Summary

An anonymous letter brings eleven people together in an attempt to change fate and destiny… or maybe to fulfill it. (LIS characters making major in-game decisions and providing commentary. Undergoing edits as of July 2017)
Hey guys, a big warm welcome from myself and tylerbamafan34. We present to you another fic, idea courtesy of Tyler.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Prologue: The Gathering

A beat-up, pale dirty yellow truck made its way down the road at a steady pace; sat inside were two girls in their late teens. The passenger looked out of the open window with rapt attention, watching the streets and trees speed past. Long blonde hair whipped around her as she tapped long, painted fingernails on the dashboard. She soon grew bored of this view and shifted her gaze back over to the blue-haired girl in the driver's seat.

"I'm just saying, Rach," Chloe said animatedly, "don't you think this is a bit odd? I'm not even a student anymore."

It did strike Rachel as strange, however this didn't deter her from wanting to investigate. She idly twirled a strand of hair around her finger. "That as the case may be, you have to admit you're at least a little curious."

Silence passed between them as Chloe thought over her reply. Then, she shook her head and sighed resignedly. "Maybe," she conceded reluctantly, "but that still doesn't explain anything."

Rachel shrugged, hazel eyes gleaming with interest. "The letter did say there would be explanations in due time. I say we give it a shot. What's the worst that could happen?"

"I think I've heard that one before," the bluenette chuckled heartily. The pair had certainly been in their fair share of trouble over the years, mostly as a direct consequence of their mischief.

The shorter of the pair stuck out her tongue and resumed her window watching, propping her chin on her hand. "Where's your sense of adventure?"

Chloe focused her attention back on the road. While she wasn't one to pass up the chance to investigate, something about this seemed off. She couldn't explain it, but that was her gut feeling. "I think we've seen plenty of adventure for several lifetimes over."

Pouting, the blonde sank back in the seat and once again stared out of the window. "You are no fun."

Chloe had to laugh at her childish display. This was the side of her not many got to see. Rachel spent so much time pretending to be something she wasn't to fit in. She gave off the impression that she was perfect to live up to everyone's high expectations, making it almost impossible to expose the girl behind the many masks. The blue-haired punk liked to think that she had uncovered the real Rachel Amber, or that she was closer than most at least.

"Hey, I went along with it, didn't I?"
Rachel raised an eyebrow skeptically at the blue-haired punk. "Yes, but it took some convincing."

She scoffed at the accusatory tone. "Oh yes, because nothing bad could ever come from blindly following the instructions from some weird anonymous handwritten letter."

The letter in question had a short and simple message: **Come to Blackwell Academy's Auditorium on Saturday 13th April 2013, 9 A.M. Further explanation will be given in time. Your life – and those of your friends and family – will depend on it.**

Gently nudging her shoulder, Rachel playfully rolled her eyes. "Enough with the sarcasm already. Whoever it's from clearly knows where you lived. If they wanted to hurt us, they could've done it already."

Chloe turned her head towards the other girl, smirking at her attempts to justify their compliance with the strange request. "Well, why didn't you say that in the first place? Makes me feel so much better."

The blonde sighed melodramatically. "You know what I mean. Seriously though, who do you think set this all up?"

That was the real question here. Chloe had been trying to work that out ever since she received the mysterious letter, around three days ago. Whenever she tried coming up with a comprehensive list of suspects, it only made her more confused and intrigued. At this point, she wouldn't be surprised if this was one of Rachel's big pranks; it seemed like something she would do.

Drawing a blank, Chloe shrugged. "Well, let's just hope it's not some creepy kidnapper or something."

"I pity the person who decides to kidnap you," Rachel mumbled into her hand.

"What's *that* supposed to mean?" the bluenette challenged, narrowing her eyes at the numerous possible insinuations.

Before either girl could say anything more, their destination came into view: Blackwell Academy. Their trivial squabbles were soon forgotten as the truck pulled into the small enclosed parking lot. As always, Chloe haphazardly pulled up across two parking spaces, one being the handicapped bay.

"Chloe…" Rachel groaned. "Really?"

"What? No-one here uses them," she retorted defensively.

Blackwell's celebrity couldn't help but smile at her infuriating logic. "Yeah, tell that to David."

"At least this time he'll have a reason to bust my ass," Chloe muttered, more to herself than Rachel. David didn't need much of an excuse to get on her case.

Both girls got out and headed towards Blackwell's auditorium, as specified in the letter. The grounds were eerily silent, only broken by the gentle swishing of the trees in the warm breeze and the cheerful chirping of birds as they lazily swooped overhead. Chloe shoved her hands in her pockets as they walked, kicking a stone along the well-travelled pathway. A mounting sense of apprehension began to build up in the pit of her stomach.

"If this is just some elaborate plan you concocted, I am so going to hit you," she threatened, squinting suspiciously at the girl walking beside her.
It wouldn't be beyond the realm of possibility. They were both renowned for their mischievous pranks, particularly those they performed on each another in their battle for the crown of 'top prankster'.

Rachel snaked her arm in the crook of Chloe's, calming her worries a little. "I could say the same to you. Only one way to find out..."

She began to tug insistently at the blue-haired punk's arm as their destination drew ever closer, dragging her along like an excited puppy out on a walk. Chloe smiled at the interesting mental image, then picked up her pace. Before long, the pair were standing in front of the double doors leading to the auditorium.

"Come on!" Rachel impatiently shoved the doors open, Chloe shaking her head in slight exasperation.

"Geez, wait a minute..." As these words left her mouth, the blonde was already through the doors. So much for being careful.

Chloe followed her inside, met by a sight she hadn't expected. Several chairs sat in the middle of the large empty space, some of them were already occupied. A screen had been set up in front of the chairs, which for now remained blank. The noise of the doors creaking shut caught the attention of the others in the room.

"Ugh, figures you two would be here," a tall girl with short blonde hair grumbled. She stood up from one of the chairs, striding over to them. Drawing herself to her fullest height, she planted a hand on her hip and offered them a contempt filled sneer.

"Hello to you too, Victoria." Rachel murmured calmly as to not antagonize her further. Chloe crossed her arms and bit her tongue to curb potential insults.

Victoria waved her hand lazily in their direction – like she was swatting an annoying fly – expression filled with disgust at having to be in the same room as them. "What do you two losers want? You'd better have had a good reason for calling me out here."

Rachel's eyebrow arched in confusion, hazel eyes holding a question. "What are you talking about?"

The taller blonde scoffed, lethargically clicking her fingers. Taylor came out of nowhere, shoving a crumpled piece of paper at them. Rachel scanned the paper, eyes widening as she read it. Growing impatient, Victoria began tapping her foot on the floor.

"Well? I'm waiting," she demanded in her default derisive tone.

Digging around in my jacket pocket, Rachel pulled out an identical piece of paper and showed it to her. She sighed, snatching it. Her brow furrowed in confusion as her eyes darted across the page.

Once finished, she shoved the latter back at Rachel, rubbing her temples. "Just fucking great. Now what?"

The shorter blonde shrugged, absentmindedly inspecting her nails. "We wait, I guess."

This suggestion earned her a scowl and an exasperated sigh. "You may have all the time in the world to wait, but some of us have important things to do."

Chloe couldn't hold her tongue any longer. "Yeah, I suppose being a total bitch must take a lot of
time and energy."

Victoria glared at her with an intense hatred. Most would have backed down at this point, but Chloe seemed to be itching for a fight. Rachel briefly considered trying to prevent this but knew that it was futile. Both girls were stubborn as hell. Nothing she said or did would change that. She had learned to just stay out of the way.

The Queen Bee took a step towards her adversary. "Um… excuse you…"

Before a fight could break out, the door creaked open once more. This time, a head cautiously poked through, checking to see if anyone was here. Hazel eyes flickered with relief as they settled on the group, an audible sigh echoing around the room.

"Oh, good. I was starting to think I had the wrong place," a sweet, shy voice spoke.

The door opened fully to reveal a girl with a blonde bun. Cautiously stepping inside, she approached the small group, the gold cross hanging down from her neck swaying. Victoria rolled her eyes and returned to her chair, closely followed by her minions. Rachel smiled warmly at the new girl, who was insanely cute.

"Don't worry, you got here just in time," Rachel reassured, glancing over at Victoria – who totally ignored her – then at Chloe, who simply shrugged. "So, what's your name, darling? Don't think I've seen you around here before."

"Kate," the girl answered, looking confused at the strange situation she had found herself in. "Um, I'm supposed to be coming to Blackwell in a few months, but…" She hesitated when Victoria scowled at her, not interested in her life story. Swallowing, Kate turned to the friendlier members of the group. "I'll assume you received a letter, too."

Rachel nodded, jabbing her thumb towards the occupied chairs. "Yes, so did Victoria and her minions."

At the mention of her name, the blonde scoffed in disgust. Chloe muttered something under her breath, no doubt some sort of insult at Victoria's expense.

Looking puzzled, Kate anxiously began playing with her cross necklace. "Does anyone have any ideas as to why we were invited here?"

That was the question on everyone's mind. Chloe sighed deeply and re-adjusted her beanie. "No clue whatsoever."

Everyone took a seat, wondering why they had been summoned here. Another ten minutes later, the door opened again. The first guy of the group stepped inside – long, messy brown hair, listening to music to pass the time. As he glanced up, he noticed Victoria and her group on the far side of the room. Wisely, he eschewed joining Blackwell's elite, joining the other three girls.

"I'm not late, am I?" he asked lightly, removing his over-ear headphones and placing them around his neck.

Kate beamed at him, happy to see another friendly face. "No, I don't think so."

"Good," he sighed as he sank into one of the free chairs. "I couldn't pass this up. Have to say, I'm interested to see what's going on here. Name's Warren, by the way."

Rachel leaned back in her chair, crossing her arms over her chest. "Aren't we all? And nice to meet
you, Warren."

A few quick introductions later and he was brought up to speed. Everything was still a mystery at this point. Given the lack of action, there were supposed to be more people on the way. The two smaller groups continued to talk among themselves, waiting. Finally – after several bored sighs and another angry rant from Victoria about wasting her precious time – the last four people arrived.

The first pair to enter were Joyce and David, making Chloe groan. "Are you fucking serious? It was bad enough having to sit in the same room as the Queen Bitch of Blackwell. Now you're telling me Step-Douche is here as well."

Joyce smiled at her daughter and the others as she passed by, David merely grunting and eyeing them up suspiciously. No doubt he thought this was all some teen prank aimed at him. Another pair came after them; a tall, well-built man with short brown hair and a bushy beard alongside a brunette woman.

A flicker of recognition flashed through Chloe's mind, body tensing as she realized why. What were Max's parents doing here? She hadn't seen Ryan and Vanessa Caulfield in five years, not since they moved to Seattle. Instinctively, she glanced around to check if they were alone, disappointed to find their daughter – her childhood best friend – nowhere to be seen. While she was still pissed at Max for ditching her so soon after William died, she would do almost anything to see her again.

A hand on the bluenette's arm caught her attention, meeting Rachel's concern filled hazel eyes. "You okay?"

Chloe could only manage a half-hearted nod, not trusting herself. She would either completely lose it or burst into tears. For now, she continued to bottle it up as always.

Ryan and Vanessa Caulfield always used to be so cheerful and energetic, full of life. The word that came to mind now was **tired**. Vanessa looked like she hadn't slept well in days. Ryan's shoulders were slumped, an arm loosely wrapped around his wife. Something was **wrong**. Remaining silent, they took a seat near Joyce and David and stared blankly at the screen.

Once everyone was seated, the screen suddenly flickered to life. Music started playing, a gentle strumming of guitar strings mixed in with ambient nature sounds, like wind and birds. Large, blocky letters fluttered onto the screen, eventually forming the words: **Life is Strange**.

Chloe's eyebrows shot up to her hairline. "What the actual fuck?" she whispered to Rachel. "It looks like Max designed it. Fits her style exactly."

The screen faded to black, white text suddenly appearing: **Life is Strange will show you the things that could have been, the consequence of choices and their impact on the past, present, and future. Pay attention…**

These words of warning remained for a few moments, fading away. Everyone looked around, perplexed.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Rachel leaned over to whisper in the bluenette's ear. This was getting weirder by the second.

Chloe shifted in her seat, tapping her fingers on her leg. "I dunno, but this is hella strange."

Her blonde friend nodded in agreement. "I guess we'll find out in a moment."
Worry crossed over Kate's delicate features, a small concerned frown forming as she considered the implications of those words. Sheepishly, she looked over to Warren – who was stroking his chin with his eyes closed, deep in thought.

Victoria seemed unimpressed by the whole situation, offhandedly commenting on the pointlessness of all this. Taylor and Courtney agreed almost instantaneously with her conclusion. However, for all her complaining she didn't leave.

Joyce and David exchanged confused glances but didn't say anything. Vanessa and Ryan Caulfield, on the other hand, didn't join in on the questioning. Instead, they stared at the screen intently, never once taking their attention off it.

What the group was about to experience would shake the very foundations of their beliefs, challenge everything they once thought they knew and give them one vital chance to change everything.

Chapter End Notes

What could possibly be going on? Find out in the upcoming chapters...
Chapter Notes

And so begins the journey…

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter One: Chrysalis, Part 1

The bitter wind howled violently, threatening to destroy anything in its wake. Bolts of lightning flashed, briefly illuminating the bleak area. Rain pelted down from the thunderous clouds in the dismal gray sky. The drops splashed against a girl lying there in the middle of the well-trodden path leading up to the lighthouse. She winced as the ice-cold water trickled down her exposed skin, completely drenching her clothing.

Ryan stiffened, eyes sharpening on the screen with a hawk like intensity. "Max."

No denying it, the girl lying there in the mud was Max Caulfield. Even Chloe, who hadn't seen her in five years, could recognize her almost immediately. She hadn't changed much, aside from the shorter haircut and thinner face. There were still plenty of freckles, her sense of style as lacking as before.

Groaning, Max came to. She blinked a few times, desperately trying to figure out what was happening right now. Sitting up, her eyes grew wide with fear as she noticed the clearly unexpected blown over trees and stormy surroundings. Where am I? What's happening?

"My baby…" Vanessa sat up, eyes soft.

"Okay, hold on," Chloe snapped, the image on the screen pausing almost on cue as she turned to Max's parents. "What's going on? Why did you two show up looking like you haven't slept in a week?"

Vanessa and Ryan glanced at one another, conflicted. All eyes were on them now, waiting for answers. After a tense few moments, Ryan sighed deeply and ran a hand through his short brown hair. "Well, we needed some answers today." His jaw tensed as he spoke those words, followed by a long awkward silence.

"Answers?" Kate hesitantly questioned, trying to gently tease more information from him.

His eyes met with Vanessa's, who was on the brink of tears. She nodded at him weakly and he cleared his throat. "Yes, even more than any of you here. We want to know where the hell our daughter is."

Everyone was taken aback by that statement, Chloe most of all. The implications hit her hard – a sucker punch. "Wait, Max is missing?"

He nodded solemnly. "She just… disappeared a few days back. No note or anything. We haven't heard from her at all in that time," he said as his voice wavered and broke. Closing his eyes, he rubbed his face with his hand and took a deep breath. "We just want her to come home. As soon as
we received the letter, we just knew it had to be connected. That's why we're here, so can we please just get on with this. We've been waiting long enough."

Nobody knew what to make of this. Less than half of them had met Max before, but knowing she was missing still made them feel uneasy. Kate shuffled uncomfortably, hands resting in her lap. Warren scratched his head and sighed. Victoria huffed but didn't say a word, neither did Taylor or Courtney.

David's jaw tightened at the information and Joyce placed a hand to her mouth in shock. Rachel tried to comfort Chloe by rubbing her shoulder, knowing Max had been a close childhood friend. Chloe couldn't process any of this; she just sat there completely stunned. The tense atmosphere was broken when the picture on the scene resumed.

Hesitantly getting to her feet, Max frantically examined the chaos and destruction surrounding her. *I'm trapped in a storm? How did I get here? … and where even is 'here'?* A bright flashing light penetrated the darkness, causing her head to snap upwards. In the distance, she saw the vague outline of the lighthouse in between the tall trees. *Wait… There's the lighthouse… I'll be safe if I can make it there… I hope… Please let me make it there.*

The group watched in silence, all transfixed by the scene playing out before them. It was so surreal to watch.

She stumbled up the path, fighting gale force winds. When she reached the top, she froze. "Holy shit!"

In the middle of the water was a swirling tornado headed straight for Arcadia Bay's shoreline. It was large enough to swallow the town whole, no problem. She backed away slowly, shaking her head in disbelief. A boat was suddenly thrown out of the water towards the lighthouse. It slammed into it with a loud thud, the top part of the tall building began to creak. Unable to support the weight, the cap of the lighthouse broke off and plummeted towards her.

"Whoa! No!" she cried out, throwing her hands up in a vain attempt to protect herself – her voice lost to the howling wind.

Just as the heavy chunk of debris was about to crush her, the screen went black.

Unable to sit still any longer, Chloe shot to her feet and clenched her fists. "Okay, what the fuck is going on?! I had better get some answers, right now!"

Rachel took her arm and gently tried to pull her back down. "Chloe, stay calm…"

"Calm?!" the bluenette shouted, shaking the blonde off as she pointed to the screen. "How am I supposed to remain calm after seeing *that*?"

Victoria crossed her arms over her chest, sighing in disgust. "Can we just get back to watching this hipster bullshit? The sooner this is all over, the better. I can't believe I am wasting my time with this."

It looked like Chloe might start another fight, but Kate interrupted nervously. "Maybe we should see what happens next. I think there is more to this. It wouldn't make much sense for it to stop here. At least, I don't think so."
Warren nodded in agreement, trying to help ease the tension. "It would be weird to invite us all here just to watch that small clip. What would be the point?"

Although the blunette couldn't argue with that, it hardly made her feel better. "I don't give a shit why this is happening. I just watched my…" What even was Max to her anymore? Chloe had said a lot of things she regretted the day she left. Sighing, she slid off her beanie and ran her fingers through faded blue locks. "Damnit…"

Joyce offered her a melancholic smile. Max had been like a daughter to the older woman, only made worse by how her disappearance was affecting Chloe. "Why don't we see what happens, Chloe? That's all we can do now."

"Yeah…" Rubbing the back of her neck, Chloe slumped back in her chair, refusing to make eye contact. When she was seated again, the image on screen changed.

Max's eyes snapped open, understandably confused when she didn't see the super tornado bearing down or the broken part of lighthouse about to crush her. Instead, she was sat at her desk in the photography classroom. That was so surreal. It… didn't feel like a dream.

Her teacher, Mark Jefferson, was leaning against the desk a few feet in front of her. "Alfred Hitchcock famously called film, 'little pieces of time' but he would be talking about photography, as he likely was," he droned on at the mostly uninterested group of students. Some of them were nearly asleep, their eyes half closed as they struggled to remain awake.

Everything seemed normal. Okay… I'm in class… Everything's cool… I'm okay. Breath, Max. Max glanced up at the clock. It read 3:50 P.M. meaning class was almost over. Thank dog for that. As much as Mr. Jefferson is an inspiration to me, he sure knows how to make a five-minute explanation drag.

Kate looked vaguely amused at Max's reluctance to name God. For most people, throwing the name around was second nature. Some members of her church went crazy about it, not her. At the end of the day, it was just a word. There were other things to get angry about, genuinely terrible events more deserved of everyone's time. If only others saw it that way…

Victoria sat to her left with Taylor, the tall blond hanging on his every word with rapt attention. Her phone vibrated on the desk, but she didn't even give it a fleeting glance.

"These pieces of time can frame us in our glory and our sorrow; from light to shadow; from color to chiaroscuro…"

At this point, Taylor threw a crumpled up ball of paper at Kate, hitting her right on the cheek. She turned her head as it collided with her face, reaching up in a delayed attempt to defend herself from the incoming projectile.

The offender in question glanced guiltily at Kate, the other girl staring back. As far as Taylor could tell, Kate didn't seem like the type to earn her the ire of Blackwell's upper echelon of students. You could usually tell who would be trouble, like Rachel for instance. One look at her and you just knew she'd be a problem. What had Kate done to earn this kind of treatment? Probably very little.

Courtney shuffled uncomfortably, knowing that – in Taylor's position – she'd have probably done exactly the same, whatever the reason. In the heat of the moment, it was easy to forget that people
had feelings and emotions. When you took a step back and thought about it... then it became much
harder to 'justify' it to yourself. Kate didn't seem like a threat to anyone, quite the opposite, which
made it all the more difficult to watch.

Seemingly oblivious to it, Mr. Jefferson continued. "Now, can you give me an example of a
photographer who perfectly captured the human condition in black and white?"

Max leaned back in her chair, going over what she had literally just experienced. That was so
weird. I'm sure I didn't fall asleep... then again, it wouldn't be the first time.

Victoria's hand shot up confidently. "Diane Arbus."

He smiled at her, happy that someone was paying attention. "There you go, Victoria! Why
Arbus?"

The Queen Bee cleared her throat, answering with ease. "Because of her images of hopeless
faces. You feel like, totally haunted by the eyes of those sad mothers and children." As she
came to the end, she glanced over at Max with an 'I dare you to do better' smirk.

"Seems like the new girl might be some competition for you, Tori." Taylor raised an eyebrow in
mild amusement, immediately regretting it when Victoria scowled at her.

Max hardly seemed like any kind of real challenge for her, so why did she even give her the time of
day? Maybe the brunette sucked up to Jefferson on something, more than enough to tick Victoria
off, as Rachel had learned. Yeah, that must be it. She probably didn't have the talent to back it all
up, relying on backhanded methods to impress him.

Why does Victoria have to make it seem like a competition all the time? Max ignored
her, instead looking at a photo of herself with her back to the camera, standing in front of a
wall covered in pictures. The shot was blurred around the edges, her outline indistinct and
vague. Look at this crap! How can I show this to Mr. Jefferson? I can hear the class laughing
at me now.

"She never did have the best self-esteem," Vanessa sighed, wishing her daughter had been more
confident in her ability.

Ryan nodded stiffly. "I don't think the move helped with that either."

Once they made it to Seattle, she only seemed to curl in on herself more. William's death – the man
had been a role model for her – and leaving Chloe behind had led to a large dip in confidence. One
she'd never quite recovered from. Of course, she'd always been a little on the shy side, but never to
that extent.

"She saw humanity as tortured, right? And frankly, it's bullshit." He sternly shushed the
muttered whispers erupting from his students. "Seriously though, I could frame any one of
you in a dark corner, and capture you in a moment of desperation. And any one of you would
do that to me. Isn't that too easy? Too obvious?" He paused, letting the rhetorical questions
hang – all part of his grandiose performance. "What if Arbus chose to capture people at the
height of their beauty or innocence? She had a brilliant eye, so she could have taken another
approach."

As Victoria jumped in with some pretentious point, Max glanced down at her beat up
camera; it had seen its fair share of war in the line of photography. I should take a picture to prove I'm still here… Plus it's perfect for my portfolio.

"Is she serious? She's just gonna take a selfie in the middle of class… right in front of her teacher?" Chloe asked incredulously, grinning in amusement. "Damn, can't wait to see how this one plays out."

The blue-haired punk could still remember the first time Max started seriously taking pictures. That damn camera had practically been an extra limb. By the looks of it, not much hadn't changed. Nearly all the photos Chloe had left were taken by the aspiring photographer when she lived in Arcadia. Max took pictures of everything, chronicling their childhood adventures. It had taken a lot to resist destroying every single last one when she left. Now, Chloe was very glad she hadn't let the anger consume her that much.

Trying to be subtle, Max angled the camera under the desk to hide her photo taking. The second the flash went off, Jefferson's head swiveled towards her. "Shh, I believe Max has taken what you kids call a 'selfie'… A dumb word for a wonderful photographic tradition. And Max… has a gift." He continued to go on about the history of selfies, sneaking in a cringe-worthy pun as he did so.

"Oh man, no way did she just get away with that. I would've been kicked out, no questions asked," Chloe protested, crossing her arms and pouting.

Rachel giggled beside her. "Well, unlike you, I'm sure Max hasn't been pushing boundaries ever since she got there."

When he turned back to her, Max slumped in her seat, trying to disappear from this uncomfortable situation. "Now Max, since you've captured our interest and clearly want to join the conversation, can you please tell us the name of the process that gave birth to the first self-portraits?"

