes covered half the time and you were screaming bloody murder for the other half.”

“That THING ripped off Jessica’s mouth,” Nathan shouted.

“I’m surprised you care so much, seeing as you were stewing with anger over her ‘not being really naked.’”

“You don’t know what naked means!” Nathan shouted more. “She was just in her underwear.”

“Oh, please, tell me what it means then,” Max smirked.

“Naked means naked!” Nathan shouted. “Ass: out, titties: out, pussy: out. I thought I was gonna see some giant cg boobs but no, just lies.”

Max glared at him, looking utterly exhausted. “I’m so sorry you feel so cheated, Nathan,” she said. “But we can still play if you promise to get a grip.”

Nathan thought for a moment. “That’s fair,” he replied. “Where are we at?”

“Who’s still alive?”

“Uh…Chris…hmm…Ash? The mean girl and her boyfriend…wait, Josh JUST died,” Nathan remembered. “He got cut in half.”

Max got the controller ready, and laughed to herself as she started the game. Nathan was already biting his nails, eyes wide before Max even pressed “resume.”

*                                                          *                                                          *

Nathan eyes shot open as he breathed in sharply, jolting awake from a particularly bad dream. Max rolled over groggily, slowly lifting herself with closed eyes. “What?” she mumbled, rubbing her eyes. “What is it?”

“Nothing, it’s nothing,” Nathan said. “Go back to sleep.”

Nathan couldn’t tell if she was too tired to push him on it or if she just figured he was okay. Max laid back down and was practically asleep before her head hit the pillow. Nathan pulled the blanket up over her shoulder. He wanted to rub her head or something, but she didn’t like being touched a bunch in her sleep, so he’d have to deal with being by himself after something like that. He crept over to the side of the bed, where her cellphone was charging, and Nathan found that it was nearly three in the morning.

This was familiar, his late-night roaming around the house, but it was different back then. Back then, he’d opt to stay up that late on purpose. It was the only time the house was quiet, along with his mind. There was no Kristine to ask him a million questions about his day, no mom to “pop in” just to see how he was doing, but only when he had a girl over. And there was no Sean Prescott—no “dad” because there was only one time he ever bothered to be one, but it was short lived.
Nathan was used to being up early for Sean Prescott, too. Three AM was go time, power time, help-daddy-keep-his-money time. He’d be up every single day at three on the dot, reviewing time notes, dates, scores, anything that’d help Nathan remember which timeline they were in, which one they wanted, and which bets to tell his dad to make. It started when he was young, but figuring his exact age when it started was impossible; he’s been in his younger body so many times, he only knew that this reality was real because Max was alive in it and Chloe and Rachel weren’t. Everything was so messed up. But the day his dad was a real dad, that was a good day. It was the best day of his life, aside from the day Max kissed him…


He was fourteen. “Yes, sir,” he said. He laid there for a second, waiting for Sean to start yelling, but he didn’t. Sean reached down and rubbed Nathan's head, being gentler than either of them thought he could be. “One hour. Clean clothes—any that you want. One. Hour.”

“I have ears and I can hear you,” Nathan wished he could say. He wished he could hit him in the head with a frying pan, too, but Sean Prescott in another timeline would find out about it somehow. “Yes, sir,” Nathan answered. He waited until his dad had closed the door behind him before he got up. Nathan waited in bed just a second longer, making sure his dad was far, far away from the room before anything happened.

Quickly, Nathan shot up from his bed and ran to the door, locking it and dashing to the bathroom. From under his sink, he pulled out his stash, half a dingy joint and a lighter that he hoped Victoria’s dad didn’t notice was missing. He’d tried to keep his hands clean, but he knew that he’d be just about disintegrated if his dad found out Nathan used his money to buy his own. It’d just be a conversation that his dad had to be tired of having by now. If Sean Prescott was anything, he was repetitive.

Standing on the edge of the bathtub, Nathan opened the small window above the shower. He pulled it while the joint rested between his lips, lighter in between his fingers, then stepped inside of the tub once it was cracked. Sighing, he reached out of the shower and turned on the fan, hoping his dad would catch the hint and leave him alone. Carefully, Nathan lit the joint, held his breath for a few seconds, and then slid down the back of the shower wall as he exhaled. If his dad found out that his hefty “allowance” was going to shit like this, he’d be done for. Taking another long, slow drag, Nathan laughed as he let it out. “What the fuck am I doing?” he said quietly. There was no idea his dad didn’t know what was goin on. He always felt better after he smoked, at least, he did for a little while. Eventually his severe paranoia would get in the way and he’d incriminate himself long before his dad’s suspicions kicked in. He’d only do it to feel something other than numb when he was awake, but his dad didn’t understand that. His dad didn’t understand anything, at all, ever, and he never would.

Finishing what was left of his joint, Nathan then flicked it into the toilet and started the shower. He knew it was three-fifteen. He’d perfect his technique. And he already knew, as always, that it was going to be a long day.

Dressed and ready, Nathan ran do his dad’s Rolls Royce, skipping breakfast because food was NEVER allowed in that car. He was barely allowed in that car.

“That was fast,” Sean commented. He pointed to the clock on the radio. “You still had twenty minutes.”
Nathan glared at him, but he didn’t say anything. Of course he was fast. He’d rather be strung up by his eviscerated intestines than have to hear the “Punctuality is key” speech again. He rested in the seat, carefully clicking his seatbelt, then crossing his arms.

“Did you eat?”

Of course he didn’t eat. He rarely ate breakfast and on the off chance that he did, a cigarette and a coke were his go-to and it didn’t really fill his stomach. “No,” Nathan answered.

“Oh,” Sean Prescott said. He cocked his head and put the car in drive, backing out of the driveway. “You can eat on the jet. What would you like?”

Nathan was dumbfounded. Sean hadn’t taken him out on the private jet since he was a kid, and he barely wanted to take Nathan then! “What’s going on?” Nathan asked flatly.

Sean Prescott silenced his suspicion with a look. “What do you want to eat, Nathan?”

Defeated, Nathan leaned back in his seat and turned his head toward the window. “I don’t know… breakfast foods? Eggs? I don’t know, I’m tired. I can’t think when I’m tired.”

“Then go to sleep.”

“I’m not ALLOWED to go to sleep!” Nathan erupted, looking at Sean with tearful, pleading eyes. “You never let me sleep!” His eyes were on his feet and his chest burned with ragged breaths, as he was hyperventilating now. Sean Prescott kept up his classic glare, all while Nathan blinked back his tears. “I’m tired,” he whined. “And when I sleep, you get mad.”

Sean Prescott reached out toward him. Naturally, Nathan held his hands up in defense, thinking today would finally be the day his dad’s violence got physical. Nathan looked up as his dad shrank away, surprised by the hurt on his face. Sean reached out again, this time much slower, and rested it on Nathan’s shoulder. “Nathan, go to sleep,” he repeated.

Angry and embarrassed, Nathan wiped his fallen tears harshly with the sleeve of his jacket and turned toward his window. He could feel his dad reaching for him again, but this time, he turned away. Sean Prescott hadn’t really touched Nathan since he was small. Lately it was an arm yank here, a shoulder grip there, none of it affectionate, ever. He didn’t know how to be gentle anymore, and seeing Nathan seemingly following in his footsteps was hard to watch. “Please don’t—touch—me,” Nathan said through gritted teeth. He didn’t know quite when he fell asleep, but he knew they hadn’t yet left the neighborhood.

Nathan startled awake much later, a bit of turbulence surprising him. Trying to process the sudden dizziness and loss of balance, Nathan immediately ran down a narrow pathway into the small bathroom on his father’s private jet. He hated sleeping on planes—somehow it always triggered sickness. After basically spitting up saliva and toothpaste, Nathan stumbled outside, where his dad was sitting with two plates of Eggs Benedict, a water for Nathan, and a mimosa for himself.

Sighing, Nathan rolled his eyes and trudged to his seat, plopping himself down and crossing his arms again. He looked at his plate and grimaced, his disgust so thick Sean could almost feel it.

“Thank you for breakfast, dad,” Sean laughed, sipping his mimosa.

“Not hungry,” Nathan said.
Sean cut himself a hearty bite, then wiped his mouth. “Come on, Nathan,” Sean attempted. “What’s wrong?”

“I’d really just rather be alone or, or with Vic right now,” Nathan said. “Far away from you.”

“Then pretend I’m your friend,” Sean said. He made it seem like he’d die if he attempted to say her name. “Vent a little, son.”

Nathan forced a laugh. “Oh, you don’t want to hear how I talk about you to my friends.”

“Now that was uncalled for,” Sean said, lowering his voice only slightly, but enough to sound much more menacing than normal. “If you’d like to say something about me, be a man and say it to my face.”

Normally, Nathan would back down out of fear. He’d be apologizing profusely, sobbing and practically kissing his boots, but that wasn’t happening today. Not—fucking—today. Nathan grabbed his knife, fast enough to make his dad flinch, and a swell of satisfaction filled him. He scraped some of his hollandaise off of his Eggs Benedict and cut into it. Watching the yolk spill out just about made him barf. “I fucking hate that,” he said, pointing. “It’s disgusting. I like eggs scrambled.”

“Nonsense,” Sean laughed it off, swallowing his fear along with a sip of mimosa. “I’ve been making it for you since you—”

“Have I ever eaten it?” Nathan shot back. That shut Sean right up. “You really don’t notice or give a shit about anyone but yourself. I’d have rather been splooged out on Melinda’s tits than have to be your son.”

Sean gave him a look. “You don’t mean that,” he said.

“You lost one son, and when you get another chance at having one, you fuck it up just like the asshole everyone thinks you are.”

Sean said nothing; he only looked down at his plate, still trying to finish his food. That was too tough. His vision was blurry. His face burned and his chest was tight. He pinched the bridge of his nose and let out a slow, staggered breath. Placing his napkin on the table, he downed his mimosa, whispered, “Excuse me,” and went to compose himself in the bathroom.

Nathan sat in his chair, arms dropped, his adrenaline dropping as he tried to process it all. He watched his dad slam the door to the bathroom, knocking one of the decorative light fixtures off the wall.

In stunned silence, Nathan realized that it was the first time he’d ever seen his father cry. Part of him felt horrible, but the other half of him was dancing. If this was going to be a regular thing—freedom—he’d need to have an arsenal ready. There were no words that were off-limits now, and Nathan was going to have his payday no matter what. Nathan moved to one of the comfier chairs near the middle of the plane, satisfied with himself as his smugness put him back to sleep.

“Nathan,” Sean Prescott eventually whispered. “Wake up, we’re here.”

Slowly Nathan woke to the sight of Donald Duck on a pole in a secluded parking space at the happiest place on earth. As much as Nathan wanted to be excited about being at Disneyland, he was overcome with suspicion, as usual. Paranoia had a fun way of rearing its ugly head and ruining
everything. “How did I get here?”

Sean motioned to the car. “Wanna take a guess?” he chuckled.

Nathan hated when he did this; when he tried to act like a dad. It was usually a ploy to get his guard down and then he’d come in for the kill. The man seemed to prey on vulnerability.

“How’d I get into the car?” Nathan retried.

“I carried you,” Sean said softly, reaching out to touch Nathan's shoulder.

Nathan shrugged him off and crossed his arms. “I told you not to touch me.”

Sighing, Sean leaned his seat back a bit and folded his hands into his lap. “Let me tell you a story, Nathan Prescott,” Sean began. Nathan rolled his eyes in a “here we go” fashion, Sean ignored it. “I remember the day Falon was born, Nathan. Your mother’s water broke, as we expected, and your grandmother came to grab Kristine. We didn’t want her to meet him. She was too young to understand anything that happened. The ride to the hospital was leisurely; we chatted, tried relaxing to some music, because we knew as soon as we stepped foot in there, nothing would be the same.

“I was still nervous, funny enough. I was outside pacing—your mom didn’t want me in there while it was happening. She didn’t want anybody to see her push out our dead son. I was a wreck, barely able to breath when they finally opened the doors to me. Your moth—Melinda, Melinda was just… numb. And slowly, it crept to me. I was taken into the room. He didn’t cry. We knew he wouldn’t cry. But you never prepare for the silence. There are no doctors congrulating you, there’s not the sound of your own tears or his coos, there’s nothing. Silence.

“Your mother couldn’t bear to look at him,” Sean continued. She said pushing him out made her physically ill. There was something about him coming, unmovin, that changed something within her. The nurses and doctors kept asking what his name was, if we wanted to see him, but there wasn’t much to say. When they finally convinced her to hold him, she couldn’t do it for long. They put him in her arms, telling her how to hold him so she wouldn’t hurt his tiny body, but all she could do was stare at him. ‘He’s so cold,’ she said. That was it. Not a prayer, not a goodbye, just a general observation. She was catatonic. She was devastated. I was devastated.

Sean rubbed his eyes as they slowly began to fill with tears. He didn’t let them fall. He wiped them away before he could. “When I finally got him,” he said, closing his eyes. He took a deep breath and exhaled. “I cried. He was cold. His lips were blue. His little fingers and toes were so tiny, I couldn’t believe it. I was in shock, I just started to laugh. I tried talking to him. I told him his name, that I loved him—how excited I had been to meet him. I held his tiny body to my heart. And then I cried again. Falon was our boy, our son, and he was gone. I never got to hear his laugh. I never got to hear is first word. No,” Sean paused, dropping his head into his hands. “Instead, I got to decide whether I wanted to bury him or cremate him. Then Melinda and I got to plan a funeral, and we got to pick out a nice white coffin with gold trim. That is what I have of my first son, a life of immediate failure. I couldn’t give him anything I’d hoped. I wanted to fill his world with opportunity, but instead, he got nothing. A ‘no’ to this existence. He didn’t even get to take his first breath. He—didn’t—even—have—his first breath.

“When I found out Sophia was pregnant with you, I had mixed feelings,” Sean admitted. “I felt like an idiot, being so reckless, especially…especially because I never really cared about her. She was a distraction to get back at your mother that could have cost me greatly. Part of me was overjoyed to have a son, and another chance to teach a boy to be a man. But I was devastated for Melinda and our marriage. She and I had our differences, but we loved each other, and I knew that this blow might have been the last straw.
“I understood your mother’s affair, albeit much after the fact. Melinda…she and I grieve very different. While I prefer to be alone, your mother needs comfort, attention, and encouraging words—and I didn’t provide them. She was patient with me and catered to my needs, and I shut her out. It was only natural that she’d seek comfort elsewhere. I knew that he meant nothing to her, but the betrayal wore heavy on my heart. I remember telling her. I remember how she peeked into my office after knocking. She was in a long blue dress—my favorite—no shoes, hair down over her shoulders, all those ridiculous rings on her fingers and toes. I…I remember everything about that day,” Sean finished, looking down at his folded hands.

Nathan analyzed it, raising an eyebrow as his smugness grew. “Are you blushing, old man?”

Sean’s face quickly shot up. He was clearly embarrassed in contempt of trying to compose himself, but only then did Nathan pretend not to notice, trying to help him save face. “Do NOT interrupt me again,” Sean said, holding up his finger. Nathan zipped his lips and leaned back in the chair.

Sean went on. “I was looking right at my feet when I told her, barely able to stand up out of my desk chair. I wasn’t even man enough to look her in the eye. And when I finally did, after it was out, she was crying. I wanted to leave, or reach out or something, but she just…I was just—I was just frozen. I was too scared to even try. I watch her feet for what seemed like hours, contemplating what I’d do if she left the room. Would I chase her? Would I let her go? Would I ask her for another chance, and did I even deserve one? After her affair and countless apologies and effort, I gave her half a chance and then threw my affair in her face. When we were talking, I’d ask her to leave any time Sophia came near, just to put it in her head that something could be going on.

“That’s when I started to feel sick—disgusted with myself. How could I have done something so cruel to someone I love so much? Soon enough, she started to move, and my stomach dropped. Melinda walked over to the table by my printer and planted her feet, bravely staring me down until I had the courage to face her. When I finally looked at her, your mother walked over, grabbed my face and, with the angriest look she could muster, told me, ‘I love you.’ It was, excuse my language, fucking surreal. Suddenly I was twenty-six and she was twenty-two, and she was saying it to me for the first time. We were at a restaurant she liked and I couldn’t stand, and she was in a yellow dress with a blue sweater. We’d only been seeing each other for four months. It was the same exact look she had back then. I told her I loved her, too. Then I completely cleared my desk; a YEAR’S worth of organized notes in the wind. I laid her down while she undid my belt and—”

“DAD,” Nathan shouted, flailing his arms. “I REALLY don’t want to hear about you plowing mom in your office, thanks.”