Max bit her lip, worrying it between her teeth. Shit, I have no clue. I didn't really take in any of the reading he set. I kind of drifted off halfway through. "You're asking me? Um… let me think…"

He slammed his fist down on the desk, making a few of the students jump, Hayden in particular; he'd nearly been asleep.

Kate also jumped and let out a little squeak of shock as the noise echoed through the auditorium. She blushed as all eyes turned to her. "Sorry… I wasn't expecting it."

Chuckling, Rachel decided to tease her just a little. "Remind me to watch horror films with you in the future. I bet it'd be fun."

Embarrassed, Kate averted her eyes and went back to playing with her cross necklace.

"You either know this or not, Max. Is there anybody here who knows their stuff?" Mr. Jefferson asked in annoyance.

Predictably, Victoria's hand shot up. "Louis Daguerre was a French painter who created 'daguerreotypes' a process that gave portraits a sharp reflective style, like a mirror," she recited, then turned to Max with a sneer. "Now you're totally stuck in the Retro Zone. Sad
Chloe burst into laughter, swiftly joined by Rachel. "Oh man, that is just too much," the bluenette managed as she wiped at her eyes. "Rach, remind me to use that one."

Victoria simply glared at them. "Like you can talk, Price."

The lecture continued, cut off by the end of day bell. A wave of relief passed over the room, everyone eager to leave.

"And guys don't forget the deadline to submit a photo in the 'Everyday Heroes' contest. I'll fly out with the winner to San Francisco where you'll be feted by the art world. It's great exposure and it can kick-start a career in photography," he continued as everyone began packing up hurriedly. "So Stella and Alyssa, get it together. Taylor, don't hide, I'm still waiting for your entry too." He turned to Max, his reprimanding stare making her recoil. "And yes Max, I see you pretending not to see me."

She audibly sighed at being singled out, gathering up the rest of her things. Her gaze turned to Kate – who was hunched over her desk, completely oblivious to everything going on around her. Kate looks so sad and quiet today. Poor thing.

At that moment, all eyes turned to Kate – who was just as confused by the gloomy behavior. The person on screen didn't even look like her. Well, she looked like her physically, but she just appeared so haggard and sad, an empty husk.

"Hi Kate," Max greeted softly so as not to scare her.

The blonde girl lifted her head from her hand, prominent dark circles under her eyes. "Oh, hi Max."

"You seem quiet today," the brunette observed, concerned.

That made Kate's shoulders slump again, eyes closing as she sighed. "Just thinking too much..."

"I hear that. Want to go grab a cup o' tea and bitch about life?" Max joked, trying to lighten the mood.

Her friend thought it over for a second, shaking her head. "Thanks, but not today. I have to go over homework."

Max gave her a reassuring smile. I don't want to pressure her, but something seems up. I'll have to try again later and hopefully, she'll tell me what's got her so down. "No worried. Let's hang later."

"Sure."

When she walked away, Max's foot hit the small crumpled up ball of paper Taylor had lobbed across the classroom earlier. Curiosity getting the better of her, she unfurled it. 'Dear Kate, we love your porn video xoxo Blackwell Academy' Now I wish I wouldn't have read this. Purge.
The note shocked Kate into a stunned silence. There was no way she would ever do something like that. Not just because of her religion, but because it wasn't in her nature. Even the thought of making that kind of video made her feel ill. Just what had happened? Part of her didn't want to know, in all honesty. Especially if this note should be taken literally. Although, she suspected there was much more at play here.

Nobody else said anything about it, feeling just a little worried now. While they didn't know Kate very well, she seemed like the last person to be involved in a porn video. Judging by how she was acting now, the accusation was presumably linked to her depressive state.

Screwing the note back up, Max pocketed the note to throw in the next trash can she saw. Her eyes turned to Victoria, who was stood at the front of the room, leaning over the desk while talking to Mr. Jefferson.

Warren's eyebrows rose. "Kinda laying it on thick, isn't she?" he murmured to Kate, indicating the seductive pose Victoria had taken.

Rachel leaned over and whispered something to Chloe, causing her to burst out laughing. Victoria scowled at them. "What's so fucking funny?"

"Nothing," Rachel said as she threw the blonde an innocent smile. No doubt it was something offensive or vulgar… maybe both.

_Every time I look at Victoria I feel like she's talking smack about me._

Rachel smirked, hazel eyes shifting over to the self-proclaimed Queen Bee. "She has that effect on most people."

Victoria deadpanned, voice dripping with thinly-veiled hatred. "You're hilarious."

"I like to think so." Rachel's sarcasm and mischievous streak were still going strong. "I would like to know how Max can afford to come to Blackwell though."

"She won a scholarship from a photography competition," Vanessa answered with a small smile. "She was thrilled."

It had been so crazy. She'd never seen her daughter so excited about anything in years. Finally, she was able to follow her long held dream. Photography was one of the only hobbies, aside from playing her guitar, that had ever truly managed to capture Max's attention; it had definitely shown that day. Of course, she'd had a few doubts, wondering if she was good enough.

Before she had the chance to take advantage of Jefferson being distracted by Victoria, he caught her eye. _There's no way I can get out of this now._ Sighing, she dragged her feet over to his desk. "Excuse me, Mr. Jefferson, can I talk to you for a moment?"

Victoria rolled her eyes in disgust. "Yes, excuse you."

Unfortunately for the blonde, Mr. Jefferson didn't the interruption as a nuisance. "No, Victoria, excuse us. I'd never let one of photography's future stars avoid handing in her picture."

She scowled at her photographic rival, manicured nails tapping impatiently on the desk.

"Do I have to? I just don't think it's that big a deal," Max mumbled as she bit her lip.
nervously.

He shook his head at the dismissive words. "Max, you're a better photographer than a liar... Now I know it's a drag to hear some old dude lecture you..." At this point, Victoria sighed in exasperation, ignored. "...but life won't wait for you to play catch-up. You're young, the world is yours, blah blah blah, right?"

"He's much more kid savvy than most," Vanessa observed quietly.

Ryan nodded in agreement. "I wasn't a good teacher myself. I barely understand Max at times, let alone other parent's kids."

"But you do have a gift," he continued earnestly, "you have the fever to take images, to frame the world only the way you envision it. Now, all you need is the courage to share your gift with others. That's what separates the artist, from the amateur."

"Man," Chloe sighed in relief, placing her hands behind her head. "I thought he wasn't going to shut up."

Rachel snorted in amusement. "You never did have patience."

"Look who's talking," the bluenette retorted, gently shoving her shoulder. Neither of them was renowned for their attention span.

Finally, she made it into the bustling corridor. Taylor and Courtney were waiting outside the room for Victoria, whispering and giggling when they saw her. Welcome to the real world... I need a serious time out in the bathroom. Splash water on my face and make sure I don't look like a total loser. Leaning against the wall, she retrieved her headphones and blocked the world out.

Guitar strumming began to play from hidden speakers. Victoria sighed in disgust as the music began to fill the room. "Figures."

Warren bobbed his head to the rhythm. "I don't know, it's actually pretty decent music. I prefer techno, but this stuff isn't bad."

Kate nodded in agreement, closing her eyes and allowing the peaceful music to wash over her.

"Indie rock for me," Chloe remarked. "Better listening for long car rides."

"Better for you maybe," Rachel quipped. "I swear, if I have to listen to Piano Fire one more time, I will lose my mind."

"Hey, it's a good song," Chloe protested.

"Yes... the first fifty consecutive times," Rachel taunted playfully.

Max walked down the corridor, mentally making the odd comment about those she passed. Her eyes roamed over the over various Vortex Club party flyers, stopping on a Missing Persons poster stuck to the wall.

The room grew silent as they saw the name on the poster... Rachel Amber. Kate brought her hand to her mouth, gasping quietly. Warren almost fell off his chair in shock. Victoria's jaw tightened, Taylor and Courtney glancing at her to gauge how they should react to this information. Ryan and
Vanessa exchanged confused glances. David's shoulders tensed up considerably, while Joyce looked over to Chloe – who was understandably taking this news very poorly.

"What the actual fuck?" Chloe breathed, refusing to believe her eyes. "What's going on?"

Rachel shook her head, complexion turning white. "I have no idea."

This image certainly brought down the mood and increased the tension. Nobody knew what this was supposed to mean. Rachel wasn't missing, she was sitting right there beside Chloe. It made no sense whatsoever.

*It looks like she's been gone for months. I hope she's ok.*

At this, Rachel recovered slightly, giving a wan smile. "She's a sweetheart." This comment seemed to ease the tensions a bit, but everyone was still on edge.

*Entering the bathroom, she scanned to check she was alone. Empty. Nobody can see my meltdown. Except for me. The music faded as she took her earbuds out, going over to the sink to splash her face. She pulled out the photo from earlier, staring. Just relax. Stop torturing yourself. You have a 'gift'.*

"Fuck it," she mumbled as she ripped the photo in half, letting the torn pieces fall to the floor.

*Just as she was about to leave, a flash of blue caught her attention – a butterfly fluttering through the small open window in the top-left hand corner. When a door closes, a window opens… Or, something like that. Cautiously, she tailed the winged creature, watching it settle on a bucket behind the stalls. Okay girl, you don't get a photo op like this every day…*

"Trust Max to take a photo now," Vanessa said with a melancholic tone. "She always was obsessed with that camera ever since we gave it to her."

"It was like an extra limb," Chloe confirmed.

*Slowly, she lined up the shot, snapping it before the butterfly had a chance to move. Almost as soon as she took the photo, the door to the bathroom creaked open. Hesitantly, she peered around the corner to see a blonde boy by the sink.*

"It's cool, Nathan… Don't stress…" he muttered to himself. "You're okay, bro. Just count to three… Don't be scared… You own this school… If I wanted to, I would blow it up… You're the Boss…"

Victoria frowned at the sight of Nathan, someone she considered a friend. She had never seen him look so stressed or sound so frightened before. Something was seriously wrong here.

*His mutterings were cut off when the door opened again, revealing a tall girl with blue hair.*

Chloe frowned at the screen as she saw herself enter the bathroom and begin to antagonistically taunt Nathan Prescott.

"You really are fearless, huh?" Rachel smirked, a smirk that soon disappeared when Nathan pulled out a gun and pointed it directly at Chloe, backing her up against the bathroom wall.
"Don't EVER tell me what to do. I'm so SICK of people trying to control me!" Nathan spat as he bashed his fist against the wall.

Chloe was trying to act tough, but anyone could see that she was so scared. "You are going to get in hella more trouble for this than drugs-"

He shook with rage. "Nobody would even miss your 'punk ass', would they?"

"Get that gun away from me, psycho!" Chloe shouted as she pushed Nathan away from her. As she did, a gunshot reverberated off the walls.

David's eyes narrowed at the sound, but other than that had no visible reaction. His military service had left some serious scars, mostly mental ones. Loud sounds could sometimes trigger the horrific memories, take him back. As shocked as she was, Joyce reached out to take his hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze.

"NO!" Max screamed as she jumped out from her hiding spot, hand outstretched.

Everything went blurry, slow motion. Chloe fell to the floor, a large red mark erupting from the point where the bullet had hit her stomach. The gun clattered to the floor as her body became limp. Then, patches of reds and oranges seeped around the seams, shadows of what had been faintly visible. Incoherent whispers and a whirring sound hung eerily in the silence.

This made everyone sit up to attention, watching the scene play in reverse. They all sat on the edges of their seats, waiting to see what would happen next.

Head snapping up, Max looked around frantically to see where she was. She was more than a little shocked to find herself back in the photography classroom. The clock read 3:50 P.M. the same as before.

Whoa! What the fuck…? How? How can that be? I was in the bathroom… He shot that poor girl… I held up my hand… and then I was back here. Mr. Jefferson was still droning on about… whatever. I already heard this lecture… not that I was really paying much attention the first time.

Taking a deep breath, she tried to calm her shattered nerves. Ok, Max. Play it cool. You need to keep it together. A piece of paper flying through the air, colliding with Kate's cheek caught her attention. Now Kate is being hassled again…

Expectant, she glanced over to Victoria, vaguely remembering that her phone had rung last time. If it does again… this is real. Sure enough, the phone began to vibrate on the desk, making Max jump and knock her camera on the floor with a loud crash. Shit! Man, I cannot believe this… Okay, if I'm crazy, I might as well go all the way… Can I actually reverse time?

Max discreetly held out her right hand, not really sure how to trigger this. Almost immediately, the scene began to unravel before her very eyes. The once smashed camera fixed itself and returned back onto her desk, good as new. She stared at it incredulously for a moment, then down at her hand. I did it… I actually did it! I'm a human time machine...

The room went deathly silent, everybody dumbfounded. Ryan and Vanessa Caulfield simply stared at the screen in utter disbelief. If all this was true, then there was little doubt it had something to do
with their daughter's sudden disappearance. David, who was usually stoic and expressionless, raised his eyebrows. Joyce opened her mouth to speak, but no matter how hard she tried she remained speechless.

Victoria tried to suppress her surprise, failing. Taylor and Courtney were whispering in hushed tones to one another. Rachel glanced over at Chloe, who had been uncharacteristically quiet for the past few minutes. It was very rare to find the blue-haired punk speechless; she always seemed to have a biting comment or sarcastic remark up her sleeve. Now though, she just sat there, trying to make some sense of the scene she had just witnessed.

Warren seemed almost impressed and clutched at Kate's arm excitedly. "Did you guys see that? Can you even begin to imagine what this will mean for all of us? This is amazing!"

"Are you sure?" Kate asked hesitantly, biting her lip.

He tilted his head curiously, not understanding. "What do you mean?"

She started playing with her cross again, rubbing it between her finger and thumb. "Is this really a good thing? Think about it. Sure, there may be the best of intentions behind using a power like that, but it doesn't mean that it is without its consequences. You can't play around with something like that without paying a price. It just seems really dangerous to me."

"I'm tempted to agree," a soft-spoken voice echoed from behind them.

They all turned to see someone leaning against the wall, hidden in the shadows. The figure took a step towards the group. She was wearing a simple combination of blue jeans, a green and gray hoodie with a black top. The hood was up, shadowing her face. It didn't help much, but it was clear to some who this was. Ryan and Vanessa Caulfield stood up abruptly and stared at the girl, their faces softening.

"Max…"

Chloe swiveled her head around, eyes falling on her old friend. So many different emotions surged through her at that moment: anger, relief, joy, and fear all at once. She wasn't sure how to react or what to say right now, so she just stared at Max.

The once missing girl took in all the confused faces, the people she cared for and those she needed to help at all costs… before it was too late. Finally, her tired blue eyes met Chloe's. Understandably, she looked as if she had seen a ghost. Maybe one day, that was all she would be…

Max offered the group a tired smile. "Did you miss me?"

Chapter End Notes

Just where has Max been and what has she been doing? Stay tuned to find out.
Chrysalis, Part 2

Welcome back, everyone. We hope you’re all doing well. Here's the next chapter.

Chapter Two: Chrysalis, Part 2

Chloe almost couldn't believe her eyes. After five years of radio silence there she was. The girl she used to call her best friend, the one person she thought she could trust in this messed up world, the elusive ghost that had mercilessly haunted her… Max Caulfield.

Both distance and time had separated them, although the way Max's eyes zeroed in on her, you'd think the last five years hadn't happened. They said the eyes were the window to the soul. If that was the case, then Chloe worried at what the world had done to her in the time they had been apart.

To the untrained eye, Max wouldn't seem any different from the introverted teen they'd seen so far on the screen. Chloe, however, saw beyond this. The hesitant glint in her gentle doe-like eyes had long since gone, now replaced with a piercing intensity unlike any the bluenette had ever seen before. Her once watery blue irises were now hard as steel with a resolve not seen in most people… least of all the Max Caulfield she had grown up with.

This was not the only observable difference. Max carried herself with more confidence, her shoulders no longer hunched over in submission, head held high. Her features were sharper and more defined, the loss of softness in her face making her seem much older. There were dark circles under her ice blue eyes, much too prominent to have simply been the product of the average student's abysmal sleep schedule. This was on an entirely different level. Even the aura surrounding Max had changed considerably.

Chloe sat there dazed, not knowing how to react. The same, however, could not be said for Max's parents. After the initial shock passed, their faces were overcome with relief. They moved with almost inhuman speed towards her, drawing her into a bone crushing hug.

Blue eyes widened slightly at their sudden pouncing, flickering with brief melancholy. Just as it began to look like Ryan and Vanessa Caulfield would never let their daughter go, they slowly disengaged, wiping away the tears. An unspoken question hung in the heavy silence, filling the room as all eyes focused on Max…

Where had she been all this time?

"It took some time figuring out how to go about this," she began, gesturing to the now blank screen. "Not to mention the precise mechanics of how to make it work."

The way Max was speaking right now, so calm in the face of this bizarre situation, astounded the group. Her eyes scanned the familiar faces, the people she'd come to know as friends… or – in the case of the Vortex Club gang and David – at least managed to pacify. Everybody gathered in that room was tied together by one week which never happened… for all but Max. If nothing changed, she would be doomed to repeat it, maybe for eternity.
Not if she had something to do about it. You didn't give Max Caulfield time powers, play her like a fiddle and not expect retribution.

She had come too far, lost too much to submit to so-called 'fate and destiny' now. With each passing day, her resolve to deny the universe only strengthened. The point of no return – no room for half-heartedness or second thoughts. All or nothing, struggling against her constraints to the bitter end, no matter the outcome. Whether she succeeded or not would be a question of time.

And she had all the time in the world at her fingertips.

Striding to the front of the room, she got a better look at everyone. Some of the group already knew her… to an extent. After changing so much, she had to wonder if anyone could really claim they understood her anymore. Others had never met her before, at least as far as they were concerned. There was only one person Max had never met personally. The pretty blonde girl with hazel eyes sat next to Chloe… Rachel Amber.

The girl in question shifted uncomfortably under Max's piercing gaze. There was something very different about the brunette compared to her on screen counterpart, something missing. She couldn't quite put her finger on it but she knew it had something to do with her newly discovered power.

Max was never supposed to have met Rachel, yet here she was sat in front of her as real as any of them with no clue of her dismal future… a future that would change by the time she was done. The very fact that they were in the same room now had to be a good sign.

"It's good to finally meet you in person, Rachel," Max offered in greeting. "After hearing so much about you from… practically everyone at Blackwell."

Rachel had been the keystone, Arcadia Bay and its residence firmly connected to her. If Max didn't know better, she would've been in awe at how one girl could decide the fates of everyone around her. Wincing at the thought, she considered everything she herself had changed and all the people she may have doomed. However, she couldn't linger on this for too long. If she did, the guilt would consume her and there would be nothing stopping the cruel 'fate' that awaited them all.

"I suppose you are all wondering why I invited you here," Max postulated as she spoke to her mostly captive audience. "This will become clear in time."

"Wait," Victoria brashly interrupted. "You're not going to tell us now?"

"Not yet, no."

Victoria rolled her eyes and scoffed. "And why the fuck not?"

"Because it won't make sense and you won't believe me," Max curtly replied, her patience being tested by the Queen Bee's contempt. "Also, it's taken a lot of my time and effort to set this all up... I don't like wasting time." Victoria leaned back in her chair, mumbling under her breath. Max ignored her and pressed on. "Your questions will be answered in due course, at least the ones I know the answers to. All I ask of you is to go into this with an open mind."

Warren tilted his head to the side, really examining the brunette. "So, does that mean you really can time travel?" His voice held a hint of excitement at the prospect.

Max grinned at this, shaking her head at his predictable question. "Trust you of all people to ask that, Warren. I suppose you'll have to wait and see."
He seemed disheartened at the reluctance to neither confirm nor deny the existence of her time travel powers, yet still felt hopeful they were real. She hadn't outright shot him down, so there was a chance.

"I think it's only fair I warn you." Max's face turned serious in this moment, her eyes pleading with them to listen. "Some of the things you are about to witness will not be pleasant, but I assure you that every single last thing you see is necessary. I wouldn't be showing you otherwise," she paused, her voice becoming quieter as she uttered the next few words. "So, no matter how intense things get, I need you all to stay focused. The fewer interruptions, the better."

With that, she closed her eyes and concentrated, the screen flickering to life again. "I'll explain how it works later," Max mentioned before anyone could question her. "Just pay close attention." She walked down the stage stairs and joined Chloe, Rachel, Kate, and Warren on their row. "Let me concentrate."

She smiled as the footage began to roll again. Chloe noticed the strain in her features again, her breathing becoming labored and hands shaking. Something wasn't quite right about Max, but she suspected it would be pointless to question. The bluenette bit her tongue, deciding to keep an eye on her. Soon, the young time traveler's face relaxed and the strange film resumed.

Max glanced down at her camera as Mr. Jefferson droned on, repeating himself. "When I took my selfie, Jefferson asked me a question. If he does again, I'll know this is for real. Taking her camera with quivering fingers, the flash of bright light indicated her photo taking.

Just as before, he caught her in the act. "Shh, I believe Max has taken what you kids call a 'selfie'... A dumb word for a wonderful photographic tradition. And Max... has a gift."

The brunette grimaced at the wording. That word could quite easily be used to describe her power, not just her photography skill. Still, it would be foolish to suggest her powers were a 'gift'. It wasn't that simple. The rewind was a double-edged sword, both helping and hurting. Was the help it provided worth the hurt?

*I know I'm not dreaming this. It's real. I can tell. So I can go back in time... Carefully placing her camera on the desk, she tried to wrap her head around this as Mr. Jefferson continued his pretentious monologue. What if that girl isn't dead yet? Can I save her? I need to go to the bathroom quickly and check it out!"

At this point, he turned to her again. "Now Max, since you've captured our interest and clearly want to join the conversation, can you please tell us the name of the process that gave birth to the first self-portraits?"

*What was it Victoria said? Think, Max. " The Daguerreian Process. Invented by a French painter named... Louis Daguerre. Around 1830," she stammered, very conscious of the insistent ticking of the clock – her entire body vibrating with nerves. Panicking is so not going to help me now... or that girl. I just need to get my ass out of here as soon as that bell rings.*

Seeming pleased enough by her answer – not that Max really cared about his praise now – he beamed at her. "Somebody has been reading as well as posing. Nice work, Max."

In sync, the Victoria on the screen and in the room scoffed and glared at Max. It was almost comedic to watch. "You really don't know anything, do you?"
The shorter girl's lip quirked into a haunting smile, blue eyes staring directly into Victoria's soul. "Don't I?"

Her hushed tone was unnerving, sending a collective shiver down everybody's spines. Max knew things nobody should, had a power no mortal should possess – the power over life and death. She could tear the universe apart at the seams if she so wished… maybe she already had.

"The Daguerreian Process made portraiture hugely popular, mainly because it gave the subjects clear defined features," Mr. Jefferson continued. "You can learn more when you actually finish reading the assigned chapters. Max is so far, way ahead of everybody."

Max's teeth gritted at this statement, eyes falling on the man who had fucked everything up. "False flattery will get you nowhere," she muttered under her breath.

His praise really set her teeth on edge, brought forward the feelings of intense hatred. The newly realized predatory glint in his eyes didn't help with that. It was all his fault that she had to play this infuriating waiting game. He was the reason she kept pushing her body to the limit and beyond.

The bell rang ominously as he repeated his spiel about the 'Everyday Heroes' contest. Eager to leave, she threw everything into her bag, paying him no attention. Max, you are not crazy. You are not dreaming. It's time to be an everyday hero. Briefly glancing at Victoria, who was kissing up to Mr. Jefferson again, she all but sprinted towards the door.

"Max," he called out, but she decided to ignore him, feeling a slight pang of guilt. Sorry, Mr. Jefferson. Someone's life is at stake.

Briefly glancing at Victoria, who was kissing up to Mr. Jefferson again, she all but sprinted towards the door.

"Max," he called out, but she decided to ignore him, feeling a slight pang of guilt. Sorry, Mr. Jefferson. Someone's life is at stake.

Max almost had to laugh at the undeserved apology. The fact that she once saw this bastard as her role model made her sick to her stomach. She should've seen it before; it was so obvious to her now. All she could do now was fix everything… or at least try to.

"Damn, Max," Rachel grinned in amusement. "Way to kick him to the curb."

Chloe looked over at her appreciatively. "I'm hella glad you did."

Bursting into the corridor, she shoved her way through the oncoming crowd. Some of the grunted as she bashed into them, others insulted her, but it didn't matter. All that mattered now was saving someone's life. *I hope I have enough time to get to the bathroom… please… please… I can't tell anybody… they'll think I'm crazy!* Shoulder shoving her way into the bathroom, she panted lightly.