“I…apologize,” Sean said, clearing his throat. “I got carried away. Moving on, fast forward to the day you were born. I was barreling down the freeway behind the police when you were crowning. By the time I got to the hospital, you had already been born. I ran up to Sophia’s room, only to see your mother standing outside the door, cooping, singing a little song about a perfect, blue-eyed little baby boy.”

Nathan blushed and looked down at his feet. For once, he didn’t know what to think, or what to say.

“When I saw you for the first time,” Sean went on, his normally hard eyes filling with tears, “I felt my heart skip a beat. You were perfect—you were absolutely perfect. And lively! You moved around so much when Melinda handed you to me, just babbling, making so much noise. She put you in my arms and smiled her beautiful smile and you…you smiled at me, too. You grabbed my hand so tightly, like I was your tether to the world. And I wept. I cried so much I had to give you back to Melinda and sit down.” Much to Nathan’s shock, Sean suddenly grabbed his shoulders tightly and turned him so that they were face to face. “The world was kind. When I was calmed, all I remember
thinking is that you were everything I have ever wanted. You are my son.”

Nathan chuckled, sitting on the floor and leaning against his side of the bed while Max slept. He was playing some game on her phone, as his was left downstairs in the loft during game time. He passed her failed levels, laughing at the easiness of her passcode—2-4-5-6-3—Chloe. He laughed again, unsure if it was because of her predictability or because of his frustration.

That day with his dad was fucking fantastic. Nothing was off-limits—they ate steaks while watching people go on the Pirates of the Caribbean ride and they bought souvenirs for practically everyone they knew. Nathan was sure he still had the Mickey Mouse ears his dad had gotten for him that day. Sean kept harping on how he was going to create a world where nothing was out of reach for Nathan, but as attractive as it seemed, it was all bullshit. The very next day, Sean got Nathan up at three, telling him to wear his best suit and be at the car in an hour. If Nathan really was all Sean ever wanted, he sure as fuck didn’t act like it.

On top of that, Nathan had had this dream so many times. His dad acted like Disneyland never even happened, and Nathan wondered if he’d made the whole thing up to cope with having such a shitty dad.

Before Nathan realized it, he was dialing on Max’s phone.


“Dad,” Nathan said. “It’s me. Max is fine. She’s asleep next—the couch. We fell asleep in the loft.” What was he doing? Sean didn’t even ASK where Max was or why Nathan was using her phone. He had no reason to anything other than what he’d call to say.

“Goodness,” Sean sighed. He shuffled a bit, and Nathan knew he was adjusting the tubes on his oxygen. Sean hushed a frightened Melinda back to sleep and went back to the receiver. “You scared me. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I wanted to ask you something,” Nathan said. He wet his dry mouth and swallowed hard. His eyes were burning as he held back tears. “When…when I was fourteen, did we go to Disneyland, just you and me?”

“Hmm…no,” Sean said. Nathan felt his heart drop, and immediately he quietly started sobbing into his hand, careful not to let his dad hear. Devastated as he was, Sean Prescott wasn’t finished. “We went when you were twelve, I think, kiddo.”

“Jesus, twelve? Nathan thought. He was smoking in the bathroom when he was twelve? Who was even selling pot to a twelve year old?

Nathan felt a wave of relief wash over him. But even so, he had to be sure that the twelve-year-old Disneyland visit was what he was actually thinking of. “Remember talking in the car?”

“I remember saying too much, at some point,” Sean chuckled.

“Ha,” Nathan gasped. “Do you remember what you were thinking when I was born? What you told me?”

“Oh yes,” Sean said warmly. “You are everything I have ever wanted.”
Nathan laughed, pinching the bridge of his nose to try to stop the intensity of his tears. His vision was completely blurry now and he was two breaths short of an anxiety attack. “You still feel like that now?” Nathan suddenly wished he could take it back. That wasn’t a fair question.

But Sean Prescott wasn’t a fair person.

“Of course I do,” Sean said softly. “You’re my son.”

Nathan dropped the phone and sat on the bed, trying to process it all. Eventually he picked up the phone, apologizing to his father for leaving him hanging. “Sorry,” he croaked. “I’m gonna head back to bed.”

“You should, as should I,” Sean managed. “I love you, Nathan.”

 “…thanks, Dad,” Nathan mustered. He couldn’t tell if Sean had already hung up, so he waited a few minutes, then hung up himself. He turned and pulled his feet into the bed, quickly gripping his chest and almost swinging his closed fist once he saw Max sitting up, awake, and waiting for him. He knew the look she was wearing all too well, and he knew he couldn’t talk his way out of it. “How long have you been awake?” he asked her.

“Since you woke up,” Max said. “I figured you’d come to me if you needed to…are you okay?”

“I don’t know, Max,” Nathan sighed. He scooted a little closer to her and laid his head down on her lap, staring toward the door, trying not to think about much. Suddenly he felt like he was little again, lying in Victoria’s lap while he waited for his mom to pick him up one day when he was sick.

Max did the same thing Victoria did back then—she rested one hand on his back, patting, while the other was stroking his hair. He could almost fall asleep like that, but he knew she was waiting for an answer. “I just…” Nathan started. “It’s my dad.”

“Did he do something?” Max asked. “…recently?”

“No,” Nathan said. “I don’t know how to feel about this whole stupid thing. My dad is dying. Back when I was nineteen, it would have been godsend. But now he keeps trying to—to fix things, but is it because he really feels guilty or because he’s afraid he’s going to hell or some shit? Would he have wanted to fix things if he wasn’t dying?” Nathan covered his eyes. “I hate this, Max,” he sobbed. “I’m still so fucking angry at him. It still hurts. But I hate seeing him like this, oh my god. I hate watching the old bastard wither away like that and wheeze through words and not be able to breath after taking a deep breath, but is it fucked up that a part of me thinks he deserves it?”

“I can’t answer that,” Max hesitated. “But you shouldn’t feel guilty about hating him. You’re entitled to that. He abused you. And you don’t have to forgive him now, or maybe ever.”

“What am I gonna do?” Nathan heaved, his sudden tears showing no sign of stopping. He had his face buried in his hands, and even her gentle touch couldn’t calm him. “I can’t do this without you. I don’t want you to go, Max. you can’t go. I need you. I need you here with me.”

Max didn’t remember much of what he said after that. Nathan’s breaths hitched in his chest, crying until exhaustion put him back to sleep. Once he was out, tears took to Max and did the same thing.

* * *

“Get up, Nathan.”

“Fuck off, Sean, I’m tired,” Nathan whined, rolling over to see Max glaring at him, not his dad.
Max was dressed pretty comfy, in a pair of black leggings and a red plaid flannel over her classic Jane Doe t-shirt.

“You still fit that thing?” Nathan laughed, stretching.

“Forget my shirt,” Max said. Your dad is about to start an interview with Juliet Watson in a few minutes.”

Nathan shot up and sprinted out of the room and down the stairs, toward the loft. Kristine was inside, having already set everything up, sitting on the right side of the couch with a bowl of potatoes. On a rolling tray in front of her were two other bowls, each with potatoes, along with a tray of fruit, a tray of bacon and eggs, and a tray of sausage. Nathan sat next to Kristine in the middle of the couch, grabbing one of the bowls off of the tray in front of them.

“Ah, no,” Kristine said, taking the bowl from his hand. “That’s Max’s. You can’t handle spicy, Buggy.”

Nathan glared at her, but he knew he couldn’t fight her on it—she was right. The last time he ate something spicy, it was tomato soup with lots of hot sauce—Victoria’s poor man’s remedy for a stuffy nose. He took one spoonful of the soup and his eyes filled with tears, his nose immediately started running, and he was vomiting, violently. He didn’t want to go through that again. That was the day!, Nathan remembered. Victoria sat and rubbed his head and pat his back in between finishing the soup and commenting that it wasn’t hot enough until his mom came to get him.

“Thanks,” Nathan said, switching bowls.

Max came down soon after, hair half-up-half-down, pulled back out of her face with a piece or two hanging over her eyebrows. She took her spot on the left side of the couch, breakfast in hand. None of them were saying anything, but they were thinking the same things: Why was Sean doing this, and what was he going to say?

“We are now live with Sean Prescott, business icon, nautical genius, otherwise known as ‘The Man Who Owns This Town,’ Juliet began. She looked excited and ready, but the bags under her eyes gave her away—Max knew that Juliet hopped on the first red-eye she could once the chance to interview Sean was presented to her. Juliet was a journalist turned reporter, eventually becoming so successful, she had her own news show, based in New York. It couldn’t have been an easy flight over.

Juliet flipped her hair and had her notepad ready. “Let’s address the elephant in the room: you were incredibly displeased with the articles I wrote about you and Nathan when his and Mark Jefferson’s trials first started. You claimed it was slander though I was merely stating fact; why is that?”

Sean was a bit taken aback. Max laughed. Juliet was not a person who wasted time. She’d been waiting for this interview for years and she was determined to get as much information out of Sean Prescott as she could—journalism was still a big part of her life. Sean adjusted the tubes on his oxygen tank, fixed the blanket thrown over his legs, and composed himself, folding his hands over his lap. “Short answer: I’m a bad person and a bad father.”

“Care to give us the long answer, Mr. Prescott?”

Sean took a deep breath. “Let me start by addressing Joyce Price.” Sean looked straight into the camera, much to everyone’s shock. “I owe you an apology, Joyce. The pieces I had written about
your late daughter were disgusting and unforgivable. I’m sorry for the horrible things said. I wholeheartedly regret doing so. I don’t deserve your forgiveness, so if you are looking to forgive someone, please let it be my son.”

Juliet stared at him, wide-eyed, trying to hide how shocked she actually was. Normally she’d get furious that he hijacked the show, but even she never expected Sean to feel anything other than greed. “Wow,” she managed. “Hopefully Joyce Price is listening. Now, back to my earlier question—you’ve explained how you were a bad person, but where does bad fatherhood come into play?”

“Simply put, I wasn’t much of a father,” Sean answered. “I treated Nathan very poorly. As I’m sure you know—as you’ve written about it—my son is severely mentally ill. I couldn’t understand that his mood swings were due to his borderline personality disorder. I’d tell him he was lazy and worthless when his depression kept him in bed all day. His illness made him unpredictable, so I sought out to fix it. His older sister, Kristine, had different treatment—she was my little slice of royalty while Nathan was merely a business asset.”

“Nathan, what did he do to you?” Kristine asked, looking at him with sullen eyes. Nathan didn’t turn to her. Right now, she didn’t exist, and her feelings weren’t something he wanted to deal with right now. She didn’t get to be upset that she didn’t know. She could shove her hurt for all he cared. She didn’t go through it. While he was waking up at three in the morning to be thrown into the car and screamed at for seeming “off,” she’d be off in fucking Kathmandu doing god knows what all on daddy’s dime.

“I…broke him,” Sean continued. “I pushed him to limits I thought impossible, devastating any confidence he had with abusive language, and getting as physical as possible without actually striking him. Everyone was so willing to accept his fifteen-hour work days at twelve years old. My only concern was that his outbursts were managed and business was taken care of.

“I was absolutely livid when he latched onto Mark Jefferson, but I cannot blame my son. I was a horrible example and Mark Jefferson must have looked like a dream compared to me. Despite grooming my son and being completely ingenuine with his intentions, he was there to comfort Nathan when I refused. When Nathan…when Chloe passed, guilt washed over me. I knew they’d investigate Nathan's mental state, and I didn’t want what I’d done to him to ever see the light of day. So I shifted the narrative. I made sure Chloe’s name was dragged through the mud so I could live my pampered life blame-free as a selfish, hateful man. There is no mistaking whose fault it was when it came to the death of Chloe Price. My son may have pulled the trigger, but I put that gun in his hand. And my god, Nathan, I am so sorry. For everything.”

“Turn it off.” Nathan said, throwing his half-empty bowl back onto the tray in front of them. “I’m not watching this bullshit anymore.” Before Max or Kristine could act, Nathan was out of the loft, having slammed the door behind him.

Kristine took one look at Max and burst into tears. She covered her face as Max scooted over to comfort her, burying her head in her hands as she tried to calm how badly she was shaking. “I didn’t know, I didn’t know,” she repeated, sobbing into her hands as Max awkwardly pat her back.

“What do I even say?” Kristine asked. “I failed him. I should have protected him. I should have saved him.”

“How could you have known?” Max asked her.

“I should have—”
“You couldn’t have,” Max told her, interrupting. “You can do something now. Be here for him now. Accept your guilt as your punishment. Move on.”

Max exited the loft, leaving Kristine to finish the show. She was surprised to see Nathan ready to leave in the kitchen, holding her purse, the keys to his truck, and her jacket. Her shoes were on the floor by his feet, and he slid them over to her, urging her to put them on. “I’m leaving. I have to get out of here. I can’t fucking think. You coming? Or do I have to ask Kristine?”

Max sighed and plopped down on the floor, loosening the ties on her chucks as she slowly slid them onto her feet.

Nathan paced angrily as she laced one shoe, crossing his arms and dragging his hands down his face—flinging her purse and the keys all over the place—in the most dramatic fashion, trying to highlight his impatience. “God,” he sneered, tapping his feet and rolling his eyes. “Will you hurry up?”

Max stopped and glared at him. “If you rush me, we’re not going.”

“Fuck you, Max!” Nathan shouted, dropping her things onto the floor. “You’re always controlling everything single thing I do! I hate it! I hate it! I hate you!”

Max finished tying her shoes in silence. Soon she stood and turned to him, standing neutral with her hands at her sides, and asked, “Are you done?”

“You’re supposed to be here to help me! To stop shit like this—” he motioned to himself, “—from happening! It’s only getting worse. I don’t even know why the fuck you’re here!” Nathan screamed. He shouted at her until his face was red, talking about how worthless she was and how she ruined his life and Chloe’s in one fell swoop. The veins in his neck were sticking out so far, they looked like they might burst, and despite the strain in his voice, he kept going. He stopped only after he’d gone completely hoarse and his hands hurt from balling his fists.

Max didn’t react the entire time. She stood there with her arms at her sides, blinking when his tone was harsh, but ultimately keeping her expression blank. When he was done, again, she asked him, “Are you done?”

Nathan was breathing heavily at this point, and now that he wasn’t seeing red anymore, he was seeing her. Her face was pink and her neck was splotchy, and he knew that she was trying to hold it back. He couldn’t tell if she was going to walk away or scream at him, and he knew he couldn’t handle either of them. Nathan swallowed. “Yes,” he finally answered.

“Okay,” Max said, holding up her hands in a surrender. She walked over to him and he backed away, so she slowed her pace little by little, stepping over the things he’d dropped onto the ground. There was no escaping her, so he froze in his tracks, and she got a little closer, not touching him, hands still up in surrender. “That is not how people who care about each other speak to each other. Please don’t speak to me like that again. It,” she paused, blinking hard in defeat once the first tear fell, “it hurt my feelings.”

Nathan completely lost himself. “Oh god, Max,” he squeezed out. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry,” he wailed. He covered his face, burying it in his hands and then into her chest. “I didn’t mean it, I didn’t mean any of it. I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.”

In between comforting him, Max wiped her own tears. “It’s okay, I forgive you,” she said. “It’s okay.”
“It’s not, it’s not okay, it’s really not,” he coughed, his face twisted up as he gasped for air and sobbed. “God, what am I gonna do without you?” He kissed her forehead, her eyelid, her cheek. “I can’t be without you. Please don’t leave.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Max reassured him. “I’m here.”

He pulled away from her, his hands on her cheeks, and before Max knew it, he was kissing her, and she was kissing him back. “Don’t go,” he breathed between heavy kissed, pinning her up against the counter, “don’t. Leave. Me.”

Max couldn’t think. She should have told him to stop, but she didn’t want to. And she didn’t respond to anything he said anymore. She’d rather give herself over to ambiguity than break his heart and tell him she wouldn’t stay in Arcadia Bay forever.

Now he was leading her up the stairs, into his old bedroom, locking the door behind them. Gently he put her onto the bed, staring at her with hungry eyes as he took off his jacket. Max knew what was coming next, and she didn’t stop it, because she didn’t want to. But she knew she should have. They knew what would happen. It’d just lead to a new bout of awkwardness, more tears, more pain. It wasn’t worth it, but god, it was.

Nathan sauntered toward her, eyes going wide as he tripped over his jacket and slamming his forehead into hers, the crack of their skulls audible.

“OW, FUCK,” Nathan shouted as he instinctively grabbed his forehead, rolling onto the bed next to her.

Max rubbed her head as well, secretly thankful they didn’t let themselves get too carried away. As right as it felt, it wasn’t the right time, and it might never be the right time. They’d enjoyed what they had, but now it was time to remember why she’d come here and not let their personal feelings for each other get in the way.

They turned to look at each other, noting the red spots on each other’s foreheads, and burst out laughing. They laughed until they couldn’t breathe and then some, until Max finally had the breath to speak. “What are we doing?” she giggled.