"Wow, Max," Rachel chuckled. "You are so out of shape."

"Can't really say that anymore," Max answered with a shrug. "Granted, you could never tell."

*Okay, Max, retrace every step*… She made her way over to the sink and turned the tap on. *I washed my face*… Splashing some of the cold water over her face, she took out her entry for the 'Everyday Heroes' contest. *I shredded my photo*… The two halves of the newly ripped photo fluttered to the floor, eyes turning expectantly to the window. *Then the… butterfly flew in*… On cue, the small blue butterfly flew in and settled on the bucket behind the last stall. Max walked over to it, crouching down, camera poised. *And I took a photo*…

Steadying her shaking hands, she took the photo. Next, she tried to find a way to prevent the
horrible fate she had seen already. Nathan paced across the room, muttering to himself. As Chloe stormed in demanding money, something caught Max's attention… the red fire alarm on the wall.

**Bingo. Now I just have to break the glass and set it off.** Under the cleaning cart was a hammer. Grabbing it, she smashed the glass and slammed her hand on it. A high-pitched droning alarm pierced the air.

"No way…" Nathan's eyes darted around the room, recoiling as Chloe kneed him in the balls and shoved him to the floor.

Chloe couldn't help but smirk at this. He deserved way worse for what he'd done to her, but this was a good start.

"Look at you go," Rachel whispered as she nudged Chloe with her elbow, attempting to lighten the mood. "How come I've never seen those smooth moves before?"

"Don't EVER touch me again, freak!" she shouted as she left the bathroom.

Nathan rolled around on the floor, his foot brushing the torn-up photo. Grabbing his gun, he sighed in exasperation. "Another shitty day…"

Peering around the stall as he made a quick getaway, Max stared in disbelief. _That did not happen! This cannot be real! I just saw a girl get shot and then saved her! What the fuck is going on? Do. Not. Freak. Out._ Not wanting to stay here any longer than she had to, she cautiously stepped out of the bathroom.

"Hey," a mustached Blackwell Security guard grunted, making her jump. "Do you hear that fire alarm? That means you should be outside."

David's brow furrowed as he watched the confrontation. His suspicious nature might help him uncover secrets but it also led to a lot of dead ends. A waste of time that could be put to better use. If all this was true, Max had saved his step-daughter – someone he really did care for, as much as his actions might suggest otherwise. He'd done a lot of things he wasn't proud of, especially since returning home. Maybe this experience would be the eye opener he needed.

Max looked down at her feet and timidly replied, "I had to use the bathroom…"

David exhaled deeply and shook his head. "Girls always use that excuse."

"Excuse for what?"

He squared his shoulders confrontationally. "For whatever you're up to. Your face is covered in guilt."

"The alarm tripped me out," Max defended weakly, only making herself sound guiltier.

"Then trip on out of here, Missy." He took a threatening step towards her. "Or are you hiding something? Huh?"

"Thank you, Mr. Madsen," a commanding voice to the left of them called out, belonging to a large, bald suited man – Principal Wells. "The situation is under control. There's no
emergency here. Leave Miss Caulfield alone and please turn off that alarm, since that's your job."

Scowling, David pushed his way into the bathroom. Max relaxed once he left, turning to leave, but Principal Wells wasn't quite done with her yet. "You look a little stressed out. Are you okay?"

The brunette swallowed nervously, shuffling her feet. "I'm... I'm just a little worried about my... future."

The Max in the room actually snorted at that. She had always been such a bad liar. Good thing she never actually needed to lie to save herself… well, not before she got her power.

He didn't appear to believe her. "You're sweating pinballs. Is that all you're really thinking about? You can always be upfront with me, Max," he paused, eyes narrowing suspiciously. "Or have you done something wrong... Is that it? Well, Max? Talk to me."

Suddenly, the screen became blurred and hazy, words appearing at the bottom: REPORT NATHAN and HIDE THE TRUTH.

"This next part is important," Max stated, closing her eyes. "You have a choice. While you may see the short-term outcomes of each decision, you can only move forward with one. Choose wisely and quickly. There will be several major decisions and each of you can vote." Her eyes opened, scanning the group. "And one more thing... every choice has consequences."

They looked at one another in confusion, then back to the screen.

A smirk danced across Max's face. "I think I can guess the choices for the grown-ups in the room, but in the interests of fairness, they can have their say as well."

Chloe was the first to speak up. "That bastard is going down." Her jaw clenched, hands balling up into fists. For her show of understandable anger, everyone could tell she was shaken up. Anybody would be after seeing themselves get shot.

"So, one vote for report, then," Max muttered to herself, knowing that later the Chloe on screen would tease her over this decision. It was kind of ironic, really.

Rachel glanced over to the bluenette, her face hardening. "I vote report, too."

That made sense. She was more curious to see how the others would vote, Victoria in particular. Didn't take long to find out.

"No brainer for me, hide the truth," Victoria offhandedly commented. Nathan was her friend after all, so it was logical that she would vote this way. Taylor and Courtney glanced at one another, seemingly reluctant to back her up on this. Eventually, they nodded too.

"You are such a bitch," Chloe growled. "How the fuck can you say that after seeing...?" she paused, unwilling to vocalize the fact she had just been shot.

The blonde turned away, crossing her arms. "I don't have to justify myself to you. If you don't like it, tough. It's not going to change anything."

"Three votes for hiding the truth," Max asserted as Chloe frowned, muttering under her breath.
Warren was the next to speak up. "If you report him, do you get in trouble?"

Max snorted indelicately. "I really couldn't care less if I did or not by this point. Sure, it causes trouble with Nathan later, but nothing I can't handle. If it's any consolation, either way I'm pretty screwed. Regardless of what I say here, Wells doesn't believe me, so don't even factor that into your decision. It's the long-term effects of decisions you want to be considering."

He seemed embarrassed for even having asked, scratching his head. "I guess report then."

"I don't think you need to really ask me what I'm voting for," Joyce breathed, still in shock. No parent wanted to see their child get hurt, especially not as severely as Chloe had been.

David grunted in agreement. He was certainly a man of few words, but Max knew he really cared for Chloe, something the rest of the group may see later.

"Two more for report." Then, she turned to her parents. "I imagine you'll be voting report too."

They nodded, not saying a word.

"While it seems to be a bit redundant now, I would like to vote report too," Kate timidly decided.

"Every vote is important, especially yours," Max reassured, smiling warmly. After everything Kate had been through in another timeline, her voice was one of the most important. Part of her wanted to spare the shy blonde all the gruesome details… but she had to show it. "I think we can safely say that report won."

Max recalled what she had seen, minus the shooting and crazy rewind powers. Unfortunately, Wells was skeptical of her story – giving her some bullshit about how distinguished Nathan's family was and how he was one of Blackwell's most honored students. "This is... a serious charge. I'll look into the matter personally. Thank you for bringing it to my attention."

"Well, why am I not surprised?" Chloe huffed, leaning back in her chair and crossing her arms. "And then people wonder why no-one says anything when shit like this goes down."

Slowly, Rachel shook her head. "We all knew this would happen. It seems the only way to get anything done in Arcadia is to do it yourself."

"It certainly is," Max confirmed bitterly, "and that's not even the best part. Wells sends a text to my mom basically calling me a liar… and I receive a sudden increase in not-so-anonymous text threats from Nathan and his father." Her blue eyes hardened to steel. "By the end of the week, I had no sympathy left for any of them."

There had been no reason for Wells to really doubt her. She wasn't a trouble maker, unlike Nathan. While her GPA wasn't perfect by a long shot, she worked hard to get things done. Her lack of confidence made contributing to class discussions difficult, but it didn't mean she was a bad student. The only reason for Well's dismissal had been one of greed.

Ryan Caulfield's face darkened at this knowledge. "Wells seemed like a decent man when we first met him."

"Money talks," Max sighed deeply. "Simple as that. It's always the same."

Vanessa wondered when her daughter had turned so cynical, no longer the sweet innocent child she used to be. Life wasn't fair, and she knew Max would learn that one day, but… not like this.
Warren, much like Chloe and Rachel, had expected the worst. He'd already heard about the Prescott's reputation, so the outcome didn't really surprise him.

"You don't know anything about Nathan," Victoria interjected heatedly. "Don't talk as if you know him, because you really don't."

"Oh." Max tilted her head curiously. "And you think you do?"

"I know more than a lame hipster like you," she hissed.

The brunette's expression turned to one of twisted amusement. "If you say so."

Kate had been very quiet during the entire exchange. For some reason, she had a very bad unshakable feeling – partly due to the way Max kept looking at her, her eyes both sympathetic and troubled. This experience wouldn't be pleasant, that much she could deduce.

Max was astounded by Wells trivializing her harsh claims. *I saw Nathan shoot that poor girl, but I can't tell Principal Wells that. He'll think I'm lying, or that I'm completely crazy… or both. It's not like I have any proof. Even if I did, I doubt he'd believe me just like that. The Prescotts pretty much own Arcadia.*

"Not for long."

Max muttered under her breath. "At least, not if I have anything to say about it."

What Nathan had done was unforgivable, however unwilling or manipulated his participation. Whether he meant it or not, his actions had grave consequences.

"That's it?" Max asked in a state of disbelief and exasperation. "After what I told you-"

"We'll continue this discussion, later, in my office," Wells abruptly interrupted, no longer willing to entertain her accusations. "Please go outside with the rest of your class now, Miss Caulfield."

"What a complete dick," Chloe scoffed bitterly. "I'm almost glad I was kicked out of Blackhell."

Rachel sighed deeply. "His refusal to acknowledge this is almost funny. You, me, hell anyone other than Nathan, would've been in deep shit."

"Can't say I'm surprised," Warren commented, slumping back in this chair. He'd been expecting this, didn't mean he wasn't disappointed about being right.

The adults in the room were understandably appalled by Wells' blatant lack of professionalism in this situation.

Victoria was uncharacteristically quiet, uncertain what to make of this bizarre situation. She was still convinced this was some ill-conceived joke, although admittedly it would be a tough prank to pull off. Still, they only had Max's word, no hard evidence. Taylor and Courtney also remained silent, exchanging worried glances.

Kate shuffled in her seat as she watched the scene. While she liked to believe the best in everyone, it was difficult in these situations. She hoped that Wells would take Max's accusations seriously, but she wasn't confident given his initial reaction.

**Conceding her point under Wells' stern stare, Max realized the discussion was over… maybe forever. Of course this academic drone won't do anything since the Prescott family owns Blackwell now. Should I rewind and change my story?**
"Like I said before," Max interjected, momentarily pausing the film, "the short-term outcomes are pretty much the same for this decision. Unless you want to change it, there's no point watching the other choice." When no-one spoke up, she once again focused on the screen, causing it to resume.

Giving up, she carried on to the campus grounds, still shaken up from the last half an hour or so. So much for fitting in… She sighed wearily, dragging her feet down the steps onto the well-travelled concrete path. I should lay low for a while and hope that Nathan doesn't hear that it was me who reported him. Who knows what he'll do to me if he finds out?

A booming electronic voice echoed around the campus. "Would Nathan Prescott please come to the front office. Thank you."

Warren winced at the announcement. "Ooooh, that's not the way to go about that. Not at all."

"Does he want you to end up in hospital?" Rachel remarked, shaking her head at just how oblivious some people could be.

Max let out a short laugh. "I did have to wonder that myself."

On her way back to the dorm building, Max struck up a few conversations with those lounging around in the sun. Most of it was useless chatter, however there seemed to be a common thread… Rachel Amber. These opinions ranged from adoration to scandal, the most serious being gossip about her having sex with Mark Jefferson, at least according to Stella's questionable sources.

Rachel snorted at this. "People sure do love to gossip in Arcadia." Her eyes wandered over to Victoria, accusing. "I'm sure I have no idea who started that particular rumor."

The short haired blonde shrugged. "If I had said it, then it wouldn't be a rumor. It would have been the blatant truth." She narrowed her eyes confrontationally at Rachel and hissed, "Best kind of rumors always have a core of truth to them."

Chloe shot up from her chair, body practically vibrating with rage as she snarled. "I've had just about fucking enough of you."

"Oh, I'm so scared," Victoria sneered tauntingly, also standing up to prepare herself for a fight.

Before either of them had the chance to advance, they found themselves completely frozen to the spot. The rest of the group looked on in confusion at the pair. Rachel seemed mildly amused at the sudden turn of events as opposed to worried. Taylor and Courtney began freaking out, rushing over to Victoria to see if she was okay. Warren's eyes almost popped out of his head, jaw dropping. Kate's brow furrowed in concern for both Chloe and Victoria.

David's jaw tightened, but otherwise his expression didn't change. Joyce's eyebrows shot up as she saw her daughter standing there, unmoving. Vanessa and Ryan glanced over at their daughter, who on the surface appeared calm and collected. Underneath her exterior, she was extremely tense and even angry at how this situation had played out. While Max had anticipated some hostility between Victoria and Chloe, she had hoped they would behave in a civil manner under these strange circumstances. It would seem she had overestimated them.

"That is enough," Max spoke through gritted teeth, a dull throbbing entering her head. "I didn't want to have to waste my energy on petty fights, but it seems I have little choice."

She was sick of this; sick and tired of always having to play the mediator. Her time power had
affected her patience, but could anyone blame her? For all she knew, she was living on borrowed time. If that was the case, then she was determined to put it to good use… unlike before.

Warren's eyes widened in awe as he switched between the two frozen girls. He got up from his chair and, after quickly opting to approach Chloe, stood in front of her, waving his hand in front of her face. When she didn't react, he looked over his shoulder to Max, sounding equal parts scared and impressed. "What did you do?"

"Well, I guess I can't be cryptic about it now. I've had enough time to… hone certain abilities. With a bit of practice, I've managed to pause specific parts of time I want, within reason anyway. It's still a work in progress of course. That's what you're seeing now." She motioned towards Chloe and Victoria fixed to the spot, standing up. "Help me get them back in their seats."

Taking a step forward she swayed, head feeling hazy. Grabbing onto the back of the nearest chair to steady herself, she placed a hand to her forehead. This dizziness had been a constant, each time more forceful. Thankfully, Chloe and Victoria's state provided a distraction for the group. Clearing her mind and taking a deep shaky breath, she went to help the others. While these episodes worried her, she had more important things to think about right now.

When the girls had been returned to their seats, Max unfroze them – head pounding from her power usage. No matter how much she seemed to practice, there was always a limit… one she kept trying to push. Finally gaining consciousness, the once frozen pair looked around in confusion.

"What just happened?" Chloe asked, her words slightly slurred as she rubbed her face. "I feel… weird."

Victoria scowled weakly, still groggy from the aftermath of Max's intervention, words coming out in starts and stops. "What the hell... did you just... do to me?"

The brunette rubbed her temples to alleviate the throbbing. "Please refrain from fighting with one another. I don't have much energy to spare on petty matters."

Rachel filled Chloe in on the last few minutes, while Taylor and Courtney explained to Victoria.

"Now, if there are no further disruptions we can continue this," Max commented, shooting both Chloe and Victoria a brief reprimanding glare.

"Sorry," Chloe mumbled, sad puppy dog eyes averted from the stern gaze.

"It's fine, Chloe. Just… try to make this easy for me, okay?" The bluenette's resigned tone inspired a pang of guilt. She didn't want to be made with Chloe, not after everything they had and would go through.

"Yeah," Chloe breathed, getting settled again. As expected, Victoria said nothing, simply glaring at Max as she straightened herself out.

Whatever happened, the young time traveler had to make it through this. Push regardless of her deteriorating condition. Nothing could stop her now. Hopefully, her body would comply with that mental determination. As time passed, the constricting limitations became more prevalent. From minor headaches and the odd nose bleed to unconsciousness, intense emotional distress and much more. Her mind was a total mess, only getting more warped.

While Max had no clue what her future held, she did know one thing. She had to finish this, for the sake of everyone sat in this room and for her own peace of mind. She had started all this and she would be the one to end it all… no matter the cost.
Chapter Three: Chrysalis, Part 3

Now everyone was settled after Max's power display, she once again resumed the film.

Max continued towards the Prescott Dormitory, stopping for a brief chat with her fellow students. Kate, who was sat on a bench, didn't have much to say for herself.

As Kate watched herself shut Max down, she frowned. Judging by her closed off posture and general aura of exhaustion, something serious was going on. This gloomy attitude just wasn't like her at all. While she had bad days like everyone else, this was on a completely different level.

Finally making it to the dorm, she was blocked by Victoria, Taylor, and Courtney, who were lounging around on the steps.

"Oh, this should be good," Rachel remarked wryly while glancing over at Victoria, who merely scoffed in irritation.

"I'm personally hoping to hear some more cringe worthy phrases," Chloe snickered, much to the blonde's obvious disgust.

"You had better watch your step, Price," Victoria threatened menacingly.

"I am practically quivering in my boots," Chloe teased, placing her hands behind her head as she leaned back in her seat, evidently not afraid of her.

They seemed to have recovered from their time freezing incident. Max had practiced using her newly developed power on actual people a handful of times, so it was refreshing to see them back to their old selves. Maybe things were starting to go her way for a change.

"Oh look, it's Max Caulfield, the selfie ho of Blackwell," Victoria sneered tauntingly, shuffling off the step and slowly circling her. "What a lame gimmick. Even Mark -Mr. Jefferson- falls for your waif hipster bullshit. 'The Daguerreian Process, Sir!' You could barely even say that. I guess you got your meds filled." Taylor and Courtney laughed on cue as she sat back down on the step. "Since you know all the answers, I guess you have to find another way into the dorm. We ain't moving."

Still needing to get into the dorm, Max stood there clutching her arm.

"Oh wait, hold that pose." Victoria snapped a picture on her phone, smirking. "So original. Don't worry, Max, I'll put a vintage filter on it right before I post it all over social medias. Now, why don't you go fuck your selfie?"

Chloe and Rachel exchanged brief glances before bursting out into an uncontrolled fit of laughter.

"Victoria, not to interrupt the whole Queen Bee vibe you've got going for yourself, but maybe you shouldn't piss off a time traveler?" Warren said sardonically. "Just for future reference."

Kate nodded in agreement, a small smile tugging at the corner of her lips. "That would be good advice to pay heed to."
The adults in the room gave Victoria a disapproving side-ways glance, while Taylor and Courtney sat there trying to gauge how they should be reacting to this. Victoria scowled angrily, her icy glare lingering on Chloe and Rachel for a fraction longer than the others.

Chloe stuck her tongue out, while Rachel tauntingly blew her a kiss and smirked, knowing full well that it would piss her off. Had it not been for Max's earlier display, she would have torn into them. Instead, she sighed in exasperation, muttering under her breath.

**Max's eyes flashed vindictively. Oh yes Victoria, I'll get your bony ass out of my way.**

Max allowed herself a victory smirk, leaning forward and steepling her fingers in front of her. As much as she didn't like to admit it, this particular scene was quite satisfying to relive.

*Her gaze fell on the sprinklers dotted around campus, a plan forming. I could crank the sprinkler up and give Victoria and her clones incentive to beat it… It took her a few attempts to move Victoria, involving the sprinklers and a tampered paint can. With some manipulation, the self-proclaimed Queen Bee was covered in paint.*

"No way! No fucking way!" she screeched, stepping back away.

Chloe broke out into a wide grin, lightly punching the young time traveler's arm. "Holy shit, Max. That was hella awesome."

Rachel sat back in her seat, a smug expression on her face. "I guess Karma does exist."

"Only when people make it so," Chloe smirked in agreement.

Max shrugged. "Seemed like a good idea at the time."

Warren smiled at the freakout, unable to feel too sorry for her. She kinda deserved it for mercilessly bullying people like Max and Kate. The shy blonde took no pleasure from seeing Victoria covered in pain, but she was glad Max found a way to move her. Getting bullied was horrible; she knew that from experience. She didn't advocate revenge, as much as this small action felt like justice.

The adults in the room remained silent, Max's parents giving her a conflicted look. They didn't enjoy seeing their daughter being subjected to this kind of treatment, especially in an environment where she should feel safe.

Taylor and Courtney stare agape, Victoria's silent disbelief turning to rage aimed at the brunette. "You will regret that, Caulfield. Mark my words."

Smirking at the laughable threats, Max shrugged. "I'd like to see you try, actually. It might be fun, for me at least. Not so much for you."

If she chose, she could do terrible things with her powers – ruin the lives of every single person on this earth with a single hand gesture. The fact that Victoria thought she stood any chance against her was almost hilarious.

Speechless, the blonde narrowed her eyes. Her threats were a knee jerk reaction to any challenge to her authority. With Max as an opponent, she was grossly outmatched, well out of her depth. Some battles weren't worth fighting.

"You know Max, you can be pretty scary when you want to be," Rachel observed, casually
brushing her long blonde hair over her shoulder. "It's not every day that one bests the Queen."

"She's hardly done that," Victoria snorted.

"Uh-huh," Rachel grinned knowingly.

From what she'd heard, Rachel Amber was as close to perfection as you could get – talented, intelligent, pretty, socially adaptable and so much more. She could be whoever you wanted her to be. In the space of one five-minute conversation, she could make you feel as if you knew her intimately. At the same time, she was a real enigma.

In that sense, Max didn't envy her. All those expectations were a heavy burden, yet she appeared to meet them with ease. Victoria also pretended she was someone else for the sake of others. She must be jealous of how easy Rachel made it all look, hence the hostility. It was almost surprising how deep Victoria's hatred and jealousy seemed to run.

Through her time travel adventures, Max knew Rachel was far from flawless. It wasn't her job to be, either. Trying to be perfect had led to her downfall. In a way, the blonde was the catalyst for everything.

Shooing Samuel away as her minions went to fetch some towels, Victoria returned to the steps. Max watched from a short distance, smiling to herself.

"I am dying to see how this plays out," Chloe chortled, rubbing her hands together with anticipation.

Wincing at the phrasing, Max's mind filled with all the close calls. While she had managed to save Chloe, she still remembered all the failed attempts. There was no way she could ever forget the piercing gunshots, desperate pleas for help, the flash of fear in her blue eyes and the blood… so much blood…

"Uh… hey, Victoria…" Max stuttered, cautiously taking a step towards the sulking blonde.

Hearing footsteps, she lifted her head and scowled. "What do you want, Max?"

Once again, the screen froze and two options appeared: MAKE FUN OF and COMFORT.

"It's decision time again," Max said, trying to even out her breathing before anyone else noticed how draining this was for her.

Rachel said nothing, her eyes narrowing slightly. For the first time, she wondered just how much Max was risking now. Max herself had mentioned that everything had consequences. Logically, the larger the risk, the harsher the repercussions.

Smirking evilly, Chloe turned to Victoria. "Well, well how the tables have turned. This one is hella obvious. Make fun of without a doubt."

"Fuck you, Price," she growled threateningly.

"Payback's a bitch," the bluenette replied, not even bothering to hide the smug satisfaction.

Max clenched her teeth, their persistent arguing not helping the mind crushing throbbing in her head. "Can you guys please stop it for more than five seconds? Seriously, we need to get this moving and you are not helping."
"Anything you say, Mad Max." Chloe shrugged, leaning back in her seat.

Chloe Price being compliant was a novel concept. Normally, she rebelled at every given opportunity. Whatever the reason, Max wasn't about to call her out. Anything for a smooth run.

"Comfort, of course. That's my vote," Victoria huffed with Taylor and Courtney nodding in agreement.

As before, Rachel followed Chloe's vote. Warren was up next, sheepishly joining them on the make fun of bandwagon.

Kate shook things up, adding her own vote for comfort. "She's been punished enough," was her simple reasoning. The morbid irony…

"Alright, adults next," the brunette muttered to herself.

Unsurprisingly, they all sided with Kate. However cruel the behavior, they couldn't condone further bullying. Before all of this, Max's moral compass had been unwavering too. Being forced to make one morally obscure question after another had drastically altered her perception of 'right' and 'wrong'.

"I guess that means comfort has won. Only just, though," Max commented, feeling slightly disappointed by the outcome.

Before she could continue, Chloe deployed her infamous pleading puppy dog eyed look. "Wait, Max. Can we see the make fun of option anyway, just once? Pretty please."

The request did not sit well with Victoria, her head snapping around to face the bluenette. "Um… excuse you?"