Nathan rolled over, a slight smile on his face. “Fuck if I know,” he answered, “but I’m glad we’re doing it together.” Max gave him a knowing look, he rolled his eyes, and suddenly they were both laughing again.

Silence eventually returned, and Max cleared her throat. “You should go talk to Kristine.”

“I should,” Nathan said, rubbing both his head and the bridge of his nose. “But…she loves him. I don’t want to ruin that for her. But…I…”

“Your dad ‘ruined’ how she felt about him all by himself, that has nothing to do with you,” Max said sternly. “And Kristine is an adult. She can decide how she feels about him after you talk to her.”

Nathan nodded at her, sighed heavily, then slowly made his way to the door. He looked back at Max for a second, somewhat annoyed. She knew he was thinking that she looked like Rachel, what with the red plaid flannel, but he didn’t say it. He left the room without another word.

Max flopped back onto the bed, staring up at the ceiling. Her phone was in the pocket of her flannel, buzzing, but she didn’t want to deal with it right now. She didn’t want to deal with anything right now. It was probably yet another bride wondering when she was going to come back to work, when
on her website it specifically stated she wasn’t taking any weddings on for the next month. Max though bridal photography would be safe, easy—something to do to pass the time, but she hated it. She hated it! She hated taking the same hundred pictures for every single boring wedding and editing for hours on end just to either repeat the process or talk down someone crazy. It was funny how mundane it had all become—she left Arcadia Bay to be free, but now the only spontaneity she had only existed here. Home.

But Seattle was home now, too.

She didn’t want to stay here—she couldn’t. Great as the visits were, Max couldn’t forget what she’d done here. People needed to know. But who would ever believe her?

Ma wondered around Nathan’s old room, glancing at the old CDs on his bookshelf, laughing at how worn a copy of The Picture of Dorian Gray was. She wondered what this version of Nathan was like—was he happy when he was living in the Hilltop House? What would things have been like if they’d met back when he was twelve? Infinitely worse, no doubt. If she found Chloe—her BEST FRIEND—not important enough to talk to for five years, god knows how long she would have left Nathan hanging.

Max walked back to the bed, resting on her stomach, suddenly feeling very bored. She didn’t know how long Nathan was going to be with Kristine, and she was so used to spending all of her free time with him, she’d sort of forgotten how to be alone. Her phone buzzed again and she finally checked it, just to get it to stop, disappointment taking her by surprise as she read the incoming message from Nathan:

Going to Manor. Mom was like wtf?? about news. She wants answers. Kill me.

Mas chuckled and tried to respond as best she could:

You’ll be fine. Text me if you need me.

She wanted to throw her phone when she got his response:

But I ALWAYS need u ;B

Dread overtook her once she realized the only way to tell Melinda the truth about the abuse was to tell her EVERYTHING. Melinda would know ultimately that Max was the one who put Nathan in jail. It was far more complicated than than—and Nathan would do his best to explain why it had to be this way—but Melinda would believe what she wanted to. It’d be easier to believe that Max was evil over anything else. It was only natural. Max could accept that. It got her thinking about her own mom.

Max sighed and dialed on her phone, sitting up and hugging her feet to her chest.

“Hey, sweetheart!” Vanessa Caulfield answered cheerfully. “How are you?”

“Hi, Mom,” Max said. Already her anxiety was bubbling up inside her. She felt sick and her mouth went dry. She could barely hold onto her phone with shaking hands. “Is dad home, too?”

“Yup! How has your trip been, sweetheart? It’s so good to hear from you,” Vanessa said. She almost sounded busy, but it could have just been the dog—she was a handful, and she LOVED Max. hearing Max’s voice over the phone probably sent her into a frenzy.

“It’s been really good, Mom,” Max said. “Can you talk? I have something to tell you.”
“Max?” Nathan called out as he unlocked the front door to the Hilltop House. “Max, I’m home!” he shouted.

The talk with mom was miserable. He and Kristine piled into his car while he tried to tell her the story, dodging Melinda’s phone calls while also trying to keep his cool. When they finally all got to the house, Melinda locked Sergeant outside and everyone gathered in his Father’s study—which never, ever would have happened under any other circumstances. Kristine’s face was already red from crying, and his dad was looking worse and worse by the second—he was almost worried about him. He was silent while Nathan explained everything, from his very first time changing time to Mark Jefferson to why Max was here for him. He tried to censor himself at first, but he thought, *fuck it*, it wasn’t going to change how messed up it all was.

Melinda switched between screaming obscenities and crying almost the whole time, as did Kristine. Nathan didn’t know how to feel about it all. It was nice to feel like someone other than Max and David were on his side—Kristine tore Sean a new one and all he could do was sit there. But nice as it was, he didn’t like seeing his dad like that. He deserved that taste of his own medicine, but it felt weird to see it happen when he was two minutes away from death.

The house was pitch black, which wasn’t unusual, but the utter silence was. Max would have normally greeted him at the door, or be on her way down the stairs to do so, but she didn’t even answer his “on my way” text when he finally got away from the house. Kristine opted to stay and take care of Sean while Melinda tried to sort everything out, and Nathan was happy to drive home alone. It was SUPER illegal, what with him being out on furlough, but for once in her life, Kristine opted not to follow the ruled. Nathan didn’t know whether to be proud or horrified that he was rubbing off on her.

There was so much he wanted to say to Max, and only now did Nathan realize that he didn’t see her car in the driveway—but she didn’t tell him she was going anywhere. Max was really good about that, even if she was just leaving the room to go to the bathroom. She wouldn’t have gone anywhere without telling him. She knew how much it scared him. Where was she?

“Max?” he croaked out again, and again there was no answer. *Oh, shit. What if something happened to her?* Nathan thought. That had to be it. He was full-on panicking now, wondering how long it would take him to search the house. He cursed his dad. The house was too fucking big! Why couldn’t they live like normal people, in a normal house, that had a normal amount of normal-sized rooms? *Fuck!*

If Max was gone, where did she go? Did Mark Jefferson break out of jail and come snatch her—he was always time type to get real pissed when he wasn’t able to “finish his work.” Oh god, Nathan hoped he didn’t. the last time he went head to head with Mark Jefferson, he ended up six feet under. He couldn’t just stand there worrying about it anymore. This was serious. He needed to call David right now and report her missing. He didn’t care about how much trouble he’d get in for driving to the house with no supervision. Circumstances called for it. David would understand. He was already dialing on his phone, running back toward the door to get back to the truck and look for Max himself just in case David wasn’t any help. Noticing the door handle shaking, Nathan dropped his phone. He ran and grabbed one of the decorative vases on the pillars near the stairs and waited.

“Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit,” he worried, trying to compartmentalize. If Jefferson had a gun, he was screwed.

The front door opened, and there was Max—completely fine, if not a little cold. Instantly noticing Nathan's distress, Max quickly shuffled inside and locked the door behind her.
“Hey,” Nathan croaked.

“…Hey,” Max said back, a hint of suspicion in her voice. “Were you about to do something reckless?”

The crack in his voice had already betrayed him. “Maybe,” he answered truthfully. “Where were you?”

Max shrugged off her jacket and kicked off her chucks. “Went to the lighthouse to clear my head,” Max said. She didn’t tell Nathan about the two-hour cry-fest she’d had with her parents while she facetimes them up there. She showed them the view of Arcadia Bay, detailing the path of the storm and all she’d done to try and stop it. She told them both about Nathan and his part in it all, and how Joyce didn’t know a thing about it. Max made them promise to let her be the one to tell Joyce the truth, and they’d agreed that she’d probably need to hear it from Max anyway. It was a long day, and all she wanted to do was relax. “How about we go talk by the indoor pool, since I’ve been here almost a MONTH and I just now discovered it.”

“How would I even bring it up?” Nathan laughed, setting the vase down and following her. “‘Hi, Max, I’m Nathan and I have an indoor pool?’”

“It’s a start.”

As Nathan rolled his eyes and Max giggled, they continued through the house until they got to the back area of the kitchen, where there was a tiny alcove leading to the door to the pool. Nathan opened the door and made a show of letting Max in first, so she curtsied as a thank you while he sighed loudly and followed.

Max sat down near the pool, not close enough to get wet, but just enough so that the water reflected on her. She crossed her legs, closed her eyes, and a slight smile crept onto her face. “Chloe and I broke into Blackwell’s pull, once,” she said warmly. “She stole the key from David and we went in to find some dirt on you.”

“THAT WAS YOU?” Nathan shouted, running over. He plopped down next to her, sticking his legs out far in relaxation. “My dad gave me shit for that for six. Hours. Six—hours, Max.”

Max laughed, opting not to respond. She leaned and rested her head on his shoulder, watching the water move. “I kissed her the next day,” she said.

“Aww,” Nathan cooed. “Cute little eighteen-year-old Max finally gets her first gay kiss from her best friend.”

“She wasn’t my first girl kiss. My first girl kiss was with my friend Shari in pre-school,” Max explained.

“I thought you said Warren was your first kiss?”

“He…was,” Max said. “He was the first guy I ever kissed. I don’t usually count Shari because we were playing house and I was the husband and I kissed her on the way in the house during recess. We weren’t allowed to play anymore after that. It’s kind of messed up, if you really think about it. What was your first kiss like?”

Nathan wrapped his arm around her. “The real first or the first one that mattered?”

“Surprise me,” Max answered.
“It was perfect.”

Max looked up at him. “That’s the most optimistic I’ve ever heard you. Tell me about it.”

Nathan smiled to himself, relaying the story. It was the first party he’d ever gone to without Victoria. He was thirteen at the time, with a really shitty older friend, Cody, who was four years older. They’d gone to a party in the next town over, where Nathan met a girl named Halo.

She was sixteen, her skin a beautiful copper brown, with loose, wavy black hair that hung past her hips. Sani, from the flower store, reminded him of her. Maybe that was why he’d gotten so flustered when he and Max were there.

Nathan and Halo had hit it off, and ended up excusing themselves to talk alone outside.

“So,” Halo had said, taking a sip of a half-downed sprite, “how old are you really?”

“Sixteen,” Nathan croaked. They were sitting at a table outside, the quiet hum of the of the party the only noise.

Halo paused for a moment, looked him up and down, and laughed at him, her face all twisted up in the biggest, cutest smile. “You’re cute, but you’re a liar, Nathan Prescott.”

He hadn’t told her his real name, and the look on his face gave that away. “You can’t—”

“If I wanted to Narc on you, I would have,” Halo said. “You don’t remember me, do you?”

“I don’t think I’d be able to forget you,” he said smoothly.

Halo laughed again. “But you have,” she said. “I was your ‘Middle School Mate,’ showing you around Arcadia Middle School back when you were in fifth grade. You took a really good picture of me. Then of course, you went off to Prescott Prep.”

“That’s not what it—”

“With all the cash your dad put in that school? Might as well have been.”

Nathan was speechless. She was reading him like a book and he couldn’t do anything about it.

“I’ll tell you what,” Halo said, standing. She reached out and pulled him up, then dusted off the back of her long dress. “How about we pretend that neither of us where here, and I take you home?”

Nathan nodded.

He hopped into her beat up car, having used sickness as an excuse to get away from Cody. He was pissed that Halo was taking Nathan home—Cody had only come to the party to see her and she’d barely said to words to him. Nathan knew he couldn’t face Cody again, and he lamented that it’d be their last encounter. But on top of that, he was more surprised that Halo was willing to take the hour long drive back to his house. They parked a block away from his house; if anyone caught him, he’d be toast.

“Well, Mr. Prescott, you are home,” Halo said, slowing to a stop and turning to look at him. Her hair looked so shiny in the moonlight, and Nathan felt his heart skip a beat. Halo’s smile quickly faded into a look of concern. “How did you get mixed up with Cody?” she asked.

“Ah, he said he’d beat me up if I didn’t help him steal a car,” Nathan admitted. He was no stranger to fighting, but they had been in a grocery store parking lot—lots of eyes to identify exactly who was
fighting. He couldn’t risk tarnishing his father’s name. The car had had a partially rolled down window, and Cody couldn’t fit his hands through the crack. The rest was history.

Halo looked at Nathan, definitely a little sad, more so looking content. She leaned forward and kissed him, much to his surprise. When she pulled away a second later, he realized that she’d opened his door for him. “Never speak to Cody again. Ever. You hear me?”

“Yes,” Nathan said, staring at her dreamily.

“Good. Sweet dreams, Nathan Prescott.”

“That’s kind of sweet,” Max said. “Why did she want you to stay away from Cody, though?”

“At the party, he’d been bragging about killing a kid the same age as me,” Nathan answered.

But Nathan didn’t find that out until he was twenty-two. Days at the facility went the same way, each feeling longer than the last, with the same routine. But today, things were different. He was always escorted by Sellman on Thursdays, but today, he was being escorted to his session with Stella by David Madsen himself—which was very, very unusual. Someone’s session must have gone over longer than usual. As Nathan trudged down the hall, David’s grip on his shoulder tightened.

“Don’t say a word,” David told him.

As they continued, Nathan could only look on in shock as Cody caught his eye. He was in a white jumpsuit, his head completely shaved, heavily cuffed on his way from Stella’s office. Automatically, they gave each other the look; the “you, too?” look, and both sighed. Cody was pushed along by his officer, and David visibly relaxed as he continued escorting Nathan.

“Please don’t give that girl a hard time today,” David warned him, once they’d gotten to the door. “Got it?”

“Whatever,” Nathan said.

He turned and opened the door, and he was ready to just follow whatever David wanted him to do, had Stella not looked so shaken.

“Who was that guy in the white?” Nathan asked, settling down on the couch. He knew who it was, but he was hoping he could squeeze Stella a little bit to figure out why the hell Cody was even here.

“His name is Cody James,” Stella said, clutching her hair. Her eyes were wide open and her hands were shaking, badly.

“Jesus, what’d he do?” Nathan asked, stretching out on the couch. He laid his head over the arm of the couch so that he was looking at Stella, upside-down. “He threaten to kill ya? I used to do that all the time. Then you just told me to shut up.”

Stella fell into her desk chair and hunched over, clasping her fingers in front of her forehead. She took deep breaths, coughing out her exhale as hyperventilation started.

“Stella?” Nathan asked. “Are you okay?”

“It was his first therapy session,” Stella said. “I’m sorry; first-timers are very, very difficult
“You should talk to somebody,” Nathan suggested. “That could help, right?”

“Nathan, I’m the one people come to talk to,” Stella said. “There was just a lot of…tension. Cody showed absolutely no remorse.”

“What—did—he—do?” Nathan pressed.

Stella sighed. “Cody James killed a thirteen-year-old boy when he was seventeen. He was tried as an adult and they are trying to commute his sentence to life in prison,” she explained. “He’s on death row.”

“Jesus, how did he kill the kid?”

“We need to start your session,” Stella said sternly, letting Nathan know that they wouldn’t be discussing Cody James ever again.

But much to her dismay, Nathan eventually got his answer from David Madsen. Stella was good at sticking to business and not getting distracted by trivial things—she was damn good at her job. David, however, was a little easier to push. All Nathan had to do was tell David about how he and Cody used to be friends and he spit it out—a little manipulative, Nathan knew, but he justified it by remembering that he could have been Cody’s next victim. David had told Nathan that Cody threw—not pushed, threw—the kid in front of an oncoming train. Nathan was pretty much a zombie at his session with Stella the next day.

But Max didn’t need to know all of that.

“Oh, shit!” Max gasped, jumping up quickly. The door to the pool was shaking, and Max could hear both David Madsen AND Kristine shouting on the other side.

Kristine threw the door open, then ran over to Nathan and snatched the front of his shirt. “WHY DIDN’T YOU ANSWER YOUR PHONE? WHY DIDN’T YOU ANSWER YOUR FUCKING PHONE?”

“I don’t have it, I don’t have it!” Nathan yelled desperately. “What happened?”

“We don’t have time for this. Get your shoes on, both of you,” David said. He walked behind Max and pushed her toward the door. The only other time David had done something like this with her was when he was ushering her out of the bathroom at Blackwell.


“Yes,” David mumbled.

“Kristine, please,” Nathan said, as she gripped his hand and dragged him out of the room. She yanked him all the way to the front door, where she threw him his shoes and snapped at him until he sat down to put them on. “Kristine, what’s…what’s happening?”

“It’s Dad,” Kristine said, beginning to cry. “He went into cardiac arrest. He doesn’t have long. It could be tonight. It could be tonight, Nathan.”

It was a lot like how it was when Chloe died. Everything moved in slow motion. Everything was
weighted. But Max was numb. Nathan caught Kristine as she sobbed, steering her to the door, trying to get her out of the house. Max had gotten her shoes on faster than she ever did before, then she reached to grab her purse and her phone.