Considering it for a moment, she couldn't deny the appeal. After much deliberation, she shrugged. "I don't see why not. I'll do that one first so I only have to rewind it once."

Victoria's jaw dropped. "Are you being fucking serious right now?"

"Thanks, Max. I owe you one." Chloe grinned gleefully. Seeing her happy after everything was more than worth the pain she was about to endure.

"You already do," Max remarked as the image on screen started up again.

Victoria's shoulders hunched, anticipating the return of earlier mockery. "Don't… Don't say a word, Max."

Blue eyes flickered with amusement as she mimicked the blonde. "Oh wait, hold that pose!" Max snapped a shot of her looking downright pathetic, white paint splattered over her clothes, skin, and hair. "And no filter needed before I post this. Now please move. I've had a messed up day and I'm going to my room."

Reluctantly, she shuffled aside. "You do that… I know where you live… So does Nathan…"

The brunette's glare turned icy. "Fair warning. Threaten me and mine in this timeline? You'll find that my supply of mercy is almost used up."

With the way now clear, Max began to climb the steps towards the dorm, glancing over her shoulder. *Maybe I shouldn't have done that… Now I have to get to my room, then see Warren.*
Chloe smirked contently, satisfied by the outcome. "Totally worth it."

Smiling, Max started to rewind. There was more resistance than before, the screen flickering. Just when it felt like her mind was about to explode she stopped on the decision screen. It was getting harder to concentrate, her right arm warm and tingly. Ignoring it, she now chose the comfort option.

Hesitantly, Max shuffled closer to her. "I am sorry. That's an awesome cashmere coat…"

Shock by the lack of teasing, Victoria's eyes narrowed skeptically. "It was. But there will be another."

An awkward silence hung between them, both uncertain of the other's agenda. "Well, you always seem to know how to pick the right outfits."

Victoria regarded the brunette with mild disdain – as if this was the most commonly known fact. "I do have some talent. Mr. Jefferson told me-"

"I've seen your pictures," Max interrupted. "You have a great eye, Richard Avedon-esque."

Expression conflicted – both annoyed by the disruption and confused by the praise – she stared at the shorter girl, suspicious. After a tense few seconds, her face and voice softened. "He's one of my heroes… Thank, Max."

"It appears that the Queen Bitch of Blackwell can be tamed," Rachel wryly commented, only loud enough for those within a foot radius to hear.

"I have to hand it to you, Max," Chloe whispered, impressed. "We all thought it was impossible."

"I have a knack for performing the seemingly impossible, especially recently," Max muttered under her breath, looking down at her right hand.

The vulnerability dissipated as soon as it had arrived. "I hope those sluts get me a towel before they hang a sign on me." Tapping her foot impatiently, Victoria took out her phone. "You deserve a better shot. Sorry about blocking you and… and the 'go fuck your selfie.'"

Stifled laughter came from where Rachel and Chloe were sat, earning them an irritated eye roll.

"That was mean… but pretty funny," Max admitted with a smile.

Sighing, Victoria rested her chin on her hand. "Just one of those days, you know?"

"I know exactly what you mean, Victoria. I'll see you later."

"Au revoir," she muttered as she moved out of the way.

"You actually do use the French thing very well," Max commented.

Victoria shrugged. "Practice."

Her parents had insisted that she learn some French, if nothing else, in preparation to continue the 'Chase Legacy'. Had it not been forced on her, she might have accepted it. Nathan was the only other person who understood high familial expectations, which was why she defended him so fiercely.
Victoria probably played me. I should have played her… Better get to my room before I find Warren. Confrontation resolved, Max climbed the stairs to the girls' dorm, passing by Taylor and Courtney rushing back downstairs.

Off-white paint peeled from the walls, which were covered in overcrowded cork boards and leaflets. The remnants of a TP war sat on the stained thin blue carpet. As she walked past Room 222, she paused to look at the whiteboard. On it were the words 'Will bang 4 JESUS' with a crude drawing underneath. Grimacing, she rubbed it out and replaced it with a peace sign.

Kate perked up and smiled shyly at Max. "At least someone is looking out for me."

That sentence made her heart ache. She could've done so much more for Kate if she'd picked up on the signs sooner, made more of an effort. Without her power, that would've been it. Much too late. Despite her dire situation, she was glad to have her rewind sometimes. A world without people like Kate wasn't worth living in.

"I should have done more," was all she could say in response.

*Home, sweet home. My favorite cocoon…* Her body relaxed as she entered her room, shoulders rolling to release tension. Books and pieces of crumpled up paper covered all surfaces and the floor. Her walls were covered in posters and photos, particularly close to her bed. A small plant sat in the far-left hand corner of the room, looking very wilted. Her trusty guitar rested against the beat-up couch opposite her bed.

Striding over to the Hi-Fi at the end of her bed, she turned it on. Gentle guitar strumming and a soft haunting voice came from the speakers. *Don't you know that I'll be around to guide you/Through your weakest moments to leave them behind you?*

The Queen Bee shook her head. "That's about what I expected from a hipster like you."

Vanessa's eyes widened at the state of her daughter's room. "Max, your room is filthy."

"You think *that's* bad, you should see Chloe's room," Rachel quipped playfully.

"That's a bit harsh, Rach," Chloe protested. "It's not like you're much better."

"At least I can see my floor," she retorted, sticking out her tongue.

"I'd like to see a single teenage keep their room clean," she murmured to Joyce, shaking her head in mild despair. "Just one."

"You speak for moms everywhere," Joyce chuckled.

Max glanced over at Kate. "You know, there might be just one I know of."

The blonde's room was almost always immaculate. Even when she was dealing with the constant stress of bullying, the only thing that had really been out of place was the small pile of semi-clean clothes on her floor.

Kate looked down shyly. "I can't stand too much mess. I never have been able to."

"Maybe you should spend more time around Max to get her in shape," Vanessa suggested half-jokingly.
Kate glanced over at the brunette, who offered a gentle smile when their eyes met. "Maybe I should."

Something about Max's presence soothed her. It was such a strange feeling and she didn't understand the reason behind it. Maybe she would find out soon enough. In fact, she was certain – for better or worse.

She retrieved an old photo from a drawer – two teen girls, both decked out in pirate gear. The one on the right was a younger Max, mid-length brown hair and an eye patch over one of the soft, blue eyes. As for the other girl, there was a black captain hat perched atop her head, long blonde hair flowing over her shoulders. She grinned mischievously at the camera, dazzling blue eyes sparkling with joy. They both looked so young and carefree.

"Aw, well don't you two look cute," Rachel teased.

Chloe didn't react to her obvious goading, her azure blue eyes falling on Max. "You… kept that photo."

How should she feel about that? Honestly, it confused the hell out of her. For so long, she'd assumed Max had totally forgotten about her, moved on. If that was the case, why would she have this photo at Blackwell?

"Of course I did," Max replied without hesitation. "It's… a precious memory to me." She looked down at her feet, mumbling this last part.

As Max stared at the photo, she sighed deeply. Max and Chloe: Best Friends Forever. Who even says that anymore? I'm going to have to call Chloe eventually and find out what she'll say. The longer I wait, the worse it'll be. Idiot.

"I really fucked up, huh?" Max muttered, refusing to meet Chloe's eyes. No matter what she said or did, there was no making up for what she'd done. Still, all she could do was keep trying, like now.

The bluenette wanted to say something to ease her pain, but the words got caught in her throat – rendered completely speechless.

Just then, a quiet beep rang out. Max glanced at her phone, groaning when she saw the long text from her mom about the 'false' accusation against Nathan Prescott. Today just isn't my day it would seem…

Ryan shook his head. "There goes my faith in the education system."

"Welcome to the club," Warren added sympathetically.

"No-one really gives a shit," Chloe sighed resignedly. "Not when there's money or power to be had."

Kate began playing with her cross necklace for comfort. "That is... a very saddening thought."

Chloe nodded, tiredly running her fingers through faded blue hair. "Ain't it?"

Max wanted to tell her that she was wrong, to instill some hope, but that would be a bold-faced lie. She knew that better than any of them.

Shoving her phoned in her bag, she noticed a post-it note stuck to her desk.
Hey Girl,

I borrowed your drive so I can watch some flix while I study. If you need it back, just track me down in my room.

Xoxo D.

On a mission, she headed down the hallway to retrieve Warren's flash drive, hearing someone shout. "You can't get out now, Dana! So tell me the truth, or rot in there!"

Welcome to 'The Real Drama Queens of Blackwell'…

Rachel snorted in agreement, smirking. "Understatement of the century. Every day a different adventure."

"I almost miss it. It kept life interesting," Chloe snickered in agreement.

"You do just love trouble," Joyce sighed, shaking her head at her daughter's eagerness to pursue trouble.

David merely grunted. He'd been unnervingly quiet, not that Max had expected any less. He was a man of few words, something that was often mistaken for indifference. Honestly, she had the same problem, just different reasons. They had a lot more in common than first met the eye.

Max approached the blonde-haired girl stood outside Dana's room, who was checking her phone agitatedly. "Hey Juliet, is everything cool?"

She looked up from her phone. "Oh yes, Max. I've locked Dana in the room because we're 'cool.'"

From the following conversation, Max learned that Dana had been sexting Juliet's boyfriend, Zach, behind her back… according to Victoria. On Dana's behalf, Max snuck into Victoria's room and found an incriminating email, proving it was all lies. That was enough to get the poor girl released. Flash drive retrieved, Max made her way over to the parking lot.

On her way back to the main part of campus, a stern voice carried over. "...so don't think I'm blind! I see everything here at Blackwell! Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Peering around the corner, she saw David Madsen towering menacingly over a cowering Kate.

"Glad to see it's not just me who gets this treatment," Chloe commented bitterly. "At least I know it's nothing personal."

"I could have told you that," Rachel added, just as biting.

Max turned to the ex-soldier to gauge his reaction. His body was extremely tense as he watched the one-sided confrontation. Kate Marsh didn't seem like a trouble maker, but looks could be deceiving. He glanced over at Joyce, whose expression was stoic.

Blue eyes shifted to the girl in question, who was understandably shocked. David sure was terrifying, even now wincing at his harsh tone. What had she done to inspire his ire? As a rule, she avoided trouble at all costs. Did it have something to do with the video mentioned in Taylor's note?
No doubt she'd find out soon enough. Part of her wanted to leave now before things got worse, but deep down she knew she couldn't. One reassuring smile from Max and she knew that leaving wasn't an option.

**Backing away from David, her voice quivered. "No, and leave me alone!"**

Another decision materialized on the screen: **TAKE PHOTO or INTERVENE.**

The stress of maintaining everything at once was starting to catch up on Max. Her body shook a minuscule amount, pushing past the dull ache with gritted teeth. She *had* to keep going, uncertain how much time she had left...

As Max struggled, the edges of the image started to fade, faint static flickering across the screen before she solidified her grip. Every pause required more of her attention than the last to keep steady. She hoped that the others were too engrossed in the experience to notice these small glitches. The last thing she needed was them worrying over her.

However, some *were* noticing. Rachel glanced at the brunette out of the corner of her eye. While she didn't see the need to pull the brakes on this yet, she was worried. Chloe was also becoming increasingly aware of the strain. As much as she wanted to mention it, she trusted Max's judgment.

"So, votes," she muttered distractedly. Full sentences were too much for her now – what with the pause and pounding headache.

No-one spoke, uncertain how to proceed. They had next to no context to work with, just what they saw on screen.

Chloe finally spoke up, her expression distant and tone low. "If it were me, I think I'd appreciate someone stepping in right now." In all her fights with David over the years, having someone on her team would've really helped.

Rachel nodded in agreement, offering no further reasoning. Anyone in Kate's situation would want someone to intervene, regardless of whether it was better in the long term.

Warren's brow furrowed slightly. "Just as a point of discussion, wouldn't it be better to have some proof here?" He looked over at Kate briefly, quick to justify himself. "Not to let you suffer or anything, but in the long term, wouldn't that be best? Max did say we should focus on the long term after all."

David and Kate remained silent, still trying to process everything.

"Not to push or anything," Max spoke through gritted teeth, "but it would be great if you guys reached a decision soon. We have a lot to get through."

"How about we let Kate decide here?" Rachel suggested. "Even if she doesn't know exactly what's going on here, I think she'd have a better grasp of the situation."

Slowly, the others nodded, even David. As of now, he had no proof Kate was up to anything suspicious. Taking an outsider's perspective, he certainly appeared to be the bad guy and he tended to jump to conclusions.

All eyes turned to Kate now, waiting for her verdict. She took a deep shuddery breath and looked Max straight in the eyes. "I would like to choose intervene here, if that's okay."

Even though Max could barely think right now because of the pain, she still managed to offer Kate
a genuine smile. "Of course, Kate. I told you, your vote is important."

The weight of her words finally dawned on the group. Their decisions here really would have grave consequences, even if they didn't know what. This was not a game.

Stepping out of her hiding spot, Max hesitantly advanced. "Hey, why don't you leave her alone?"

Startled by the interruption, David drew himself to his fullest height. "Excuse us, this is official campus business-"

"Excuse me, you shouldn't be yelling at students. Or bullying them." Her voice became more confident with each word.

His jaw tightened at her accusations. "Hey, hey, nobody is bullying anybody. I'm doing my job."

The brunette shook from the surge of adrenaline. "No, you're not."

Stepping back from Kate, he towered over Max and jabbed his finger at her. "You're part of the problem, missy. I will remember this conversation." With one final glare at Kate, he skulked off.

Chloe stared on in disbelief. "Damn, Max. That was hardcore."

Max hated confrontation, no matter how trivial. As a kid, she shied away at the first sign of trouble. Unlike the bluenette, who fearlessly barged head first into the fray without hesitation – a trait shared by Rachel. Max had been the counterbalance to her recklessness, while Rachel was the catalyst.

Blackwell's head of security met Kate's eye awkwardly; neither knew how to react. He tensed considerably, waiting for the predictable anger and hatred. Instead, he received a forgiving smile. Taken aback, his expression softened, once steely eyes flickering with warmth. Few would forgive his seemingly unjustifiable behavior, especially someone as undeserved of his wrath as Kate. Yet, she had.

"In retrospect, it is easy to start seeing the Vortex Club everywhere," Max mused, her eyes hardened. "But not in a nice girl like Kate."

"That's sweet of you to say," Kate beamed gratefully. It was strange to know the brunette thought so highly of her, yet she knew next to nothing about Max – aside from her having a kind heart. As soon as she could, Kate would change that.

"It's only the truth," Max added matter-of-factly, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

"Oh god, will you two stop being so damn adorable please," Rachel grinned. "I don't think I can take much more."

"Yes, it's almost sickening," Victoria huffed, irritated as she tapped her manicured fingernails on her leg.

The short blonde blushed slightly, clearing her throat as she focused straight ahead.

Kate grabbed onto Max's hands, her face lighting up for the first time. "Oh Max, that was
great. I think you scared him for once... I have to go, but thank you. It means a lot."

"Anytime, Kate."

"And I mean that," Max affirmed. "Even now."

"Seems like you've got yourself a guardian angel," Rachel smiled wryly.

"Maybe we all do," Kate noted while looking over at the young time traveler.

Not many people would have gone to such lengths to protect those around her. In that moment, Kate had an unwavering faith in Max, the strongest she had ever felt in another person. It almost overwhelmed her.

"I don't know if I'd go that far," she shrugged. "I'm just doing what I can."

"Modest as always," Chloe chuckled lightly.

"Unlike you," Rachel smirked, playfully nudging the blue-haired punk's shoulder.

As hard as she tried to look annoyed, Chloe's face strained from trying to suppress a grin. "You know, I'm starting to go off you."

"Come on now, you don't really mean that," Rachel grabbed onto her arm, eyelids batting innocently. "Do you?"

Chloe shrugged, letting the smile loose. "Who knows?"

**Before David had the chance to pounce on her again, Kate wisely made a swift exit. I felt like an everyday hero helping Kate but now Officer David Dickhead is after me. Maybe I should rewind and mind my own business?**

"I'll assume everyone is satisfied with this outcome?" Max asked, sighing in relief when no-one spoke. Pausing the whole show was much harder than letting it flow naturally.

**Finally, Max reached the parking lot and, after much coaxing from Warren, joined him over by an old, beat-up car. And there's Warren... Did he actually buy a used car?**

Said pop culture enthusiast perked up at that. "Good to know he actually follows through with that."

"What do ya mean?" Chloe asked curiously.

"Eh," Warren shrugged. "Just wouldn't be the first time my uncle passed on something that doesn't exactly work well."

**Digging out the flash drive she approached Warren, who held his arms out for a hug. What up, Max? How are you?**

**The prompt went straight over her head, handing it over. Here's your flash. Thanks.**

Taking the flash, he scratched his head awkwardly. "No problem."

"Ouch," Rachel winced at the oblivious move, "that was kinda embarrassing to watch."
Warren sighed, running his fingers through his hair. "Can't blame a guy for trying."

"You aren't quite finished yet, Warren," Max mentioned, feeling a little sorry for him; she sure could be dense, sometimes – unintentional or not.

He shrugged. "Well, let's see the damage."

"Check out my new wheels..." Warren motioned back to the car with his head.

Max took a good look at his ride, seeming mildly impressed. "Cool. Very old school."

He leaned back on hood casually and patted it. "1978 to be exact. Now we can go to the drive-in. There's one in Newburg, just 60 miles away."

"That's a Volkswagen, right?" Rachel asked tilting her head. She was no car expert by any stretch of the imagination, but she could recognize different car brands easily enough.

"Yup," Warren nodded. "Not exactly great on gas, but it's durable."

"It looks sturdier than Chloe's truck anyway," the blonde commented, shooting the bluenette a sly grin.

"Well, maybe you can hitch a ride with Warren the next time you want to go to the store at 3 am in the morning," she grumbled, crossing her arms over her chest.

"The only winners in a collision with those two vehicles would be the manufacturers of tetanus shots," Max quipped, grinning to herself.

"I think you might be right there," Joyce muttered in agreement.

"Hey, I like my old truck," Chloe defended.

Victoria's lip curled in disgust. "Why am I surprised that you actually like that piece of junk?"

"Not all of us can rely on daddy's money," the bluenette bitterly retorted.

"Now, Chloe," the older woman cautioned, "there's no need to be like that."

"Whatever," she mumbled, shoving her hands into the pockets of her patched up gray pants.

"You're in the wrong time, Warren. But then, so am I..." Her expression suddenly became troubled, today's events crossed her mind again. So much drama to contend with.

Warren picked up on this change. "You okay?"

"It's been one strange fucking day," she exhaled deeply.

"That's certainly one way of putting it," Kate said, finally rejoining the conversation.

"You can say that again," Joyce mumbled. A lot had happened in such a short space of time and she was having trouble wrapping her head around it. They all were.

David merely nodded stiffly, being the usual talkative person he wasn't.

"Well, it's about to get stranger, so prepare yourselves." She wished someone had been there to walk her through this, or at least warned her how messed up it would get. Some things she
would *never* be able to erase from her mind.

"Not sure how much more weird stuff I can take right now," Ryan sighed, stroking his unkempt beard. Facial hair care had been the last thing on his mind recently, too preoccupied with finding his daughter.

"I second that," Vanessa added, glancing over at Max.

There really was something different about her daughter, not necessarily good; she had the air of a person who had seen way too much. A pang of worry entered the pit of her stomach. Just what else had Max faced alone? She'd already seen her childhood friend get shot and discovered that she had time powers. How much more would there be to shock her?

**Warren grinned to himself. "I bet. I heard Victoria got a faceful of paint… I'd pay money to see a photo of that..."**

"Wouldn't we all?" Rachel grinned cheekily in Victoria's direction, who sneered in response.

"At least people would pay for my head shots. I'm not so desperate that I hand them out to everyone I see on the street just for some attention."

"Ouch, low blow," Rachel winced, pretending to be offended. "So I want to be a model, sue me."

"Why bother? It's not like you have anything worth taking anyway," the taller blonde scoffed.

She simply shrugged. "There are some things money can't buy."

"You're definitely gorgeous enough for it," Max offered up as reassurance.

Rachel turned to the brunette, hazel eyes widening in shock, soon replaced by a flicker of amusement. "Well, aren't you just a smooth talker?" She grinned charmingly and winked. "I'll take a compliment from a pretty lady."

"Uh, will you two shut up and get a fucking room or something, somewhere away from me," Victoria growled, rubbing at her temples.

"Is someone getting jealous?" the mischievous blonde lightly teased. "Don't worry, there's plenty of me to go around."

"Now you've done it, Max," Chloe groaned. "There's no stopping her."

"You say that like it's a bad thing, Chloe," Rachel pouted.

At this point, David cleared his throat awkwardly as if to alert them that there were, in fact, other people in the room. Everyone settled down again and continued to watch the story unfold before their eyes.

Max laughed quietly, brushing her hair behind her ears. "Really? I wish I would have known..."

"You probably would have raised a Kickstarter fund just for that one image of her covered in paint," Warren chuckled amusedly, crossing his arms behind his head.

Managing a smile, Max shook her head. "Had I known that... Anyway, Victoria took down my photo. So that drama ended well."
Curious, he tilted his head and changed the subject. "So did you get a chance to check out the movie booty on my flash drive?"

She nodded. "Yeah, thanks. You had some cool shit on there, from 'Akira' to 'Twilight Zone'. Which seems apropos today…"

"Max, you are such a nerd," the bluenette chuckled fondly.

"Like you can talk," Max retorted wryly. "I'm sure our misspent youth watching anime had absolutely no influence on that blue hair of yours."

Chloe reached up and twiddled a fade blue strand between her fingers. "Maybe…"

Warren grinned cheekily. "I consider myself a pop… cultural pirate connoisseur."

"That does sound better than 'thief','" Max pointed out, rolling her eyes.

He forced out a laugh. "Ha ha. Make sure you watch 'Cannibal Holocaust'!"

Kate's eyebrows shot up to her hairline at the -frankly disturbing- title. "Cannibal Holocaust?" she asked incredulously, glancing over at Max for some sort of confirmation and reassurance.

"Don't take it too seriously," Max consoled. "It's mostly a gore fest. Has next to nothing to do with World War 2." She paused for a moment. "I probably still wouldn't watch it if I were you, though."

"Doesn't seem like something you'd enjoy, Kate," Chloe mentioned, recalling when Rachel had literally forced her to watch it in the early hours of the morning for the 'optimized viewing experience'.

Rachel shuffled in her chair, absentmindedly inspecting her nails. "Don't knock it till you try it."

"Seen it," the brunette countered smugly. "I was more disturbed by all those emo-vampire movies on there."

Warren shrugged. "Can't a sensitive high school boy love sensitive vampires too?"

Max raised an eyebrow in amusement. "So you're sensitive…"

He visibly winced at her mildly teasing tone. "Ouch… That sounds awful the way you say it."

"How so?" she questioned curiously.

He shoved his hands in his pockets, staring down at his shoes. "Sensitive usually means: 'Won't be having sex with you'."

Some of the group shuffled awkwardly at his directness, namely Warren himself. "I'm sure not pulling any punches, huh?"

"It certainly is an… interesting approach," Kate hesitantly interjected.

"With people like Max, you've got to be blatantly obvious," Chloe mentioned, remembering the numerous times when things like this went straight over Max's head… and the fun of explaining them in great depth, watching her get all flustered.

Ryan was currently making Warren squirm with the side eye he was giving the kid.
Ignoring the implications of his bold statement, she shook her head. "Oh, gawd. You need a sensitive woman to kick your ass."

"Damn, Max," Rachel chuckled. "Even when people are spelling it out for you, you just brush it off. It's pretty impressive, really."

"That's one word for it," Chloe added, feeling a weird sense of relief wash over her. Witnessing Warren's questionable flirting attempts irritated her.

He recovered quickly, grinning. "If I was lucky… Speaking of hip and fast, we should cruise out in my car to an actual movie this week… But you seem distracted."

Considering something, her body tensed up. "I need to talk to somebody… just to get it out of my system…"

"Dr. Warren Graham is in da house," he chimed in. "I won't even prescribe you any meds… Tell me everything."

Max stood beside him, leaning against the hood of his car. "For reals, Warren, this is between you and me, not social media."

His brow furrowed at her suddenly serious expression. "Don't insult me. Max, go on."

She took a deep calming breath and hesitantly began. "I had this incredibly bizarro experience in Mr. Jefferson's class today… I mean, life changing. Have you ever had a dream, so real it was like a movie?"