David drove, the sire on his squad car somehow less deafening than Kristine’s screams into her cellphone. Melinda was hysterical on the other line, trying to relay Sean’s condition. The messages were broken up. Kristine was losing her mind. Melinda was lost. Everything hurt.

Nathan, however, was silent. He sat absolutely still, hands balled into fists resting on his knees, eyes down, staring at nothing but focusing on something. He wanted to feel nothing, but, as always, the anger managed to seep through. It was rooted in him so deeply, he’d wonder if he’d ever be without it. It’d planted itself in him. And he didn’t know how to let it go. It wasn’t his normal, white-hot anger. It was too quiet; too focused. It was loathing; it was disappointment. It was the anger he directed sorely at himself.

When Nathan texted Max to let her know he was on his way home, he’d put his phone on “Do Not Disturb.” It silenced any oncoming calls and sent an auto-reply text message from his phone while he was driving. And Nathan liked the quiet. He was rarely alone since he’d gotten out, and he felt ecstatic that Kristine and his mom had trusted him enough to drive straight home on his own. But when Nathan had returned home, he immediately started to worry—Max was his rock, his security, and she wasn’t there. She should have told him she wouldn’t be home! It was her fault! He’d been so distracted by the possibility that something terrible had happened to Max, he’d forgotten to turn off Do Not Disturb.

The first of Kristine’s thirty-seven calls came two minutes after he’d left Prescott Manor.

Nathan didn’t really know how to feel about his dad dying. While a large part of him screamed “good riddance,” the other half of him remembered that trip to Disneyland. He remembered his dad ordering them steaks at the Blue Bayou, and he flipped off people on the Pirates of the Caribbean ride while his dad rolled his eyes. He remembered spinning his dad so hard on the teacups, his glasses flew off, but for once, he didn’t get mad—Sean only laughed and wore his backup pair. He remembered every hug he’d gotten that day, every kiss, every time his dad had told him he was proud of him—and only then did Nathan feel a little bit of pain. It was subtle, like a phantom sting in his chest. He resolved to give his paint to Kristine. Dealing with it on his own was not an option right now. So instead of being even a little bit sad about his father’s possible passing, he’d feel bad that it’d be his fault that Kristine might not get to say goodbye to Sean instead.

“Nathan,” Max said. She reached out to him because she knew she should have, but in all honesty, she didn’t want to. She knew that she’d feel nothing once his hand was under his, because all she could focus on was her trip to the hospital. She was in David’s muscle car, Chloe’s blood on her shoes, following the ambulance that had her body while a cruiser drove behind them. All she could feel was how she felt back then. Numb. “Nathan,” she tried again, touching him this time, “are you —”

“Don’t fucking touch me,” he muttered coldly.

Max shrank away and gave him the space he obviously wanted. She made sure nothing was touching him—not even the laces on her shoes—and leaned against the window, looking outside. He was angry enough with her, and she didn’t want to make it any worse.

David skidded to a stop, parking across a handicap parking space, and hurrying to catch up to Kristine, who was out of the car and up the steps to the hospital before Max even managed to get out of her seatbelt. Nathan was out of the car, waiting on Max, angry that she was being so goddamn slow.
Nathan grabbed her hand and sped into the hospital as she struggled to keep up with his pace. He wouldn’t look at her, and he wouldn’t talk to her, but his grip on her hand said much more than he thought it did. He needed her to be here for him.

“Seat Prescott,” Kristine said, walking up to the woman at the counter and tossing her ID. She pointed back to David, then Max and Nathan, who’d just entered the building. “They’re with me.”

“Yes,” the woman at the counter began, “but we’re only allowing family in at this time. Sean Prescott is in…” the woman lowered her voice, “critical condition.”

“I veto that,” David said, flashing his badge. “Kristine, Nathan, Max, head to the hallway.” David turned his attention back to the woman at the counter. “You best buzz us in, Ma’am.”

“I’m sorry, Sir, but our policy is very strict when it comes to—”

“She’s my fiancée,” Nathan blurted. “Can we go now?”

Exasperated, the woman sat down and allowed them through the locked door to the elevator hallway. They all shuffled in once an elevator was available, and now Nathan was back to pretending Max wasn’t there and didn’t exist. She scooted away from him—as far as space in the elevator would allow—and she hoped he wouldn’t explode with anger. He’d gotten a lot better at working through it, but he’d never had his dad die before, so he didn’t even know where his anger would go.

The elevator dinged, and they flooded out, taking an immediate left, following Kristine. Shew as back on her cellphone, following Melinda’s instructions to the room. Everything was moving so fast—so many doctors, so many beeping pagers, so many nurses and carts full of needles and medicine being whisked this way and that. Finally, they stopped in front of room 313, where a chart with the name “Prescott, Sean” hung outside the door. Kristine rushed in and David found an excuse to sit in the upstairs waiting room, leaving Max and Nathan by the door.

“Go on in,” Max said quickly. “I’ll wait here.”

“If you’re not gonna come in, then have David take your ass home,” Nathan said. “I need you in there.”

“You have Melinda and Kristine,” Max said sternly. “It’s not appropriate for me to be in there.”

“Max, please,” Nathan whined. “Just for a second.”

“I can’t, Nathan,” Max said. “You’ll be okay. I promise you’ll be okay.”

Nathan gave her a dirty look. “Then fuck off,” Nathan said.

“Nathan, that’s not fair,” Max said.

“No!” Nathan interrupted. “Leave! I don’t want you in here! You don’t give a shit about me or how I feel at all. You’d go in if it were Chloe and her dad.”

“Nathan,” Max said, more seriously this time. “That’s different.”

“It’s not! Get out of here!” Nathan yelled, and David stood up from his chair in the waiting room.

“You watch yourself,” David said, running over. “Don’t make a scene, Nathan.”

“Nathan,” Max said calmly. “Nathan, please—”

“I TOLD YOU TO GET THE FUCK OUT OF HERE!” Nathan screeched in her face, and it wasn’t long before David had him up against the wall.

Instantly his tone calmed, but David’s grip didn’t. “Are you out of your mind, hmm?” David said, his grip tightening.


“Get off me!” Nathan shouted.

“Don’t forget where you’re headed, Nathan,” David said sternly. “I got you for a whole ‘nother year.”


David sighed and let Nathan go. “You get on in there. Go be with your sister and your mom,” he commanded, and Nathan quickly got a grip on the door handle.

Max stood there, tears slowly falling out of her eyes, but her face strong. “Go,” she told him.

Nathan opened the door and went inside.

David took Max home.

Max was sobbing before she managed to flop onto the bed. She’d been good at holding it in until David had to go and ruin it.

“You should have let me handle him,” David scolded, glaring at her. “If I were any other officer, you’d be in trouble, Max.”

Max looked up at him guiltily. “Thank you,” Max said.

“You know it’s not your fault, right?”

“I know,” Max whispered. “I’m gonna head inside, I need to clear my head.” Max exited the cruiser and turned away as fast as she could, already covering her reddening face. Her eyes were on fire with threatening tears, but Max didn’t want David to think it bothered her.

“You didn’t deserve that, any of it,” David called after her.

Tears fell. Things shouldn’t still have been this hard. She wanted to go in, she really did, but Kristine had texted her in the car, asking her to stay out. Max completely understood—and was a little relieved. She didn’t want to be there when Sean Prescott died, and she was glad she wasn’t. She regretted not being there when Nathan needed her, but he didn’t realize that Kristine would go above and beyond to be there for him, even pushing her sadness aside.

He took Max’s reluctance so personally. And he was still so mad at her—and for once, she didn’t have the energy to deal with it. Max grabbed her phone and shut it off in the middle of an oncoming call from Nathan, opting to sleep it off and talk to him once she felt better. He could live with not having a response until he got home. No doubt he wouldn’t even try to sleep in his own room.
Max awoke sometime later to a knock on the bedroom door. Her hair had fallen out of her ponytail and it was sticking to the dried tears on her face, and the room was pitch black. Groggily Max dragged herself out of bed, losing her flannel on the way to the door. She’d been so tired, she hadn’t even taken off her shoes. She ditched her shoes as well, yawning and stretching before she rested her hand on the door handle. She opened it slowly, the slammed it once she saw his face. Max slept enough for her sadness to form into anger, and the last thing she wanted to do right now was deal with him. He could go to sleep in his perfectly good bed in his perfectly good room down the hall while she passed back out. She pulled herself into a ball underneath the covers and ignored his second not and his subsequent entrance into the room.