Before she could explain further, heavy footsteps stomped towards them. A boy with blonde hair and a resting scowl strode over to them, Nathan Prescott.

"This is going to go so well," Warren sarcastically mumbled.

Rachel leaned back in her chair and sighed. "For sure."

When he reached them, Nathan pushed Warren out of the way, his icy blue eyes glaring at Max. "Max Caulfield, right? You're one of Jefferson's photo groupies…"

Vanessa looked on worriedly, recognizing the boy from the bathroom shooting. Her husband tensed up, understandably concerned by this situation. Joyce seemed almost as apprehensive about this as Max's parents. Max was like a daughter to her, so having to watch her go through this ordeal was difficult. David's expression remained mostly impassive, however there was a slight uncontrollable twitch.

Victoria's brow furrowed at Nathan's appearance. This was not the Nathan she knew; his relaxed, cocky swagger replaced by an agitated stomp – more aggressive than she'd ever seen. Everything about him seemed tense and troubled, like a bomb just waiting to go off without warning. Taylor and Courtney sensed it too, exchanging worried glances. Just like the Vortex Club posse, Rachel could sense something was wrong. While Nathan was a rich kid brat on occasion, he could be fun to hang around with and certainly knew how to party hard, with the money to do it.

Chloe clenched her fist, wanting more than anything to punch that smug bastard's face. She had done it before to people who had tried harassing Max at school when they were kids. It had earned her a few bruises and some trouble – totally worth it. The desire to pulverize Nathan was stronger
than any she had ever experienced.

Warren shifted uncomfortably in his chair, feeling helpless as he watched Max almost fold in on herself at Nathan's presence. Kate bit her lip, worrying it nervously between her teeth. Once again, she gripped onto her cross, silently praying that Max would get out of this without coming to harm.

"I'm one of his students," she corrected. 'Groupie' implied that she didn't have a mind of her own.

Nathan's jaw clenched and his hands balled up into fists beside his legs. "Whatthefuckever. I know you like to take pictures, especially when you're hiding out in the bathrooms. You best tell me what you told the Principal. Now!"

She cowered at the venom in his voice. "I told him the truth. A student had a gun."

Body shaking with rage, he drew himself to his fullest height, controlling the situation. "No, you told him I had a gun. That's why he dragged me into his office."

"And did what? Give you a stern lecture?" she shot back with shaky confidence, meeting his icy stare.

"Nobody, nobody lectures me. Everybody tried though... They try..." he muttered, voice low and unstable.

"You should talk to somebody, Nathan..."

That made him snap. "Do not analyze me! I pay people for that. Worry about yourself, Max Caulfield."

"I could call the police," she threatened weakly.

He couldn't keep in his twisted laughter. "Do it. The Prescott's own the pigs here."

David frowned, dissatisfied with Nathan's blatant disregard for the law.

"And here I thought Arcadia was a decent place." Joyce's voice came out strained.

"It's not the place that is the problem," Max mentioned quietly, "it's the people."

The older woman nodded, barely keeping it together. "You're right. Some of the best people get taken away first..."

Guilt flooded Max's body at the thought of William Price. She tried so hard to keep him alive for Chloe and Joyce... only fucking it up more.

Almost out of nowhere, Warren pushed Nathan back. "Get away from her, dude!"

Without hesitation, Nathan headbutted him hard. The impact made him stumble back and clutch onto his head. As Nathan was about to pounce on Warren, Max grabbed onto his arm and pulled him back,

"Hey, leave him alone!" As she set out her demand, he spun around and grabbed her by the throat.
Involuntarily wincing at the memory, Max felt her neck constrict in sympathy for her on screen counterpart. It was surreal to watch this from an outsider's perspective.

Ryan's fists clenched as he watched his daughter get harassed. He wasn't a violent man, but he wouldn't hesitate beating this kid to a bloody pulp. No-one threatened his family, no-one. Vanessa looked on in horror, almost not believing her eyes as Max struggled against his vice-like grip.

Victoria warily watched the screen, not saying a word as her friend threatened and physically harassed another student. The way he was acting right now terrified her, as much as she hated to admit it. Taylor and Courtney glanced over at her, wondering what she was thinking now. They both knew Nathan could get a little carried away sometimes; this was way beyond anything they'd ever seen.

Kate brought a hand to her mouth and gasped quietly, eyes widening in horror at his violence. Warren swallowed hard, hoping that he would recover in time to help her. Chloe silently seethed with rage while Rachel's brow furrowed in concern.

"Nobody tells me what to do. Not my parents, not the Principal, or that whore in the bathroom," he spat at her as she struggled against him.

"Stop that! Right now!" she shouted as she raked her nails down the side of his face.

He howled in pain, suddenly releasing her. She stumbled back, falling to the floor as a run-down yellow truck screeched to a halt just behind her. Scrambling to her feet using the truck's hood, she turned to see who was driving.

Her eyes widened when she saw the girl from before, who seemed equally shocked. "Max?"

After a moment, Max stuttered in disbelief. "Chloe?"

"Oh yeah," Chloe smirked. "Dream team together again."

The brunette offered a melancholic smile, knowing full well that Chloe had made the impossible possible. Without her, Max was… nothing. That was why she could never give up until she literally collapsed to the floor, never to move again. Even then, she'd find some way to keep Chloe safe.

"I have a feeling the whole of Arcadia Bay, Nathan Prescott in particular, should watch out now," Rachel chuckled.

"They really should," Max muttered through gritted teeth. She had little mercy to spare anymore, especially for those who constantly fucked with her.

"No way. You again?" Nathan growled, mostly recovered from Max's attack.

Unexpectedly, Warren tackled him to the ground, attempting to pin the larger boy down.

"Warren!" Max cried out in shocked concern.

As Nathan began wailing on him, he waved her away. "Go, go! I got this."

"Impressive," Chloe whistled, grateful for his timely interference.

"I have to hand it to you, Warren," Rachel smiled, "not everyone can fend off someone like
Nathan.

Warren scratched his head awkwardly, a light blush creeping onto his cheeks at the praise. "Thanks, I guess. I am kind of getting pummeled out there, but I suppose it did the trick." When his eyes fell on Victoria, an icy shudder was sent up his spine. He quickly turned his attention back to the screen, but would still feel her glaring at him.

Kate winced as Nathan mercilessly punched him in the face. "That is probably going to leave a nasty bruise or two."

"Everyone loves a good battle scar," Warren shrugged nonchalantly.

"Nerd alert!" Chloe teased.

Not wasting time, Chloe opened the passenger side door and coaxed her in. "Get in Max!"

Taking one last glance at Warren, she jumped into the truck. Nathan turned to the noise, his expression the pure embodiment of rage as he kicked the door in frustration. "Get your punk asses out of there now! Don't even try to run! Nobody messes with me! NOBODY!"

Flooring it, the bluenette drove out onto the road. The inside of her truck was messy, empty cans and unpaid parking tickets littering the dashboard. Graffiti was scrawled onto almost every square inch of the truck's interior, with a skull and feather charm hanging down from the mirror.

Rachel shook her head, suppressing a smile. "And I thought it was bad now."

"It gives it character," the blue-haired punk defended.

"Chloe…" Joyce sighed, unable to express her disgust with the predictable state of her daughter's truck.

"If you think this is bad, you'd better close your eyes when we get to her room," Max mentioned.

Joyce shook her head in disappointment. "I might just have to."

"Figures," David muttered to himself, not offering anything further in response.

Slumping back in the worn seat, Max tried to catch her breath. "Man, Nathan Prescott is messed up. And dangerous… This day never ends…"

Irritated, Chloe tapped her fingers against the steering wheel. "Oh, and thanks, Chloe! After five years you're still Max Caulfield."

The brunette shifted uncomfortably under her almost accusatory gaze.

Even now, Max couldn't help but feel a pang of guilt. She'd been such a coward, selfish. While she had been scared of Chloe hating her, the older girl had been hurting; her dad died and her best friend disappeared almost without a trace when she needed support the most.

The bluenette's face softened considerably. "Don't give me the guilty face. At least pretend you're glad to see me."

For the first time, Max's expression showed genuine warmth. "I never have to pretend with you,
Max relaxed as the tension faded. "I am seriously glad to see you. Oh, and thanks, Chloe. It makes perfect sense I'd see you today."

"Yes, it's been that kind of day." A flicker of cautious curiosity entered Chloe's eyes. "So what did that freak want with you?"

"Hopefully nothing after today," Max murmured, more to herself. "So, how do you know Nathan?"

She shrugged. "He's just another Arcadia asshole..." Before Max would question further, the bluenette changed the subject. "Your friend really took a beatdown for you."

"Warren? Yeah, I owe him big time," Max noted, conflicted about her choice to leave him at Nathan's mercy.

Chloe gave her an indecipherable look. "You're not the only one in debt, and you're already causing trouble."

There was a brief awkward silence as Max glanced out of the smudged window, watching the scenery speed past in a blur. "I thought it would be quiet here. Feels so weird to be back."

"So I guess Seattle sucked hard?" the older girl asked, hopeful.

Max looked down, eyes shadowed by her hair. "I guess. It was cool but... I felt kinda lonely, out of my league."

"You never really were happy at Seattle, were you?" Vanessa suddenly asked.

As much as she might want to say she enjoyed every minute, it would be a blatant lie. In Seattle, she never seemed to have a second to catch her breath, not like in Arcadia – where inaction could easily swallow you up, if you let it. In truth, she'd always preferred the whimsical mysteries of nature and its relaxed aura to the fast-paced inner city life.

"Not really, no," Max admitted after much deliberation.

Ryan sighed deeply. "I had a feeling that was the case. I doubt you would have pushed so hard to come to Blackwell otherwise."

"I get why we had to move," she added understandingly, "and it's not like I hated it or anything, it... just wasn't me. I felt out of place."

"It's just a shame that Arcadia essentially became a ghost town," Ryan muttered. That was the reason they moved in the first place. Work had dried up and, while the properties in Arcadia Bay weren't expensive, they still needed the money to live.

"You can blame the Prescotts for that," she scowled.
"I would think you'd fit right in with the art school hipsters..." the blue haired punk lightly teased.

"Right. You look like the cover of Hipster Girl dot com," Max quipped with a light smirk.

Chloe rolled her eyes playfully at the comment. "At least you're still a smart-ass."

"That's why I'm here," the brunette grinned.

"Please, girl. You came back for Blackwell Academy," the older girl scoffed.

"Of course," Max agreed instantly, "It's one of the best photography programs in the country... and my favorite teacher, Mark Jefferson."

"So you came back to Arcadia for a teacher... not your best friend," Chloe summarized, shooting her a sideways glance.

With the tension rising again, Max shuffled uncomfortably. "Don't you think I'm happy to see you?"

Chloe's face hardened again. While her tone was calm, it was clearly forced, flickers of anger coloring it. "No. You were happy to wait five years without a call or even a text."

Each time Max heard the betrayal in her tone, it chipped away at her very soul – a constant reminder of her fuck ups. Yet another reason why she was trying so hard to set things right. Chloe sure as hell deserved it.

"Max... look, I was hella pissed when you left, but more than anything I'm happy to see you again." Chloe suddenly found her boots really interesting. "You know I'm not good at dealing with my emotions properly, so... I just thought you should know that."

A small smile tugged at Max's lip. "I do know it, and I can't blame you for it." Not as much as she blamed herself...

As that fateful week of their reunion passed, Chloe had slowly begun to let the brunette back into her life – almost picking up where they left off when she realized Max was on her side. Sure, they'd fought but they supported each other through difficult times. If everything went according to plan, they still would.

"Good," was all Chloe could manage in response, tension fading. She had a feeling this experience would provide them both with the right words. All she had to do was wait.

Max's shoulders hunched over as the words cut through the tense atmosphere. "I'm sorry. I know things were tough on you when I left."

Grip tightening on the steering wheel, Chloe's knuckles turned white. "How do you know? You weren't even here."

Chloe saw the brunette bow her head, hair covering her face. If only she had approached this more calmly... Unfortunately, that wasn't in the blue-haired punk's nature. She let it all build up, exploding at the nearest person – whether they deserved it or not. Then, she calmed down and regretted it. Gently, she nudged Max's foot, trying to reassure her.
After a second or two, Max returned the nudge. Enough with the whole 'Woe is Max' act. Sitting up straight, she concentrated on the important task at hand. When she lifted her head again, she noticed the flickering on the screen again, this time much more obvious. Some of the colors were faded, a soft hum coming from the speakers. The insistent pain in her head intensified as she focused on hiding the deterioration.

Avoiding the betrayal in Chloe's eyes, Max stared at the floor. "I didn't order my parents to move specifically to fuck you over, Chloe."

"You've been at Blackwell for almost a month without letting me know. 'Nuff said," she snapped abruptly.

"I just wanted to settle in first and not be such a shy cliché geek." As Max spoke, her excuses began to sound more and more pathetic. "I totally would have contacted you."

Chloe exhaled deeply, adjusting her dark blue beanie. "I bet you don't use these sad excuses on Mr. Jefferson... Don't use them on me, Max."

Slumping back in her seat, Max glanced over at the bluenette. Sunlight seeped through the window, illuminating her features. Her style had changed, now a heavy punk rocker vibe. A colorful tattoo sleeve poked out through the right sleeve of her jacket.

Reaching into her bag, Max pulled out her camera to find it smashed from her fall in the parking lot. "Broken. Oh man, are you cereal?"

The outdated phrase made Chloe smirk. "Wow, haven't heard that one in a while..."

"Not everything changes. Except my camera has officially taken a shit," she groaned in annoyance.

"My step-douche has a boatload of tools. Maybe you can fix it in my place..." Chloe casually suggested.

"Very smooth, Chloe," Rachel grinned.

"Shut up," was all Chloe could manage to reply, her cheeks growing faintly pink at the suggestive tone.

"That touched a nerve," the blonde taunted, enjoying every second making her squirm.

In response, the blue-haired punk glared at her, only amusing Rachel more. Max wondered how Chloe and the others would react to the middle of the week, one decision in particular. No doubt it would bring up some embarrassing conversation.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a spike of pain in her already throbbing mind. She recoiled, clutching at her head as a thin trickle of blood ran from her nose. Biting her lip hard to stifle a grunt, she pushed through.

"I need very specific tiny tools," Max muttered as she thoroughly examined the damage to her camera.

"Nerd alert!" Chloe exclaimed gleefully. "My stepdad has a fully stocked garage. And he actually is a tiny tool." She paused for a moment before offering a warm smile. "Welcome
home, Max."

Several things happened at once. There was a sound like shattering glass, and the image abruptly vanished by spinning into a vortex and warping away. Those gathered both felt and saw the ripples of energy converge on Max, who was on all fours and panting hard.

It hurt. As time resumed its normal course, Max felt bile rush through her digestive system. Her entire body convulsed violently as the backlash from her power usage surged through her. Vaguely, she registered movement and voices – distant and smothered, as if her surroundings were submerged underwater. Everything slowly faded away from her by the second.

Desperately, she tried to fight it, to maintain control… but her body wouldn't allow it. Part of her was relieved when the darkness finally overcame her, taking away the pain. She almost hoped this would be the end. It would be nice to just give up here, but that just wasn't an option. Not anymore.
Chapter Four: Chrysalis, Part 4

Already Chloe was on her feet, rolling Max onto her side before she'd consciously made the choice to move. Panic forced her forward, vision tunneled and heart stopping. Face drained of color, she checked Max's pulse, sighing in relief when she felt a steady thump. The even rise and fall of the younger girl's chest indicated she was breathing, another good sign. Dried blood clung to her skin, nose no longer bleeding.

She had just passed out, not great but better than the alternatives. A wave of relief washed over the bluenette as she came to that conclusion.

The collective concern lessened as they sized up the situation. Kate closed her eyes in a silent prayer. Warren simply stared at Max's unconscious form, not sure what to do with himself. While Victoria tried to look uninterested, her body tensed up. Taylor and Courtney stood beside her with worried expressions. Taylor and Courtney stood beside her with worried expressions. Rachel held back, not wanting to overcrowd. Joyce brought a hand to her mouth in horror, while David's brow began to twitch.

Vanessa all but ran over to Max, soon joined by her husband – who was on the verge of breaking down. "What happened?"

"If I had to make a guess," Warren began, recalling everything he knew about time travel… admitted from sci-fi films. "I'd say the strain of manipulating the time stream like this was causing a lot of stress."

"Why do you keep pushing yourself to the limit, Max?" Chloe asked angrily, finding a clean tissue in her pocket to wipe away the blood. "There's no fucking point in doing this if you..." She bit her lip hard, not wanting to continue that thought.

Kate glanced down at the unconscious girl, tone hushed. "There must be something really important she needs to show us if she's going this far."

"So why couldn't she just tell us, for fuck's sake?" Chloe snapped, the blonde immediately recoiling at the harsh tone.

"There are some things that require more than simply telling," Rachel gently suggested. "Not that I condone Max pushing herself to the edge like this," she added as an afterthought, not wanting to enrage Chloe further.

"With that kinda power, I can only imagine what would motivate her to come back again," Warren offered, slightly flustered.

"Her motivations are easy enough to deduce," Victoria interrupted impatiently. "Recall the tornado headed straight for Arcadia – clearly not a metaphorical representation. That must be at least part of it."

Rachel tilted her head to the side, deep in thought. "It's possible. There must be more going on than that though, otherwise Max would have just told us or just shown the bits relevant to the storm."
"That would make sense," Warren chipped in. "She wouldn't have gone to so much trouble in that case."

The taller blonde scoffed, expression dripping with contempt. "Didn't I just say the storm could be part of it? You really are stupid."


"You're both right," Max's voice croaked weakly, finally coming to. "There's more going on. How long was I out?"

When she groggily hauled herself to her feet, Chloe latched onto her, voice quivering as she held back tears. "Don't you dare do that again."

Patting the bluenette on the back reassuringly, she pulled away. "I don't know if I'll be able to keep giving every choice a vote. The ones that matter? Yes, they'll still be voted on, but I am not strong enough yet to control it efficiently enough for all the choices."

When nobody spoke, she shook the last remnants of haziness from her mind. Whenever she pushed herself too hard, her body and mind short-circuited. As she took her seat, she closed her eyes and concentrated. This time, everyone saw the presentation form, felt the ripple of power emanating from the girl.

Chloe pulled her truck outside the half-painted house, a limp American flag hanging by the door. The two girls jumped out, Max hanging back. Unlocking the door, the bluenette hurried her along and they headed upstairs to her room.

It was messy – posters, notes and graffiti covering the walls. Empty beer bottles and magazines littered the floor. The bed was unmade, a suitcase beside it filled with even more junk. Just above was an angrily scribbled out height chart.

"I swear it gets worse every time I see it," Joyce mentioned, sounding disappointed. Chloe had always been disorganized, making a mess regardless.

David regarded the room with disgust. He'd given up trying to force her to clean it, choosing his battles.

"You can't blame me for this one," Rachel commented with a smug smirk. The bluenette always tried to blame her for the mess.

"You think this is bad, wait until later," Max mentioned. When their investigations really got going, Chloe's room had been beyond words – a bomb site.

Chloe sauntered inside, making a beeline for her bed. "My room looks a bit different than the last time you saw it."

Once upon a time, Max knew this room like the back of her hand. Now, it was almost unrecognizable, much like Chloe. "It's cool. At least we can chill out."

"This isn't exactly my 'chill out zone' ...My step-führer makes sure of that. Come in and close the door," she instructed, lighting up a joint. "Put on some music while I medicate."

"Chloe…" Joyce sighed, despairing at her daughter's drug habit.
David's jaw tightened as smoke billowed from her mouth, seething in silence.

"So much for subtlety," Rachel chuckled lightly.

"Like you can talk," Chloe grumbled under her breath, avoiding eye contact.

Max began her search, snooping while she was at it. She came across a few old photos – some of William, childhood drawings, more Missing Person posters, a mountain of unpaid parking tickets in the trash can and an abysmal school report. A weird blend of the old and new Chloe.

Eventually, she found a metal lock box stashed under the bed. Inside was a disc labeled *Mixtape*. Something else caught her eye, a familiar half folded photo. Curious, she unfolded it, two girls staring back at her. Chloe was on the left, flipping off the camera. To the right was a girl with long blonde hair, piercing hazel eyes and a blue feather earring.

"Nice to know you kept that photo." Rachel had to admit, it was a personal favorite of hers.

"Well, of course I kept it," Chloe muttered, slightly embarrassed. "I don't just lose personal stuff like that."

"Well, I'm flattered," Rachel lightly teased, her grin widening. Seeing the big bad bluenette flustered was always a treat.

Victoria sighed in disgust. "Give it a rest."

The mischievous pair thankfully didn't antagonize her further, still very aware of Max's earlier collapsing. They didn't want to add to the already large strain, as tempting as it was to mock Victoria.

Max's heart sank in her chest, feeling jealous. While she didn't regret bringing Rachel back, Chloe was her world, her rock… and it felt like she was slowly losing the stability the bluenette had once provided. Clamping down, she focused on the screen. She'd chosen this path, so she had to accept all the consequences. Whatever was best for Chloe, her constant reminder.

"Hey, give me that!" Chloe snatched the photo from her hands, protective.

"Sorry I wasn’t trying to be nosy," Max apologized, surprised by the sudden movement.

"Yeah right," Chloe wryly challenged. "You are the embodiment of nosy."

"It was a pretty weak defense," Max admitted, "especially against someone who knows me as well as you do."

The bluenette shook her head and smiled. "Some things never change."

"And some do," Max muttered to herself, feeling her shoulders slump. She knew that better than anyone.

"Obviously she was a good friend," Max continued cautiously.

"That's putting it mildly," Chloe mumbled, crossing her legs and propping her head on her hand.
Sitting down beside her, the brunette bit her lip. "That's Rachel Amber… Her 'Missing Person' posters are all over Blackwell."

Chloe nodded sadly. "Yeah, I put them up… She was my angel."

Rachel had always known Chloe was way more serious about their relationship than she was. Over the years, she'd done things she wasn't proud of, kept secrets that would hurt the bluenette. Did her disappearance have something to do with her desire to leave Arcadia? Maybe got caught up in a situation way beyond her control… That was when she felt Max's icy stare, making her shiver. All of this was pretty embarrassing for Chloe. It was much easier to get angry or divert attention to someone else than face this vulnerability.

"After my dad died and you moved, I felt abandoned," Chloe revealed, hurt and betrayed. "Rachel saved my life."

Wincing, Max hung her head. "Man, I had no idea."

"Well, you never made much effort to find out. I was fourteen, we were best friends," Chloe's brow furrowed, sounding irritated.

"I never forgot. Even if I was an asshole and didn't keep in touch," the brunette replied earnestly. "But you had Rachel…"

A faint smile tugged at Chloe's lips. "Rachel had my back. We were gonna kick the world's ass." The smile faded, replaced with a wistful expression. "You would laugh at how different we were… She wanted to be a star."

"She looks like a model," Max observed.

Rachel offered the younger girl a charming smile. "I'm glad someone sees it."

Victoria scoffed, rolling her eyes. "Someone with obviously poor tastes."

"I think I'd have to agree with Max on this one," Warren piped in.

Kate nodded in agreement. "As would I."

Rachel threw a smirk at the scowling blonde, who merely turned her head, before giving the shy girl an appreciative grin. "Well, thank you. It's comforting to know that I have a chance at least."

"Knock it off, Rach," Chloe interjected with a scoff. "You have more than just a chance to make it big and you know it."

Grimacing, Max recalled that without her power, Rachel Amber wouldn't have the slimmest chance of following her dreams – over before she even started. So long as it all went according to plan, she had a second chance at… everything. The brunette hoped that by the end, the mischievous blonde would understand just how close she'd come to losing everything.

"That was her plan. Our plan," Chloe corrected herself. "Get the hell out of Bigfootville, and into Los Angeles."

"So what happened? Did your folks, your mom, try to stop you?" Max asked.

"My mom was too busy hooked up with Sergeant Shithead," the bluenette scoffed.
David wasn't surprised by the not-so-fond nickname. To an extent, he probably deserved it. While he only wanted the best for Chloe, he had a strange way of expressing it and she wasn't much better. They antagonized each other, their hot-headed nature and stubbornness to blame.

Joyce shot her daughter a dirty glance. All she ever wanted was to feel like a family again. It soon became apparent after William's death that wasn't going to happen – too many unresolved issues. Whenever she tried to bring him up, Chloe shut her down. Eventually, she gave up, which only made the young teen's anger intensify. Maybe this experience would break the cycle.