“Max?” he said hoarsely. He closed the door behind him, but he didn’t come any closer. Nathan shrugged off his jacket and kicked off his shoes. “Max?”

She didn’t respond.

Nathan slowly made his way toward the bed, feeling his way around in the darkness. He lowered himself next to her, careful not to cough or otherwise disturb her in any way. Eventually he couldn’t help himself as he hesitantly reached out to her, resting his hand on her forehead. She rolled over and faced him, an angry look on her face, but he couldn’t see it in the darkness. He rubbed her bangs back and he gave her a solemn look, wishing he could take back everything that happened in the hospital. He turned and got into his storytelling position and she matched him, still silent, still looking a mess, still saying nothing.

“I…I’m sorry,” Nathan said. He exhaled deliberately and cupped her face. “That’s…that’s now how people who care about each other talk to each other. I care about you and I’m sorry.”

“I…accept your apology,” Max said quietly. “How are you feeling?”

“Me?” Nathan said. “I’m fine.”

Max put her hands on his face and made him look her in the eye. He was hard to see, but she could still tell he was avoiding direct eye contact. “Don’t kid yourself. What happened in there?”

Mac didn’t need to ask to know it was over. He wouldn’t have been home if his dad was okay. As much as he loved being around Max, had his father cheated death, he’d be stuck to his side until Melinda decided he’d had enough.

“He’s gone, Max,” Nathan told her. “He’s dead. My dad is dead.”

There was a lot to say. There was even more to do. But for now, Nathan needed someone to hold him while he sobbed, so Max did just that. The next few days were going to be tough, but they’d get through them together. They could do it. They could make it.

Melinda had stayed behind in the hospital to make the arrangements while Nathan got Kristine home. Kristine was still hysterical, sitting up in her room and sobbing, calling out for her late father. His body would be embalmed in a matter of hours and the funeral would be the day after tomorrow. They’d gotten pretty lucky, what with all of Sean’s connections. It’d be easy. It’d be hasty, and they’d all be able to move on with their lives.

Nathan buried his face in Max’s chest, gripping her shirt like a lifeline. It hurt. He couldn’t breathe. All his sobs caught in his throat. The air was heavy. He pushed his head against her chest and she took it, wrapping her arms around him and cooing a soft song while he cried. Eventually he was able to slow it to a stop, breathing deeply and exhaling, then looking to her. “My mom is going to be a fucking mess,” Nathan said. “She thinks she’s got it together, but she doesn’t. I fucked up
everything. I turned their universe upside down."

“You didn’t do anything,” Max told him.

“They want me to speak at his funeral, Max. What the fuck do I even say? He JUST died, and now I have to do everything,” Nathan said. “His body was so stiff and so cold. He was wearing the blanket that my Nana knitted for him when he was a little kid. He held my hand and he just talked and talked but it didn’t sound like him—he wasn’t making any sense. He was like a different person. I don’t want to see him like that. I don’t want to see his body,” Nathan sobbed. “I wasn’t ready. I wasn’t ready for this at all.”

Max wished there was something she could say, but all she could do was agree with him.

*                                                          *                                                          *

They’d skipped the viewing. It was only natural. No one in the immediate Prescott family wanted to see him that way. Melinda wanted to be strong and say goodbye, but Kristine said screw that. She’d stayed locked in her room almost the entire day, only leaving to let Nathan and Max know that she was still alive. Nathan almost found it funny, the way she grieved, because it was so…unlike her. He thought she’d be standing right next to Sean’s dead body smiling and handing out programs about his life. Maybe she’d feel better doing it at the funeral.

Nathan couldn’t bring himself to go to the viewing. He’d had enough of seeing his dad’s brittle old body and he knew he couldn’t take another second of it. At least when he was in his chair, he was talking, he was moving, but in the casket? It was just a shell of who he used to be, and he hadn’t been much.

The funeral was today. Nathan had left the room sometime in the middle of the night, but he didn’t come back. Max had checked to make sure he was okay, and she’d found him asleep in the guest room. She figured he needed to be alone to get a good night’s rest.

Now Max was in the mirror, brushing through the end of her ponytail and making sure there were no wrinkles in her dress. She was surprised she fit the old thing—and funny enough, she brought it completely intending to wear it to Sean’s funeral. She hadn’t worn it since Chloe’s funeral, and it had hence been dubbed the “funeral dress.”

Upon exiting the bathroom, Max slipped on a short pair of black boots over her stockings and pulled on a black cardigan. She walked over to her purse, grabbing a small package of tissues that Kristine had left for her and her cellphone and setting them inside.

“Max?” she heard, muffled through the door, accompanied by a knock.

It was Kristine. She came into the room, looking around, just the slightest bit of worry in her eyes.

“Is everything okay?” Max asked.

“Is Nathan in here with you?” Kristine asked. She shifted her feet, eyes glared toward the bathroom, hoping that Nathan would come out.

“No,” Max said gravely. “I haven’t seen him all morning.”

Just then, Melinda entered the room. Unlike Max and Kristine, who were rapidly filling with worry, she looked to be at ease. A soft smile sat on her face, and she daintily stepped into the room and over to the bed. She pat the bed for a bit, then sat down. “If we don’t find my son,” she said softly, “I will lose my shit.”
“I know a place he could be,” Max said. It was obvious; he had to have been at The Spot. What better way was there to avoid his family than to go to a place neither of them knew existed? “Maybe he messaged one of us.” Max went into her purse quickly, hoping Melinda wouldn’t blame her for losing track of Nathan. It’d become natural for them to be together, and even Max not knowing where he went was scary. Opening her phone, Max felt a twinge of hope. “I know where he is.”

“Please get him,” Melinda said. “I’ll stall the funeral, but…please Max, bring him home.”

Max ran downstairs, opting not to share the message he’d sent her:

Clearing my head. U know where.

Max skidded to a stop in her rental car and quickly took off her seatbelt. She had half a mind to leave the car running just in case she didn’t find him there, but after pacing a few feet, there it was—Nathan’s red truck. Max started up the steep hill, ignoring the random flashbacks of rain and lightning as she went. She had the same thing happen when she came to the lighthouse a few days prior, but right now, the visions seemed much more ominous. Max couldn’t help but have a bad feeling.

Continuing up the hill, Max breathed a sigh of relief once she saw there. He had his back to her, sitting on the bench atop the hill by the lighthouse. He was staring straight ahead, dressed and ready in his funeral suit.

Max approached him cautiously, practically tiptoeing the last few steps. Nathan turned and smiled at her, scooting on the bench, giving her some room.

“Nathan,” she started. “You could have gotten in huge trouble.”

“My dad’s dead. Can you blame me?” Nathan said flatly.

“I know it’s hard, but you can’t be this reckless,” Max said gently. “What if your mom had sent David here instead of me?”

Nathan looked her in the eyes and then looked at his hands, prompting Max to look, too. She hadn’t noticed the envelope at first, and upon further inspection, Max realized that it was the same one Sean had asked her to give to him.

“Oh,” she breathed.

“I needed to clear my head,” Nathan said, “and Arcadia Bay can’t touch me up here.”

Max understood the sentiment. It was the safest place from the things that happened there. The town seemed so much smaller from atop the hill—and so much easier to get away from—but it was a magnet and they both knew it. Once a person went there, they had roots there, and every once in a while, their plants would bloom, calling them back home.

“What the hell, right?” Nathan forced a laugh, trying to smile.

Max nodded at him.

Nathan took a deep breath, exhaled, then folded the envelope, breaking the red Prescott seal. His heart pounded as he opened it and pulled out a hand-written letter by Sean, along with picture of Sophia Isley’s headstone, with an address—also in his handwriting—on the back.
“Little late for that, asshole,” Nathan said, putting the picture back into the envelope. He gave his attention back to the letter. “It’s his will,” Nathan explained.

Max didn’t say anything back to him.

Nathan hunched over a bit and began to read. Max was as patient as could be, her hand on his shoulder to show her support. She wondered why Sean didn’t just have a reading, but it was probably explained in the letter.

When Nathan was done reading, he leaned back into the bench, wide blue eyes staring up at the wide blue sky.

“Are you okay?” Max asked him.

“…”

“What?”

“…everything…”

“Nathan,” Max started.

“Everything,” Nathan repeated. “Everything, Max. he wants to give me EVERYTHING—properties, stocks, businesses, cash—all of it. And if I don’t take it all, it gets split three ways—Mom, Kristine, and me.”

“Well,” Max gulped, “what are you gonna do?”

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