"I feel the love… Now, when did Rachel actually disappear?" Max asked with a serious expression.

"Look at you getting in detective mode." As much as Rachel tried to joke around, it was strange to know she was missing… maybe worse.

Max's mind flooded with her and Chloe's investigation. It had gone far beyond asking mundane questions, breaking into Blackwell, Frank's RV, the Dark Room… She shuddered, noticing the screen flicker.

"This is nothing compared to later," she murmured quietly, desperate to keep her mind firmly off the Dark Room.

"Six months ago," Chloe revealed, shuffling uncomfortably. "She just… left Arcadia. Without a word. Without… me," her voice began to break at the end of her sentence.

"How do you know she disappeared? Maybe she wanted to start a totally new life…"

Max winced at her stupidity; that had not been the right thing to say. Anyone with even a sliver of social awareness would've realized that immediately. She used to be so clueless…

"Unlike you, she would have told me, okay?" she snapped accusingly. "Something happened to her."

"I believe you," Max quickly backtracked. "I'm just trying to get all deductive…"

The bluenette's expression of anger shifted to distant and troubled. "Before Rachel left, she said she met somebody who changed her life… Then poof."

"And you haven't heard anything from her since?" the younger girl cautiously questioned, not wanting to get her head bitten off again.

"Like everybody in my life. My dad, you… and Rachel. Gone…" Pushing back the emotion, her face hardened. "Can you put some music on now?"

A familiar song filtered through the speakers as Max fulfilled the request. Chloe had laid back, ash tray resting on her stomach as smoke billowed around her. Goodbye to my Santa Monica Dream/Fifteen kids in the backyard drinking wine.

"Oh great, more hipster bullshit," Victoria sighed exasperatedly, rubbing at her temples.

"And I suppose the crap they play at the Vortex parties is much better," Chloe sarcastically retorted.

"I quite like it personally," Kate softly added.
"It seems very… apropos," Warren noted warily.

"Anyway… You can find tools to fix your camera in the garage…” Chloe mentioned, aura closed off.

Worried, Max took a tentative step forward. "Chloe, are you okay?"

She brought the joint to her lips and inhaled deeply, letting the smoke out in one long breath. "Sure, I'm awesome. I just want to blaze and be alone for a moment…"

Taking the not-so-subtle cue, Max thoroughly snooped around the bathroom and Joyce's room before heading downstairs.

"I see you haven't changed at all," Joyce chuckled lightly. The brunette had always been curious,verging on invasive. William had encouraged her inquisitive nature, perhaps more than healthy. Prying too much could get you and other people hurt.

Ryan glanced at his daughter. He'd always been worried her tendency to snoop would get her in trouble, maybe this experience would verify that terrible feeling. Vanessa watched on with quiet concern. As much as she wanted to spare Max from all this, it was much too late.

There was a corkboard in the downstairs hallway, covered in old photos of Chloe – when she was happy and carefree. Not like now. Her phone went off with a text from Kate, thanking her for earlier. Smiling, Max replied and resumed her snooping.

A growing sense of unease was building up in the pit of Kate's stomach. Something serious must've happened to make her so gloomy and depressed. While she was apprehensive, having Max around made it all seem less scary for some reason. Knowing someone was looking out for her was comforting.

Before she headed into David's hovel, she stopped in front of the beat-up couch. Damn, it's the couch! We used to pretend it was a pirate ship… Looks like a shipwreck now.

"Hey! How dare you insult our great ship, Maxine Caulfield!" Chloe suddenly exclaimed. "Take it back, right now!"

"Oh, if you're bringing full names into this you must be seriously pissed," Rachel chuckled.

The adamant protests made Max smile. "You have to admit, it doesn't look quite as impressive as before."

Chloe rolled her eyes. "It's not the looks you need to be focusing on, it's the memories attached to it that make it awesome. You of all people should know that."

"I think you two can safely claim ownership over a lot of the marks and scratches on that poor couch," Joyce sighed tiredly. "Among many other things in the house. I am still finding new pen marks and stains even now."

There was a very visible stain on the floor next to the couch. Hey, I remember that stain! Chloe and I knocked over Joyce's wine bottle and we scrubbed forever, but it never came out. We got so busted!

"You certainly did," Joyce smiled, turning to the brunette.
Max offered her a sheepish smile. "Y-yeah. Sorry about that, Joyce."

"I think you've said sorry enough, Max," Joyce reassured, waving her apology away. "It's Chloe who has yet to show remorse."

"What's done is done. No point dwelling on it," Chloe shrugged, showing no remorse.

Max continued onto the workshop, pocketing the tools needed to fix her camera – with the help of some time manipulation. Before she left, she opened a cupboard and found a suspicious TV. Without hesitation, she switched it on, shocked by the shifting footage of different parts of Chloe's house. *What the-? Chloe's step-dad actually installed cameras in the rooms? For reals? This guy has serious trust issues! Do Chloe and Joyce even know about this?* To add to the creep factor, there was a file atop one of the cupboards, filled with pictures of Kate Marsh.

All eyes turned to David in awkward silence. None of them could believe the invasive surveillance, especially Joyce. There was nothing to say right now. As for Chloe, she knew he was paranoid, but this was… much worse than she had imagined. Kate's fear increased at the sight of the pictures, not liking the almost surreal strangeness of the situation.

**Disturbing discoveries made, Max headed back upstairs and set about fixing her camera to no avail. When she gave up, Chloe came over to examine the photos she had taken today, eyes widening at the butterfly.**

"Wait… I've seen this before. No way. When did you take this?" She threw the picture back on the desk, tone accusing.

"Uh..." Max hesitated, desperately trying to think up some excuse.

"YOU took this photo, you brat! In the bathroom today... You set off the alarm! That's why Nathan raged after you... It makes total sense. You hella saved my life," Chloe concluded, watching Max shuffled under her intense gaze. "Now, tell me the truth, Max."

"I was there... Hiding in the corner," she confirmed with a sigh.

"Damn. You're a ninja," she muttered, seriously impressed.

"A ninja would have cut Nathan's head off," Max protested weakly. "I just took a butterfly photo..."

The blue haired punk was in awe. "That is so badass."

Max exhaled deeply at the memory. "Oh yeah, I almost wet myself when I saw the gun..."

"So, did you recognize me?" Chloe asked, curious.

"Not at all," the brunette admitted. "Your hair and clothes are so different..."

"That's putting it mildly," Chloe herself remarked.

"You certainly have changed a lot since we last saw you, Chloe," Vanessa added thoughtfully.

"Five years is a long time after all," the bluenette pointed out.
In that time, she changed and experienced so much. Her past restricted her, determining how she reacted to certain situations, usually resolving in anger. She had tried to distance herself from it all, which was why she had changed her appearance so drastically.

"Not everyone changes quite as much as you did, outwardly anyway," Rachel gently offered.

"Sometimes we all need a change," Max sadly commented, eyes fixed on the screen.

"I hope so." Chloe crossed her arms over her chest. "I'm sure this is all so weird to you after coming back."

"Like you said, it's been that kind of day," Max exhaled deeply.

"So you must have overheard our conversation..." the blue-haired punk concluded, eyes narrowing suspiciously.

"Just a bit..." the younger girl reluctantly confessed.

"There is no way you didn't hear every single vowel," she shot back, not buying the weak deflection.

Max shuffled awkwardly under the intense stare. "Okay, I heard something about money... drugs... but that's it."

"So, pretty much everything then," Chloe wryly remarked.

"To be fair, the bathroom is not the most private of places," Max countered. "Anyone could have heard you."

Chloe's brow furrowed. "It wasn't just anyone who overheard though. It was you. On top of that, you had a way to save me. That can't be a coincidence."

Once upon a time, Max had been certain her powers had a purpose – to help her friends. She soon realized that was a naïve perspective. There was no bigger picture in this, no greater good; that was simply a notion reserved for idealistic stories of heroes. Her powers had fucked her over more times than she could count, leaving her with less than nothing. She was tired of constantly being punished. No matter the consequences, she would find a way to keep Chloe happy and alive.

"Now for the big question: Did you tell anybody?"

Max didn't hesitate in her answer. "Absolutely. Nathan Prescott had a fucking gun on you."

"Gutless prick..." she mumbled under her breath, "that was scary. Who did you tell?"

"The Principal... but he didn't seem to believe me," Max replied dejectedly.

"The Principal?" Chloe asked incredulously. "Are you still twelve? That drunk jackass only cares about cash for Blackwell Academy... Don't trust him."

"I seem to recall someone not wanting to report Nathan earlier," Max couldn't help but add.

"Well, to be fair, if I'd known he'd actually shot me, then I sure as hell would have," Chloe defended. "Not that it did much good."
"Nathan will pay, don't you worry about that," the young time traveler mumbled angrily. "As will anyone else who messed with me and those I care about."

She wouldn't let Jefferson or the Prescotts get away with this. Half of the people in this room had been directly hurt by those two parties. Nathan had given Warren a black eye; drugged Kate, Rachel and Chloe and – if she was going to believe Jefferson – killed the latter pair. Not to mention his family provided that sicko with a stage to perform, the Dark Room.

Mark Jefferson had done much worse. Manipulated Nathan, kidnapped and photographed Rachel, Kate and so many others before them. He'd killed Nathan, Victoria, and Chloe directly. The catalyst for all of this – Rachel's death, Chloe's numerous deaths, her powers… he was the reason she was here now.

After promising she didn't mention Chloe, the bluenette relaxed and grabbed something from a shelf near the desk – a camera. "I, er, know it was your birthday last month… This was my father's real camera… I want you to have it."

"That's so cool you remembered my birthday," Max took the camera, her face falling as she handed it back. "But I can't take this."

Gently, Chloe pushed the camera back. "Of course you can. My dad would be pissed if I never used it. And now I know it will be used awesomely." She swiped the butterfly photo off the desk. "And I'll snag this picture as a symbol of our reunion. Cool?"

Without much hesitation, Max grinned. "Yes, of course it's cool! Thank you… This camera is so sweet."

"Now that we got the mushy shit out of the way." Chloe crouched down, choosing a song on her Hi-Fi. "I feel like stage diving! Let's thrash this place!

An upbeat rock tune came from the speakers much to both Chloe's delight and Victoria's annoyance, not to mention David's disapproval.

The brunette let out a small laugh as Chloe bounded over to her. "You're crazy."

"Yep, yep, I'm fucking insane in the brain! Let's dance! Shake that boney white ass!" Chloe jumped on the bed eagerly and swayed her hips. "or take my picture with your new camera!" Lining up the shot, Max did just that, capturing her erratic dancing. "This song fucking rules! Can't dance, hippie? Come on! Rawk out, girl!" Max started to awkwardly wave her arms around at her childhood best friend's encouragement. "Yes! Break it down, Max!"

"Remind me to never invite you to a Vortex Club party," Victoria abruptly announced. "You'd just embarrass yourself and everyone around you."

"Better than being an uptight bitch," Chloe mumbled under her breath. Max was thankful for her unexpected subtlety. The less strain, the better. Tensions would be running high enough as it was.

The party was interrupted by David's sudden appearance, Chloe blocking off the door to give Max chance to hide in the closet before he forced his way into the room. Immediately, he accused her of taking one of his guns. Then he noticed the still smoking joint in the ashtray on her desk.
He picked it up and began advancing on Chloe, his tone steely. "Wait, is that grass? You've been toking up in here!"

"Oh yeah, guns, weed... You are trippin' balls," she scoffed, trying to act tough.

His face darkened, drawing himself to his fullest height. "I am sick of your disrespect! Tell me the truth, that's an order! Whose is it?"

Making an executive decision, Max bypassed the choice. It wasn't majorly important to the overarching story and she needed to conserve her energy. Each pause increased the strain. Besides, she didn't want to see Chloe get hit by David. If she saw the bluenette get hurt again, she might explode with rage.

Decisively, Max stepped out of the closet and claimed the weed was hers. After getting thoroughly chewed out by David and finding out that Chloe had in fact taken his gun, they climbed out of the window and made their escape to the lighthouse. Chloe stormed off up the dirt path, calling for Max over her shoulder. When the brunette made it to the top, panting lightly, she saw the bluenette sat on a rickety bench near the cliff edge.

The sun was low in the multi-colored sky, its rays reflecting off the water's surface. Sitting down beside her, they reviewed their findings. Max informed Chloe about David's secret surveillance system, the blue-haired punk mentioning her debt and Nathan drugging her in return.

Her almost blasé attitude towards Nathan's behavior and cynicism for the police made Max frustrated. "I won't always be around to save you..."

Chloe offered her an appreciative smile. "You were here today, Max. You saved me! I'm still tripping on that... Seeing you after all these years feels like-"

"Destiny?" the younger girl finished for her.

"There's no such thing," Max stated with a snort.

She would never accept that. Everything she had done up to this point had defied 'fate' and 'destiny'. Those terms were just used to dodge responsibility for inaction. Instead of letting the universe mercilessly rip everything away from her, she had fought. One way or another, she would succeed in the end.

Without warning, Chloe stood over by the cliff edge, soon joined by Max. They stared out over the water in silence, wind ruffling their hair. "If this is destiny, I hope we can find Rachel. I miss her, Max." Her tone turned resentful and bitter. "This shit-pit has taken away everyone I've ever loved... I'd like to drop a bomb on Arcadia Bay and turn it to fucking glass..."

As Max was about to respond, she doubled over a clutched her head, expression pained. Suddenly, she collapsed to the ground, losing consciousness.

When her eyes opened again, she was back at the bottom of the winding path... and the storm was back. Groggily, she got to her feet, frantically looking around as the tempestuous wind howled and rain pelted down from gray clouds in the turbulent sky. Oh no, not again... Why
is this happening to me? Why am I here again? That was when she spotted a ghostly doe stood just a couple of feet from her.

The animal's presence raised many questions. Out of all of them, Rachel was the most fascinated by this; astrology and spirit animals really enthralled her. Considering everything that had happened to Max, the latter would make sense from what she had read.

Dodging her way past falling trees and other obstacles, Max followed the doe all the way to the top of the path. The ghostly animal disappeared near the cliff edge, just in front of the swirling vortex headed straight for Arcadia. Faint flapping caught her attention, a newspaper stuck to a wooden fence post. Curious, Max took it and read the date. "October 11th? Is this Friday! That's only four days away..."

The newspaper was violently ripped from her hand, lost in the wind. "Oh no." That tornado is headed straight for the town...

More music came from the speakers, but nobody commented on it this time. They were all too enthralled by the events unfurling before them on the screen. None of this seemed even remotely possible. Then again, they had all seen Max's powers with their own eyes.

When Max finally returned from her living nightmare, her legs gave out under her. The impending hurricane disappeared, sky shifting from a dark stormy gray to the previous warm watercolor palette.

She gripped onto Chloe, anchoring herself back in reality. "Chloe... you're here. I'm back. Oh my Lord. This is real... it's real. Oh man, this sucks..."

"Max, what's going on?" Chloe questioned hesitantly. "You totally blacked out."

"I didn't black out... I had a vision... the town is going to get wiped out by a tornado..."

"Oregon gets about five tornadoes every twenty years. You just zoned," the bluenette reassured, watching her freak out.

"No, no. I saw it," she insisted, grabbing onto Chloe's wrist. "I could actually feel the electricity in the air." After calming down, Max explained how she had managed to save Chloe from Nathan in the bathroom... with her rewind power.

Of course, the bluenette was skeptical. "Okay, I see you're a geek now with a great imagination, but this isn't an anime or a video game. People don't have those powers, Max..."

The brunette's bottom lip trembled. "I don't know what I have... But I have it. And I'm scared shitless."

"You need to get high. It's been a hella insane fucking day..." Chloe announced, trying to defuse the tension.

Max recoiled as something cold fell on her face. She wiped her cheek, looking up at the sky. Her jaw dropped and eyes widened as she saw something impossible... it was snowing.

"What the hell is this?" Chloe demanded.
"Snowflakes..." Max mumbled under her breath as snowflakes melted on her skin.

The blue-haired punk stood up, unable to comprehend the bizarre situation. "It's like 80 degrees... How?"

"Climate change," Max pushed off the ground to join her. "Or a storm is coming."

Chloe stood there for a while, trying to comprehend any of this. Eventually, her blue eyes settled on her childhood best friend, confused. "Max, start from the beginning. Tell me everything..."

Brief snapshots of the other people in the room showed while the snow fell. David was fixing a security camera facing the backyard, not giving it a second thought. Joyce was cleaning counters at the Two Whales Diner when she noticed the snowstorm.

Warren was in the science lab, glancing at the bizarre spectacle in awe. Kate was sat on her bed, crying her eyes out, totally oblivious to the strange occurrence. The beach materialized, a blonde man stumbling out of an RV to investigate a skinny brown dog barking at the snow.

Victoria stared at one of the many Missing Person posters plastered to a notice-board outside Blackwell, frowning at the weather. Principal Wells stared out the window of his office, observing the peculiar phenomenon as he sipped a glass of amber liquid.

Mark Jefferson was sat at his desk in the photography classroom shuffling through papers when the abnormal weather hit. Nathan was on campus, sat at a table examining his camera, paying little attention to the sudden snowfall.

Finally, red binders came into view, much too dark and blurry to read the spines. On the last was a name clearly written in slanted, uneven handwriting, sending a collective shiver down the spines of those present...

Rachel.

A tense silence filled the room as the screen faded to black. Those red binders, particularly the last, heightened anxiety. Whatever was going on here, Rachel wasn't the only one affected.

Warren ran his fingers through brown hair, exhaling deeply. "This... doesn't look good."

Kate's face scrunched up in distress at the implications. This must be important to the overarching story Max wanted to show them. Did her odd behavior have something to do with these binders? While Victoria despised Rachel, she didn't want her to get hurt – just knocked down a peg or two. Whatever was going on here was much more ominous. Taylor and Courtney watched her expression change from aloofness to one of mild unease.

David's hands clenched, eyes hard as steel while Joyce's face fell. Max's parents glanced over to their daughter, who seemed to almost fold in on herself at the appearance of the red binders. Fingers dug into her arms as she hugged herself. She didn't want to face this, she wanted to forget everything that had ever happened in that fucked up hell hole... but she had no choice.

Somehow, Rachel managed to keep her calm outward demeanor. Internally, she was panicking. It was safe to assume that the name on the binder wasn't a coincidence. For that reason, she prepared herself for the worst-case scenario.
Chloe’s face turned pale, a mounting sense of fear gripping at her heart. Rachel's disappearance and this fucked up binder made her scared to continue. She glanced over at Max, who was muttering to herself and visibly shaking— not from the strain of her powers, but out of fear.

Pushing through her distress, the bluenette placed a tentative hand on Max's shoulder. "Max…"

The brunette's hand unfurled, tension fading. She had to keep reminding herself that she wasn't in the Dark Room. Now, she had the chance to change everything. She couldn't give in to the fear, especially when there was much worse to come.

Just as much to reassure herself as the bluenette, she put a hand over Chloe's. She felt physically, mentally and emotionally drained. If she pushed herself now, she would definitely pass out again… and next time she might not wake up.

"We'll have a brief break now," Max suddenly announced. "I imagine everyone needs a moment to get things into perspective." She tiredly motioned over to a table pushed up against to the wall to the left. "I gather together some food and drink in case you need it. I… need some air. We will meet back here in fifteen minutes. Don't be late."

Without another word, she decisively strode over to the door and left before the flood of questions arrived. She needed some time alone, everyone could see that. It didn't stop some wanting to check on her.

The second she left, Vanessa and Ryan followed her out. Chloe was more hesitant, but ultimately decided she should at least offer her company if Max wanted it. The brunette's parent would probably interrogate her, not the best approach. Sometimes, just having someone there, even if you didn't talk, helped. Besides, she needed a cigarette break. So much for cutting down.

"I'll be back," she muttered to Rachel, arming herself with water bottles and potato chips. She hadn't seen Max eat or drink yet and Chloe was getting hungry, nothing new.

The sun hid behind clouds, a cool breeze hitting her skin as she left the auditorium. Soon enough, she heard muffled voices. Not wanting to eavesdrop, she hung around near the entrance and pulled the last cigarette from the battered box, tossing it to the ground. Cursing as she tried to get her old lighter to work, she finally lit the damn thing. A cloud of smoke left her mouth.

This was all so surreal and strange, even if she took the whole rewind thing out of the picture. For Max, all this must be a million times weirder.

A few minutes later, Max's parents trudged back to the entrance, disheartened. They offered Chloe a weary smile, returning to the auditorium. Flicking her half-smoked cigarette to the ground, stomping out the remaining embers, she went to find Max. She was sat on a bench near a tree, back turned and head in her hands. Under different circumstances, Chloe might jump her. Now wasn't the time.

Max lifted her head at the sound of footsteps, expression exhausted. "Oh, hey, Chloe."

The bluenette hated seeing her like this, so resigned. "I, uh, just wanted to see how you were doing. I totally get if you want to be alone, but…" she sighed. This sounded way better in her head.

Nodding, she gently patted the space beside her. "You know, I could use some company right now… especially you."

Chloe sat down beside her, trying to gauge what she was thinking. In the past, Max had been so easy to read. Not so much now…
"It's been a weird day, huh?" Max suddenly asked, breaking the tension.

"Yeah, it has," Chloe sighed deeply. "I bet it's been much weirder for you though."

"Things have been weird since I found out I had these powers," she sadly replied, glancing down at her right hand.

Not having a response to that, Chloe also glanced down at her hands, noticing the water bottle. It would be something to change the subject, at least. "Here, I grabbed some water and chips," she announced, holding them out to Max. "Figured you might want something."

"Thanks." Max smiled appreciatively as she took the items, unscrewing the lid to take a sip of water.

Chloe tapped her foot anxiously, opening the bag of chips. "So… what did your parents have to say?"

"Mostly they just asked me stuff, not that I can blame them," she responded tiredly. "It's not like I have all the answers anyway." Exhaling deeply, she ran her fingers through her hair. "How are you handling everything so far?"

She was obviously trying to divert attention away from herself. That and she always liked to see what other people were thinking, whether out of nosiness or genuine care… most likely both.

"Can't say it's the easiest thing to process," Chloe admitted. That was the understatement of the year, if not the century.

"It probably isn't going to get any easier," the brunette muttered with a shrug.

Finishing off her chips, Chloe screwed the bag up and chucked it over her shoulder, earning her an eye roll. "I figured as much. It's okay, though."

That was the last thing Max had expected her to say. "Oh?"

"Well, knowing you're looking out for me helps, although I am worried." The bluenette suddenly found her boots interesting. "I know you'll tell me to chill out, but… I can't help it, Max." Protectively, her arms crossed over her chest, shoulders hunching. "I know you probably won't be able to make any promises, but just… take it easy, yeah? I won't tell or force you to stop… whatever this is, but you're probably one of the only people in Arcadia who's not a total jackass. Even after all the shit we've been and will probably continue to go through, I'm... hella glad to see you again so..." Her brow furrowed slightly as the image of Max's collapsed body crossed her mind. "I'd rather not cut it short, if you can help it."

She desperately wanted to promise Chloe that everything would be fine but she couldn't. All she could do was try, for the bluenette's sake if nothing else. Truth be told, she wanted to make it out alive. The thought of dying was… fucking terrifying. If she had to sacrifice, she'd do it in a heartbeat. Didn't mean she had to like it. Maybe she could survive this… and maybe she was clinging to blind optimism.

Max rubbed her neck. "I'll… try, Chloe."

Chloe sighed in relief, offering her a smile. "That's good enough for me, Max. You'd better try hard though or I will totally beat your hipster ass down." She glanced back towards the auditorium. "Guess we'd better head on back now. Everyone will be waiting." Standing, she offered the brunette a hand. "C'mon, let's go."
Max tentatively took the hand she was offered as they made their way back. After her chat with Chloe, she was filled with a strengthened resolve to see this through to the end… and hopefully, beyond that.

Chapter End Notes

Phew, finally we've gotten through 'Chrysalis'. We shall be back next time to start 'Out of Time'.
Out of Time, Part 1

Chapter Notes

So, 'Out of Time' here we come.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Five: Out of Time, Part 1

When they returned to the auditorium, Max scanned the room to check everyone was back. Joyce and her parents were talking, David remaining stony faced in his chair. Victoria and her drone seemed to be discussing something. Warren was having a mini internal freak out – in awe of Max's power yet apprehensive. Kate was extremely quiet, no wonder really. Chloe re-joined Rachel, the blonde offering a small smile.

With everyone accounted for, watered and fed, Max returned to her chair. They were still very tense but the break had helped. At least, unlike her, they had other people to discuss choices with. If a decision led to a bad path, she had to take full responsibility. Honestly, she wasn't so sure if a 'right' answer even existed anymore.

All eyes turned to the young time traveler as she sat down. Warren hoped she'd take it easy from now on, she had been a friend to him once. Kate too didn't want to see her suffer. Even though Victoria may have seen her as a rival, she wasn't heartless. Neither was Taylor nor Courtney, who had been majorly concerned by the collapse.

Ryan and Vanessa had tried to convince Max to stop this during the break to no avail. They could see this was important to their daughter but they were desperately worried about her health. If it happened again, they would push much harder to get her to the hospital. No doubt Joyce would back them up, seeing Max as a second daughter. David would agree too, especially after the whole surveillance paranoia situation.

Rachel was worried, both for Max and Chloe's sake. When she had passed out, the bluenette went into full on panic mode. Thankfully, the brunette had woken up before she broke down completely. Next time, they might not be so lucky. As much as Chloe trusted Max, she refused to watch the slow deterioration to the point where her life was at risk. Nothing was worth that.

Soon, they would all see what was at stake, the reasons Max pushed herself so hard. There were so many dangers – Jefferson, the Prescotts, and that damn storm. She didn't even want to think about how much more aggressive it might be now. One step at a time.

The screen slowly flickered back to life, power flowing from her body – warm and tingly. So long as she didn't abuse the rewrite, she could maintain it for a pretty long time. With a bit of practice, she had unlocked a few new abilities. Shame it didn't come with a convenient "Rewind for Dummies" guide. All she had to go on was fiction.

Were there more people like her out there? Nobody in their right mind would publicly out themselves – they'd be carted off to the nearest mental institution. Or somebody would abuse the power if they did believe it, like in the films. Now wasn't the time to think about the hypotheticals. Clearing her mind of rampant thoughts, she relaxed and got her breathing steady.
Max awoke to the sound of indie music, morning light filtering through the window. Evidence of her time travel research – books, post-it notes, and papers – was scattered across her room, unorganized. Blue eyes opened as she stretched, looking exhausted.

_No amount of rewind will keep me clean._ With that thought, she stood and took a quick glance in the mirror before heading to the shower room. _Whoa, hello zombie-face. This is what happens when you research quantum physics all night…_

"You always were a lightweight," Chloe chuckled. As a kid, Max could barely stay up past twelve. When she did, she was so out of it the next morning.

"Need I mention movie nights?" Max countered defensively. Blade Runner was the only film Chloe had stayed awake through to the end. She frowned, remembering their alternate timeline screening – so much nostalgia – and the morning after… a soul-destroying decision.

"Glad to know I'm not the only one," Rachel added with a smirk. "Was starting to take it personally."

"I can't help it," Chloe protested. "I get hella comfy and warm, not to mention I usually eat a ton of snacks."

"You could at least _try_ to stay awake though," the blonde retorted playfully.

Then, Max's phone buzzed with a message from Chloe.

Chloe: _u there mad max_

Max: _Like I said. Always for you :) :) :)_

Chloe: _NO EMOJI!_

Max: :( 

Chloe: _meet me at the diner in 10_

Max: _I'll be there._

Chloe: _do not be late or I'll know time is not on your side_

Chloe: _Don't get high like in my room_

Max: _On my way. :)_

Chloe: _u r EVIL 40 minutes or else_

_Even with all this crazy shit going on, it is so cool having Chloe back in my life again. Like no time has passed…_

"Way to get all mushy on me, Caulfield," Chloe teased with a smirk.

"It's my job to be the mushy one in this friendship," Max replied softly. "I'll be waiting until hell freezes over before you voluntarily admit any kind of emotional vulnerability without making a joke."
"I have my moments," the bluenette protested defensively.

"Yeah, I know," she sighed. When Chloe wasn't trying to act so punk rock, she could be really sweet.

Even with all the bullshit, they had easily fallen into old habits. Chloe's presence had counterbalanced the scary ordeal. If only Max had gotten in touch sooner under better circumstances… she'd been such a coward and Chloe had suffered for it. No point dwelling on the past.

*Okay, Max, let's hit the showers now! Before she headed out, she glanced over at the photos near her bed. 'The Max Caulfield Photo Memorial Wall.'*

"I'm surprised there aren't more, to be honest," Chloe added, glad to see the brunette hadn't lost her spark.

"You should see her room in Seattle," Vanessa fondly commented, her husband nodding. Her walls were simply mediums for treasured memories.

*On her journey to the shower room, Max rubbed yet another crude message from Kate's whiteboard and saved Alyssa from a flying roll of TP.*

"Look at you playing the hero, Super Max," Chloe remarked as she watched her at work.

"It's become a bad habit of mine," Max sadly replied. That and trying to help people… The harder she tried, the more she fucked up. Just like when she'd tried to save William.

Picking up on the shift in mood, the bluenette nudged her shoulder. "I didn't mean that as a bad thing. At least you're trying."

Chloe made her sound so selfless but she had manipulated so many people using her powers. Not only that, she had risked everything to save her best friend, mostly for herself. Some of her actions just happened to benefit other people.

"I guess…" she mumbled, not wanting to argue; she didn't have the energy.

*Kate was at the sink, brushing her teeth when she walked in. The blonde thanked Max for saving her from David. After promising to return the book she'd borrowed – 'The October Country' – Max took the middle shower stall.*

"The last thing I wanted to see today was a twee hipster showering," Victoria grumbled irritatedly.

"I dunno," Rachel grinned cheekily. "Sounds like the start of a good film to me."

"I'm not even going to ask," Max muttered under her breath. Before, she might've been embarrassed by that comment. Not so much now.

"It's safer not to," Chloe confirmed. "There's some crazy shit going on in that girl's head."

"Take it as a compliment," Rachel smirked teasingly. "Besides, you're keeping this way too tame for my tastes."

"You really have no shame, do you? Not that I expected anything less from you," Victoria scoffed disapprovingly.
Kate shuffled uncomfortably, not the only one feeling awkward. The sound of the door creaking open on screen cut the conversation short.

Peering through the shower curtain, Max caught Victoria and Taylor harassing Kate, teasing her relentlessly over a video, just like the note in photography class. Unable to take it, the short blonde stormed out of the shower room. "You're going to be sorry someday."

With Kate still in earshot, Victoria continued her bullying. "Oh boo hoo, I'm sorry you're a viral slut. I'm sure she had fun."

"Looks like it," Taylor agreed quickly, properly fulfilling her role of mindless minion.

Staring into a mirror, Victoria ran her fingers through short blonde hair. "I know Nathan hooked her up. And you know he has the good shit."

"Preach it, sista."

After sufficiently bitching about the paint incident from yesterday – as well as Max and Kate – Victoria wrote the link to Kate's Vortex Club video, which Max rubbed out before leaving.

"Well, why am I not surprised?" Chloe sighed deeply, watching the relentless bullying. "You always did like picking on those people who wouldn't put up much of a fight, except for Rachel."

The blonde had bitten off more than she could chew with Rachel. Very few people could shrug off vindictive rumors like Blackwell's celebrity, though. Kate seemed like the kind of girl who took things to heart, which nobody should blame her for. She shouldn't have to put up with it in the first place.

"You certainly know where to hit a girl where it hurts," Rachel added bitterly.

Unlike most of Victoria's victims, the mischievous blonde was more than capable to fight back. The Queen Bitch of Blackwell didn't understand how precarious her position was. If she did, she'd definitely be nicer – most Vortex Club goers bore her no love or loyalty, same with Nathan. She chose to rule with terror, whereas Rachel focused on charm.

Warren simply shook his head, knowing what it was like to get bullied. This treatment was more brutal than he'd ever put up with.

Max's parents remained silent. Their daughter had always been an easy target thanks to her shy nature and lack of confidence, something that changed when she met Chloe – who picked a fight with anyone trying to bully Max. Hopefully, she could pay the favor forward for Kate.

"Can't poor Kate get a break?" Joyce said with forced calm. "First, my husband has been harassing her and now this? What the hell is going on?"

David had no response to that, feeling like a failure for his lack of justifiable focus on Kate. His methods seemed more urgent and aggressive than usual. Was it all related to those red binders?

This scene was unsettling for Victoria to watch. She saw it all: the slow deterioration in composure, closed off posture, quivering voice… tears. Guilt flooded her body. How many lives had she ruined this way over the years? All to make herself feel more secure. Her parents had taught her that anything was fair game to further her own goals; people were either obstacles or tools. None of the Vortex crew could face Kate, all too ashamed of the cruel bullying.
As for Kate, she winced at the harsh words. Clearly, Victoria had filmed her doing something gossip worthy, out of character she assumed. It was then she felt a hand on her shoulder.

"Kate, please understand that this is so important. Otherwise, I wouldn't put you through this. Just know I'm here for you, okay?" Max managed, tone strained and apologetic.

The shy blonde felt the hand on her shoulder shake, not from power strain but from emotion and fear. She softly placed her own hand over Max's, squeezing. "I'll be okay, Max. I don't think you'd do this to be spiteful, so don't worry."

Next, the brunette turned to Victoria with an icy glare. "And you, Victoria. You need to pay attention to this more than anyone."

Anger threatened to overwhelm her knowing what was to come. While Victoria had only been part of the problem, Max found it hard to forgive her like Kate had. Power surged through her body, reflecting her emotional instability. The screen jumped, air charged and warm.

Warren shivered, wondering if he should move. Kate frowned in concern, unable to help. Rachel drummed her fingers on her thigh, trying to ignore the electric feeling in the air giving her goosebumps. Chloe felt so damn useless; her friend was hurting but she didn't know what to say or do – infuriating.

Calming herself down, Max repeated her focusing mantra. Anger could wait. Focus on the threat.

Checking in on Dana, she went back to her room. It was impossible to miss the huge NOBODY MESSES WITH ME BITCH on her photo wall in red, alongside a really messed up picture on her bed. No fucking way! This is not why I came to Blackwell. And I still have to clean all this crap up? After I find Kate's book...

"No prizes for guessing who did that," Chloe muttered angrily. Didn't take a genius to figure out which entitled dick had waltzed into her room like he owned the place. "When I see that fucking prick, he's going to be sorry." She didn't appreciate people fucking with her friends, no matter who they were.

Ryan was just as mad, hands balled up as his body shook with rage. It took a lot for him to snap, as mild mannered as Max. "What the fuck is wrong with that school? There is no excuse. How can they let that little shit do whatever the fuck he wants? Hell, if he had actually shot Chloe, he'd have probably managed to get away with it somehow. I knew the Prescotts were bad news when we left, but this..." He couldn't speak anymore, words consumed by rage.

Vanessa said nothing, seething in silence. Principal Wells had sold Blackwell on being the 'perfect environment for students to thrive and flourish. Guess he conveniently forgot to mention the entitled, armed students breaking into dorm rooms and leaving threats. Nathan had probably gotten away with so much, testing the unending boundaries of his family's influence.

Joyce was also fuming. Even William – who had been the kindest, most forgiving man she'd ever met – would be up in arms. "I hope Nathan Prescott enjoys his time while he can because when I'm done with him... he'll wish he never came to Arcadia Bay.

In retrospect, the message had been nothing more than an empty threat. Nathan had been the least of Max's troubles. By the end, she had actually managed to feel a sliver of pity alongside the overwhelming hatred. He had been a tool, needed serious help that neither his father not Jefferson cared enough to provide. Victoria was the only one who did care, and she had been clueless until the very end. Had Max not been so focused on Nathan, she might have seen Jefferson coming –
there had been hints. She had been too trusting. Not anymore.

Ignoring it for now, she focused on Kate's book – avoiding a spillage with her rewind. On the way to 222, she received a threatening message.

Private Number: Keep your smart mouth shut about everything. Or I'm coming for your ass. I know where you sleep.

Oh shit, now I'm getting anonymous threats? It never ends… This has to be from Nathan… but it could be anybody… I better be doubly careful around here or I could be in serious danger… If I'm not already.

"Max..." Kate whispered as she saw the message.

Just how had she coped with everything? It must have been so stressful, bearing the weight alone. Max turned to her, blue eyes filled with terror. Somehow, she was still holding on… barely. And she would until the bitter end.

Warren rubbed his face with his hands, hoping he'd be there if Max ever needed his help. However small. He'd already helped with Nathan, so was confident she could rely on him to get her out of a tough situation. It was the very least he could do.

Rachel had expected something like this. Nathan could be fun to hang around with but was also easy to anger and a terrifying enemy to have. This was more extreme than anything she'd seen him do before, though. He must've experienced something truly traumatic to act out this way. Was it linked to her disappearance?

Victoria was the most surprised, unable to recognize the boy before her. Nathan was the only person who understood the pressure she endured living under the name of a prestigious family. She had seen his softer, more playful side on numerous occasions, making this hard to watch.

Pocketing her phone, she knocked on door 222. "Kate? You in there?"

A muffled voice carried through the closed door. "Yes, I'm here. Come in, Max..."

Kate's room was so dark, windows and mirrors covered. The bed was unmade, a small pile of crumpled clothes strewn in the far-right corner. In her trash can, there were scrunched up tissues and disturbing drawings. Atop a chest of drawers was a caged white rabbit with black ears and eye rings. A violin carelessly balanced on its case on the couch.

There was a harshly written letter from an Aunt, blaming Kate for what had happened to her. Photos were dotted around the room of her family and friends: Stella and Alyssa. Finally, an open bible – highlighted and scribble on. Matthew 11:28. "Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest..."

Kate sat at her desk, head propped on her hand. Poor Kate, she doesn't look good...

A morbid silence hung over the group at the state of Kate's room. She seemed like the neat type. Nobody could deny something was wrong now. It only took one look to realize that.

Tentatively, Max reached out to touch her shoulder. "Uh, hey, Kate, I brought your book..."

Kate lifted her head slowly – the normally warm, cheerful hazel eyes now despondent, her
The shy blonde winced at the vulnerability. She didn't want to imagine how desperate she must be feeling right now. This went beyond normal mood fluctuations.

"I hate bullies," Max mentioned firmly. "David Madsen should know better."

"I was hoping he would," Kate dejectedly mumbled, eyes glimmering with faint hope. "But it's nice to see that you care about me…"

The brunette's expression softened. "Kate, I actually do care. So, what's the story with you and David?"

"Well. He's a total paranoid ass! He thinks I'm part of the Vortex Club. Yeah, right."

"Because Kate really looks like the usual kind of asshole who goes to Vortex Club parties," Chloe retorted sarcastically. She was the very last person, even with Max around.

Victoria didn't even retaliate to this blatant insult; she didn't have the right to at this point.

"Hey, just remember that I've been to some of those parties," Rachel mumbled, trying to lighten the mood.

"Why does he think that?" she inquired softly, not wanting to alienate Kate.

"Because he saw the video," Kate's voice quivered, barely keeping her composure. "Do you know how humiliating this is for me?"

"I know this sucks, Kate, but… tell me about the video and maybe I can help," Max offered.

"Wait…" Kate interjected, gaze turning to Max. "That means… you didn't watch it?"

"I couldn't betray your trust like that." Her expression and tone softened. "You were my closest friend at Blackwell, on par with Warren. With everyone else gawping at the video, how would you feel if I watched it?" Her brow furrowed, eyes flickering with dejection. "I've already fucked Chloe over with passive participation. How could I let it happen again?"

"Max, quit blaming yourself for that," Chloe demanded, unable to take the self-depreciation anymore. "You've done so much for me already. Shit, by the end of this, you'll have probably saved me a thousand times. Saved everyone. So just… cut yourself some slack for once. Please." Her voice became quiet and strained. "Do it for me if nothing else."

Max was surprised by the forward request, especially since this Chloe held such bitter resentment towards her. "I…" she stammered, sighing and rubbing her temples. "It's… not that easy, Chloe." If it was, she would've already done it.

"Yeah. Sorry." The bluenette hung her head. Maybe it was childish and selfish to ask her to forgive herself just like that. It didn't work that way, she should know.

Max's heart dropped at the dejected expression. The last thing she wanted was to make her sad. "There's no need to apologize. You're just trying to help." She crossed her arms, deep in thought. "I'll get there someday." Maybe.

Offering a gentle smile, Chloe turned her attention back to the screen.
Kate curled in on herself, expression conflicted. "Basically, I went to one Vortex Club party and ended up making out with a bunch of people... and I have no memory of it..."

Kate inhaled sharply. No wonder she had been so depressed. She must be so worried about what her church and mom would think. Her dad would be supportive, but that wouldn't be enough to combat the excessive torment. Even just thinking about it made her feel so... hopeless.

Warren sat there, stunned. It seemed so out of character for someone like Kate. There had to be more than met the eye. Chloe and Rachel exchanged knowing glances. Kate's story of humiliation wasn't so uncommon. They suspected drugs, involuntarily taken – would explain the memory loss. With Frank around, it was easy enough to get what you wanted.

Max's parents just added this to the list of lies they had been told about Blackwell. David was angry, both at other people and himself. Instead of helping, he'd been part of the problem. In a way, Joyce was glad Chloe had been kicked from Blackwell, much too dangerous... not that it helped her much in the end.

Max glanced over at Victoria, knowing that deep down she didn't want to hurt people. Hopefully, this experience would open her eyes, give her a chance to redeem herself before it was too late. Same with all of them.

"That's awful," Max replied sympathetically. "So, how did that happen?"

Kate went on to explain that she had a single sip of red wine the whole night – Max seemed to suspect someone drugging her. She had started feeling dizzy and sick, then Nathan offered to take her to the hospital. All she could remember was waking up in a bright room, a soft voice, a sharp sting in her neck. The next day, she woke up outside her room, no marks or bruises. She theorized that Victoria was the one who took the video.

"Jesus Kate, I'm sorry. This is serious shit," Max breathed, at a loss of what to say.

Kate glanced up at her, eyes filled with desperation. "How do I get a viral video taken down? I know it's already spreading-what if my church sees that? I need to know what to do..."

"Kate, we'll figure it out," Max reassured gently. "I'll check back later, okay?" Returning the book, she turned to leave.

"So Max, can I ask you a question? And please be honest," Kate tentatively called out to her.

"Absolutely, Kate. Anything."

She was quiet, face cycling through a torrent of emotions – so vulnerable, like a single word would break her. "I need to find out if Nathan Prescott helped me... or hurt me after the party. Should I go to the police?"

The now familiar decision screen appeared with two options: GO TO POLICE or LOOK FOR PROOF.
"Well, as you can see we have another decision," Max noted in a hushed tone. "Choose wisely."

"Nathan can't get away with this, not again," Ryan finally mentioned, breaking the silence. "He's gotten away with too much as it is."

"I agree," Vanessa added. "Enough is enough."

"While I doubt it'll help much – considering how much power the Prescotts have over the police – Nathan can't keep doing this," Chloe agreed solemnly. "He's done it to me, Kate and god know who else."

Max shuddered, knowing Rachel's fate and Nathan's supposed involvement. How would they all react to the truth? Would they snap? Could they process it? Maybe, they would truly understand why she was doing this.

Rachel simply nodded at Chloe's reasoning. She had nothing further to include to the discussion; it would only waste time to repeat things.

Warren was next. "Let's hope the police actually do something about this." He didn't have much faith, but it was better than accepting that the Prescotts owned Arcadia.

Victoria abstained – she had protected Nathan too much already and made Kate suffer. Taylor and Courtney followed suit.

Max finally turned to Kate, already knowing the answer to her question. "How are you going to vote?"

"I imagine you already know what I am going to say, Max," Kate replied, wondering why the brunette was asking – there were enough votes.

Max offered her a sad yet comforting smile. "Like I said before, your vote is important and I want you to be able to voice it. You deserve that much." Especially after everything she'd had to endure.

Despite the somber exchange, Kate couldn't help but return the smile. Honestly, she wanted to cry at how sweet Max was to her. Choices, no matter how seemingly insignificant, meant something.

Shuffling in her seat, she answered. "I think I would appreciate going to the police. Even if it turns out to be useless, it would be nice to feel as if I'm being heard."

Max nodded before mumbling an approving, "Okay, go to the police it is then." At least with this choice, she'd only have to re-watch Kate's jump twice, none of them final. Not being able to save her would be… traumatizing for all involved.

Max nodded firmly. "Yes, you should definitely go to the police, Kate. I totally believe every word you say. Nathan Prescott is truly dangerous."

The blonde perked up, offering her first genuine smile. "Bless you, Max. I will go to the police… and also Principal Wells. With you as my backup witness, they'll have to take us seriously now."

"Backup witness?" Max asked, starting to backtrack. "Well, I mean, I believe you and everything, but… we're still just spoiled punk students to the cops and faculty… I think we just need to be very careful here..."
Right now, Max felt so angry at herself. Instead of worrying about her own scholarship, she should have been focused on Kate's pain. She could never forgive herself for uttering those words. Rachel noticed the brunette's self-rage out her peripheral vision. She probably blamed herself, even though she had done more for Kate than anyone. The others had either actively bullied her and spread the video around or passively watched, never challenging.


"Nothing… except the Prescotts are a powerful family," Max noted nervously. "I hope this won't backfire on us, that's all. Even though that rich bastard has earned some serious bad karma. He'll get it…"

Kate rested her head on her hand, subtly hinting that the conversation was over. Taking her cue, Max left.

If they thought the first part had been shocking and tense, it was nothing compared to what was to come. This was only the beginning of the nightmares.

Chapter End Notes

Things are starting to get tense with our mismatched group, huh?
Chapter Six: Out of Time, Part 2

Everything Max had shown them so far was a prelude to the horrifying week. When it came to certain events and decisions, there would no doubt be tears, unadulterated rage, even silence. It would hurt but she refused to allow history to repeat itself.

Ryan and Vanessa knew this was supposed to be the best years of their daughter's life, where she had the chance to explore and develop her passion. Instead, she had been subjected to the Prescott's reign of terror and nobody seemed to care, blamed her.

Kate's account had shaken the group. Given the attention, she must be a crucial part of the story. Maybe what happened was related to Rachel's disappearance, something the mischievous blonde suspected. There were so many questions still. Chloe was becoming increasingly worried about Rachel's fate… and Max herself. Her power was maybe more of a curse than a gift.

Once Max left Kate's room, she received a barrage of text spam from Chloe reminding her about their Two Whales breakfast meeting. After having a weirdly deep conversation with Samuel – about Spirit Animals and the weather – and making a tentative peace with Taylor, she headed to the bus stop. On the way, she got yet another threatening text, from Nathan's father this time.

"Can't these assholes give it a rest?" Chloe asked through gritted teeth. Max didn't deserve this kind of hassle. The Prescotts were clearly dangerous and Nathan needed some serious help for his aggression.

"Apparently not," Max replied bitterly. By the end of the week, nowhere felt safe for her. Nathan had already proven himself unstable by shooting Chloe. If her powers hadn't awakened then…

After a brief chat with a black-eyed Warren, who was hanging around the dorm, she continued to the bus stop. She noticed David and Nathan discussing something nearby, giving them a wide berth. David talking to Nathan cannot be a good thing. This has something to do with Kate… or Rachel

Joyce had to wonder what the hell David was up to. She wanted to trust him unconditionally. With the secret surveillance as well as harassing Kate and Max, it was easier to doubt him. Not to mention his mutually hostile attitude towards Chloe. As a family, they had fallen into a vicious cycle of miscommunication, too many unresolved issues.

David frowned at the heated debate on screen. He had never trusted Nathan or any of the Vortex Club members. He could only assume he was grilling the boy for information now. Both Rachel and Kate felt uneasy. David had always claimed Rachel was a bad influence on Chloe, making her out to be a complete villain. While he may have been partially right about her, his one-sided hostility towards Kate was unwarranted.

Not dwelling on the strange meeting, Max got on the bus and stuck her headphones in as she stared out of the window. Don't you know that I'll be around to guide you/Through your
weakest moments to leave them behind you/Returning nightmares only shadows/We'll cast some light and you'll be alright/ We'll cast some light and you'll be alright for now

When the bus came to a stop outside the diner, she stepped off receiving texts from Chloe.

Chloe: running late grab a booth at the diner

Chloe: mom will feed you

Shaking her head, smiling at Chloe's predictable untimely fashion, she texted back.

Max: Somebody better. I'll be lucky if you make it by noon

"Timekeeping has never been a strong point of yours, has it?" Rachel wryly remarked as she lightly elbowed the bluenette's ribs.

"Like you're any better," she retorted, pushing Rachel's shoulder in retaliation – the blonde nearly colliding into an unsuspecting Kate, who narrowly missed getting elbowed in the face.

Rachel turned to the other girl with an apologetic smile. "Sorry about that. Didn't mean to nearly break your nose." She shot a dirty glance Chloe's way, gently tapping her around the head. "Some of us don't think before we act."

"It's fine, Rachel. No need to worry about it. My nose is still intact, so all is well." A playful grin tugged at the corner of Kate's lips, tone playful. "If you had actually elbowed me, that would be a different story. I'm glad I could spare you from experiencing the famous Marsh wrath."

"Looks like I got off lightly, then," Rachel smirked in amusement.

It was really something to see these two interact. They were polar opposites: Rachel the wild, party animal type and Kate the shy Christian girl. Seeing them joke around like this was soothing. In moments like this, Max felt like she was making a difference, that she could change things.

"Well, I can't speak for your punctuality, Rachel. Chloe, on the other hand…" the brunette allowed herself a smirk.

"Yeah, gang up on me, why don't you?" the blue-haired punk pouted playfully. She didn't really mind the teasing, especially when Max got involved. It showed that she hadn't given up yet, hopefully.

After searching the area – nosing around a sketchy looking RV and talking to a homeless lady behind the diner – she headed into the Two Whales Diner. Man, that smell of breakfast and the sound of clanging silverware… makes me feel thirteen again…

Coming back to Arcadia had been a serious nostalgia trip for Max. Wherever she went, memories flooded her mind, mostly of her and Chloe's adventures. In five years, the sleepy town hadn't changed much, aside from looking more run down. Seattle had never been her home.

Seeing yet another bunch of Missing Person posters, she made a beeline for the middle booth. An older blonde woman, Joyce, made her way over with a jug of coffee. "And there she is—a lovely young woman. How are you doing, Max?"

The brunette flashed her a wide grin. "Hi Joyce, it's nice to see you again. You look the same."
Joyce raised an eyebrow in amusement, motioning towards her uniform. "Like I'm still a waitress at the Two Whale after all these years?"

Max shook her head. "No, like you still look pretty."

"Smooth, Max. Very smooth," Rachel chuckled heartily. "Maybe I can learn a thing or two from you."

"Max always did have a way with the ladies with that Caulfield charm," Chloe taunted mockingly with a wink. "Once she got past all the awkward stuttering of course. Right, Max?"

If only the bluenette knew… Wednesday morning would bring about some interesting discussion. As tempting as it was to avoid embarrassing decisions, it wouldn't be fair on Chloe. That and it took more energy to skip over huge chunks. On the plus side, it would provide a well-needed distraction and make her friend speechless for once.

As nonchalant as possible, Max shrugged. "You could say that."

"Nice save, kid. You're still smart," Joyce chuckled, her expression turning serious. "But not that smart… Now you get busted for smoking pot. I heard the whole sordid story from David. I'm sorry this was how you had to meet him. He's a good man… no matter what Chloe says."

"Willing to change that verdict?" Chloe muttered under her breath.

Ever since David turned up, only a few months after William's death, they had fought. Chloe had resented her mom, felt like she was trying to replace her dad. Deep down, she knew that wasn't true but anger was easier to deal with than sadness. She had been so young at the time of her father's death, yet old enough to understand.

As much as Max wanted to reassure them that David was on their side, it was better to show than tell. Chloe had only seen his bad side, one she had a hand in coaxing out. They were both stubborn as hell with very different opinions. If she told them all the answers, this experience wouldn't hold the same potency. They had to figure it all out on their own.

Kate – who probably had the most reason to hate David now – believed in second chances in the face of genuine remorse. Besides, Max wouldn't have invited him here if he really was a bad person.

"Yeah, I'm sure," Max muttered, rubbing the back of her neck. "I don't even smoke… like, ever. It was almost an accident. Very stupid."

Joyce placed her hands on the table, leaning in closer. "It surprised me fierce. I was hoping you could be a good influence in her life now…"

"I will be. Promise," Max reassured, expression sympathetic. "I know things were hard for you and Chloe. I feel bad that I didn’t call. Now my folks are in Seattle and I'm all alone at Blackwell. It's my karma."

Sighing, the older woman's blue eyes flashed with melancholy. "You did the right thing. You moved forward with your life. I did, after William passed on. Chloe… Chloe chose to stay angry." She shook off the thoughts of William, offering up a slight smile. "Anyway, I hope we see more of you. Chloe needs an old friend again."
"Joyce, I am so sorry about William. I have great memories of him," Max added earnestly.

William had a presence that instantly lit up a room, mostly with his terrible puns and dad humor – something Max had unfortunately inherited. In fact, she'd picked up her love of photography from him, too – something he only encouraged. His death had been a major knock on her confidence; she was practically an honorary member of the Price family.

Even after all these years, William was a sore spot for Chloe. She'd never really grieved properly, instead remaining angry and bitter. Whenever her mom had tried to bring him up, the bluenette shut her down. Maybe it was time to sort through a few unresolved feelings instead of running away. It might be painful and take a while, but it was better than bottling it all up.

"I'm glad, Max. That was his gift to us… wonderful memories. Even if Chloe doesn't understand yet," Joyce said, her voice thick with emotion.

"Chloe understands," Max gently interjected. "She just needs… time. I know that sucks for you."

"Oh, she hit all the phases…" Joyce revealed with a tired, resigned smile. "Expulsion, running away, drugs, bad boys, tattoos, piercings, blue hair… Now she's gotta rebel against her stepfather."

The brunette fidgeted in her seat. "I see why… I mean-"

Joyce didn't seem surprised by the unfavorable opinion. "Do you? He's not as much of a hardass as you think. But you did tell him you had a joint, right? You took that responsibility?"

Max bit her lip, worrying it between her teeth. "David scared me when he said he might have my scholarship taken away for that stupid joint…"

"Nobody's in trouble over a doobie, Max," Joyce reassured, a genuine grin forming. "And I admire that you took the heat for Chloe… Like a great friend."

Max would hardly consider herself a great friend. Just a coward too caught up in excuses to face responsibility. She had to stop with the lame ass justifications, just accept that she had been a shitty friend to Chloe. That wasn't her anymore, not for the rest of her life… however long that may be.

Joyce grin faded as she continued. "But Chloe does push David and it's not fair. He paid his dues in a war. He does care about her, along with all the students at Blackwell."

"He cares about Kate Marsh?" Max asked with a frown.

The question earned her a shrug. "David mentioned her, but I stay out of his business. I won't patrol Blackwell and he won't cook at the diner, you know?"

"I saw him arguing with Kate… I thought you might know why…" Max muttered, staring into her steaming cup of coffee.

"Nice try, Nancy Drew," Joyce chortled at the persistent curiosity. "But next to you, there's only one student I'm worried about. And she's not even in school anymore."
Ordering Joyce's famous Belgian waffles, Max let the nostalgia wash over her. As she stared out of the window, she idly traced a Warren-esque math equation carved into the table and sipped at her coffee.

When Joyce returned, she put a plate of delicious looking waffles on the table. "I can hear your stomach rumbling from here, Max. Here. You'll love this."

Max rubbed her hands together eagerly. "I'm drooling like a baby."

"You and Chloe always did love coming to the diner." For the first time in a while, Joyce managed a genuine smile. Even though Chloe always played up and caused a mess, they were fond memories. What she wouldn't give to go back before their lives had been turned upside down.

"I still do," Max replied, recalling how amazing it felt coming back to the Two Whales. So many memories of a simpler time. "I have yet to find food that rivals the stuff you make."

"Flattery will get you everywhere," Joyce chuckled.

"Still can't believe you're a woman," the older woman sighed. "When I look at pictures of Chloe-" The door to the diner was violently pushed open. "Speak of the devil…"

"Mom and Max, together again!" the bluenette exclaimed as she cockily sauntered over to the table.

Joyce regarded her with a suspicious glance. "And Chloe, looking for a free meal. You've put your whole damn college fund on your tab."

"I'm treating Chloe for breakfast," Max interjected swiftly, nibbling at her breakfast.

"Are you atoning for yesterday?" Joyce asked sternly, simply an act for Chloe's benefit.

"Oh God Mom, please do not give Max any shit for that. She apologized," the blue-haired punk whined in Max's defense.

Joyce's expression softened. "I know she did. Max is a good girl-woman," she quickly corrected herself with a wistful tone. "She's eighteen now."

Chloe casually placed her hands behind her head. "Too old to get lectures from you or Sgt. Pepper."

"Call him David if you don't want to be lectured," Joyce cautioned before adding as an afterthought, "You only get one damn slice of bacon today."

"Damn, that's harsh," Rachel teased lightly. "Joyce really knows your weaknesses."

"I should do," the older woman concurred with mild amusement. "Chloe is hardly subtle about… well, anything really. I don't know where she puts it all…"

Chloe shrugged at the almost accusatory tone, leaning back in her chair with a loud creak. "Well, I'm a growing girl. What more can I say?"

"It would be nice to not be eaten out of house and home though," Joyce countered. Her daughter had a healthy appetite; it was any wonder how she stayed so thin. Good thing, too. Chloe wouldn't
change her eating habits for love nor money.

"Just you wait," Rachel piped in. "It'll catch up with you one day."

"Oh, really? I think that might be the jealousy talking," Chloe retorted, sticking out her tongue.

Contrary to popular belief, Rachel had to watch what she ate and exercise regularly to keep her figure. Unlike Chloe, who could stuff her face with whatever she fancied, no consequence.

Irritated, Chloe waltzed over and changed the jukebox to a rockier tune. Then, she jumped into the seat opposite Max. "Let's talk about your superpower…"

Max took a deep breath and gathered her thoughts. "I don't have any explanation… And I can't explain why I saw that crazy fucking tornado…"

"Come one, that's just a daydream," Chloe scoffed dismissively. "I want proof you can rewind time."

"This is all happening so fast…" Max sighed, leaning back in her seat.

"We'll start slow. Right here. Now," she prompted eagerly, excited to play with the rewind.

Smirking, Max came up with a plan. "Mhhh… I can tell you every single thing you have in your pockets."

Chloe's face lit up at this. "You have X-ray vision, dude? I don't even know what's in my pockets. Let me see…" Checking under the table, she turned back to the brunette. "Okay Max, impress me!"

After some rewind manipulation, she managed to get it right – keys with a cute panda key chain, seven cigarettes, 86 cents and a parking ticket. Emptying her pockets onto the table, Chloe stared in awe.

"Amazeballs. I literally just got chills all over my neck," she glanced up to meet Max's smug expression. "You have powers."

"Take that crap off the table, Chloe," Joyce ordered with a swiping motion as she brought Chloe's food over.

"Sure mom," the bluenette sighed, shoving her meager possessions back into her pockets. When Joyce left them alone, she dug into her food with the ravenous ferocity of a half-starved animal. "Man, I'm hungry like the wolf."

"Clearly."

Pausing momentarily, she gave Max a grin. "I'm freaking out about what just happened. You have to show me more, something way cooler so I will believe you without a doubt…"

Max leaned forward, enjoying messing around with Chloe's head. "I will predict the future."

"No way!" the blue-haired punk exclaimed, positively buzzing with excitement.

"I don't think I have ever seen you so excited," Rachel remarked smugly. "It's kinda cute."
Chloe narrowed her eyes. "I'll have you know there is nothing cute about me. I am 100% punk rock and I will beat down anybody who claims differently."

"If you say so," the blonde chuckled, holding up her hands. It was almost funny how adamantly the bluenette defended her image. When their stubborn natures clashed during an argument, sparks flew and things got broken.

In the next thirty seconds, four things of note happened. A trucker dropped his mug. The cop at the counter was left by his partner. Joyce broke up a fight between Justin and Trevor. A cockroach crawled onto the jukebox, making it go haywire. Rewinding, she relayed everything to Chloe, who was astounded when it played out exactly as Max predicted.

Hands flat on the table, Chloe bowed her head. "I pledge allegiance to Max and the power for which she stands…"

"This isn't a toy, Chloe," Max clarified, already suspecting a scheme to abuse her power. "I do have to be careful how I use it-"

"Very careful," Max mumbled under her breath. At the beginning of the week, she had misused her power, played with forces she didn't understand – still was. Even now, there were so many unanswered questions.

Chloe scoffed, disbelieving of her reluctance. "Screw that! Of course it's a toy! The best toy ever! You can bang anyone with no strings attached, rewind time and boom." She slammed her hand on the table, cutlery clattering. "It's like it never happened!"

"Trust you to think of that," Rachel snorted.

"Like hell you wouldn't think of that first too," Chloe defended, knowing full well that Rachel would be abusing a power like that left, right and center.

If Chloe had the rewind power, she would try to travel back to the day of William's death. If she could change that, her life would be so much better. Her dad would be alive and she could get in touch with Max without the awkwardness.

"I might, but I don't think I'd be announcing it so willingly," Rachel admitted, wondering what she would use it for. There would be so much potential to exploit.

Joyce shook her head despairingly. "I think we can all be thankful that Max had these powers instead. God knows you two cause enough trouble as it is without having an advantage like that."

"I second that," the young time traveler agreed.

Max pondered over what the group might use her power for. Chloe would prank people, as would Rachel. Her parents might relive old memories from her childhood. David would use it to catch people in the act. Joyce might use it to one up Chloe for once… or go back to when William was alive, the thought making her heart sink.

Warren would probably volunteer himself for weird and wonderful science experiments. As for Victoria, humiliating rivals, blackmail material and extra time for her biting put downs, until recently anyway. When it came to Kate, she would use her powers to help people – the reason she would choose the shy blonde if she had to. After her experience, she wouldn't wish this power on anyone.
"Traitor!" Chloe huffed, delivering her next line in her infamously bad childhood pirate accent. "Yar, I never expected me trusty first mate to mutiny!"

"You are really embarrassing sometimes, you know that, right?" Max sighed, rolling her eyes playfully.

"I should hope so. I try my best." She flashed Max an impish grin. "You know you love it really."

Max couldn't really deny that. Some of her best memories involved Chloe – them acting like the total dorks they were at heart. It was crazy how quickly they had fallen back into old routines over the week, with a few changes.

"Maybe I do," Max reluctantly admitted, knowing that it would go straight to her head. "Only because it's you, though."

"Does that give me a free pass then?" Chloe cheekily asked. Over the years, she'd gotten away with a lot around Max. Although, the shy brunette could put her foot down when needed.

Max shrugged. "Someone has to put up with you. I'm willing to accept the burden."

"I take back every nice thing I ever said about you, Maxine Caulfield," Chloe added extra emphasis, casually flipping her off.

"Max, never Maxine," she corrected, nose wrinkling at the use of her full name. Chloe knew it annoyed her. Next time, she'd add some extra emojis to her text as payback… incentive enough to survive.

Max rolled her eyes at the suggestion. "Grow up."

"Maybe you made a move on me and I would never know!" Chloe shot back playfully with a wide smirk.

"Do I sense some wishful thinking on your part there, Chloe?" Rachel grinned mischievously.

"Hey, Max would be damn lucky to make a move on me," the bluenette protested, pushing back the embarrassment. She refused to give Rachel the satisfaction.

With everything she knew now, Max had to wonder if Chloe had been at least partly serious, even hopeful back then. "I could do worse."

The blue-haired punk shot her an annoyed glance, pushing her shoulder. "You are such a bitch sometimes."

"Says you," Max retorted softly, enjoying the fleeting respite.

"Yes, that's what I did," Max countered sarcastically.

"You can rewind time, Max," Chloe stated, brushing off her light mockery. "That's fucking insane. We have to play!"

"I don't have time," the brunette sighed, leaning back.

"You did not just say that," she replied incredulously. A thin trail of blood trickled from Max's nose. "Uh… Check your nose. Too much blow?" When Max's expression became strained, the bluenette frowned with concern. "Hey, you okay?"
Warren ran his fingers through his hair, going through his movie time travel knowledge. The logic ran in two veins: one where the wielder faced no backlash, the other where a single seemingly insignificant action had drastic consequences for everyone. The latter seemed to be more apt in Max's case. People weren't supposed to have this power, bodies and minds unprepared.

Kate bit the inside of her cheek, a sense of dread overwhelming her. Victoria's eyes widened a fraction, not too surprised by the nosebleed. Ryan and Vanessa hated every moment they saw their daughter in pain. Joyce equally worried for her well-being. Even David managed a concerned expression. Rachel tapped her foot, aware of Chloe's increasing anxiety. The bluenette felt a lump in her throat, guilt flooding her body. She had pushed Max too hard.

The blood flow lessened, Max's face relaxing. "Too much excitement. See what happens when we hook up again?"" Then… let's go to one of my secret lairs and fully test your power." Chloe stood, motioning for her to follow. "You need a sidekick to guide you."

Not needing much prompting, Max shuffled off the chair. "Okay, Girl Wonder… Show me the way to Chloe's Cave." *Chloe finally believes me… and I wonder what kind of crazy shit she has in mind now.*

"You could sound a little more excited to be spending time with me," Chloe quipped.

"Can you blame me after all the trouble you nearly got me into as a kid with your bright ideas?" Max asked with amused skepticism.

"Well, someone had to show you what fun actually was," the bluenette replied with a smirk.

As much as Max enjoyed the joking, she had to make sure Chloe understood how she really felt. "We didn't need to do stupid shit to have fun, Chloe. Just chilling out and talking about random stuff was more than enough... well, for me anyway."

The older girl stumbled over her words with the drastic change in tone. "Well… yeah, it was for me too, but… I thought you might kind of get bored of it after a while, I guess."

"Get bored… around Chloe Price?" Max questioned incredulously. "Not likely. That is almost an oxymoron."

Instead of replying, Chloe remained silent. Anything she said now would make her sound like a mushy sap. Some things should only be said to the intended person.

"Okay Supergirl, let's go to my secret place!" Chloe exclaimed excitedly as Max's phone started vibrating. "Don't even answer. We have places to go... and people to do..." She bounced on the balls of her feet, wildly swinging her arms. "Come on, before Mom starts some more shit. Let's bail!"

"It's Kate Marsh from Blackwell..." Max revealed hesitantly, glancing at her phone.

"Big whoop. You don't call me once in over five years and now you're all over some beeyatch you see every day at school?" When the brunette didn't move, her eyes flickered with disappointment. "I see how you roll. So go ahead, chat up Kate Marsh from Blackwell. I've got other people to hang out with too."
Just as before, two choices appeared on screen: **ANSWER** or **DON'T ANSWER**.

While Max was confident she knew what they would choose, she couldn't bypass the decision. The only real benefit from not answering Kate was keeping Chloe from getting pissed. In the grand scheme of things, that wouldn't last. Besides, there was much more than hurt feelings at stake. To speed things up, she prompted them. "I assume that most, if not all of you, will want to answer."

Her assumption was met with nods and confirming glances. However you looked at it, Kate needed support. A very dull ache formed in the back of Max's mind as she let the memory resume. Soon, she could rest – after the rooftop scene. The others would need a break then, too. She suspected there would be discussion and apologies left, right and center.

**Offering Chloe an apologetic look, she answered the call. "Hey Kate, what's up?"**

"Please, don't let your best friend get in the way," she mumbled bitterly as the brunette moved away.

"You okay?" In the background, Joyce and Chloe seemed to be having an argument. "I promise Kate, I won't forget." Max listened for a moment before replying, "I swear. Just do your homework and don't stress... I really don't think we should go into this right now... I'll call you later though, okay?"

Max gritted her teeth. There wouldn't even be a later... without her power. If she had just insisted on going to Blackwell, she would've avoided the junkyard fiasco and been there for Kate. The screen flickered as the image of a train thundering towards Chloe materialized, alongside her echoed pleas for help. Forcing it back, she took a breath and focused.

**Hanging up, Max returned to the bluenette, who was annoyed by her decision. "Thanks, Max. If you'd rather chill with Kate, please go ahead."

"You are ridiculous. I'm chillin' with you, okay?" Max weakly responded, flinching at the harsh tone.**

"For now. Let's rock," Chloe muttered, storming out of the diner.

**Sighing, Max hung back and rubbed her neck. *Sucks that Chloe and Joyce got into an argument... I could rewind and not answer Kate. It's not like I won't see her in class later.***

Again, Max hated herself. Kate so obviously needed help – reached out to her – and yet she still doubted her decision at the time. By ignoring Kate, history would repeat itself – just like with Chloe. No more. She refused to continue this cycle of being a liability, a spineless coward. It had taken her too long to figure it out. From now on, she would **never** abandon anyone.

Chapter End Notes

And so the heartache begins...
Chapter Seven: Out of Time, Part 3

The rest of that Tuesday would be tough to get through, and that word didn't do it justice. The junkyard and then… Kate. Words were inadequate to convey the emotional trauma. Kate's attempted suicide was only the beginning of the horrific ordeal. Max wondered how the others would cope with the surreal, crazy week. Probably not much better than she had. Honestly, she had several close calls for a complete emotional breakdown, especially by Friday.

Would they have done the same? Ripped time apart to save a friend? Would Chloe if the roles were reversed?

She liked to assume yes. Despite being angry and betrayal, Chloe had shown she cared in her own way. Some may see the bluenette as selfish or immature – not totally unfounded – but she did step up when it mattered. For those few who earned her trust.

Now, how would she react in Chloe's position? Probably not as bitterly but she would've been depressed and majorly self-conscious. Locked herself in her room, slowly retracting. Maybe she would've eventually let rage consume her. Or given up and faded away. Unlike her, Chloe would've gotten in touch over those five years – support would help.

There was no point thinking about what could've been. All she knew was the here and now. Even that wasn't certain anymore.

Arcadia Bay's Junkyard – a twisted dirt path snaking through walls of discarded refuse, the most notable a rusted, yellow bus and an old, run down boat opposite. Train tracks ran parallel, vibrating occasionally as a train passed by. Beyond that, the outer edge of the forest, tall trees swishing in the gentle breeze, birds softly chirping.

"Is this a race?" Max panted lightly as she struggled to keep up with Chloe's long strides.

"Keep up," Chloe called back, maintaining her fast pace.

"How many times are you going to get pissed at me this week?" the brunette sighed, cheeks flushed from exertion.

"That depends on you. And how well you do in this phase of the test…," Chloe spread her arms out in invitation, a half empty beer bottle loosely held in her hand. "Welcome to American Rust, my home away from Hell."

Max shook her head at the introduction. "Raw and rough. It suits you…"

David's jaw tensed. Dangerous people made regular use of the junkyard, most of whom were pumped full of drugs or involved in shady deals, sometimes both. He'd lost count of the arguments over the dubious choice in hang out zone, only encouraging Chloe to frequent it. Joyce knew the kinds of people who lived in Arcadia and didn't want to see Chloe get crushed by a mountain of debris. Ryan and Vanessa also worried over the potential dangers for both girls.
Victoria's nose wrinkled in disgust at the sight: warped, rusted cars; broken washing machines; jagged glass and ripped fabric. She wouldn't be caught dead near this place. Kate felt sad at the wasted potential of this beautiful area. Warren noticed a familiar metal frame, similar to his own car. He wryly wondered how long it was until his also ended up on the pile, not too long by the looks of it.

"Couldn't keep away, huh?" Rachel asked softly, eyes drawn to the gray brick shack by the railway. They had spent so much time here, a safe haven from people like David. She still remembered the day they claimed the building as their own. After clearing out the debris and broken glass, they went on a huge treasure hunt. Planks of wood and concrete bricks became makeshift furniture. The walls were gradually covered with graffiti, posters and a salvaged dartboard. Gradually, it became home.

"Guess not," Chloe mumbled in response. Even if Rachel had disappeared, this place was the closest to a sanctuary that she had. It wasn't perfect. Then again, when was anything?

Max shuddered, knowing what was just a few feet away… a shallow grave. How many times had she unknowingly walked over that spot? It made her feel ill thinking about it.

The anger from before faded, Chloe's mind now occupied with the rewind power. "Max, do you even know how awesome this is? I get my best friend back and she's also super sized?"

"We don't know for how long," Max pointed out.

"Exactly why it's time to have fun." The bluenette walked over to the right, producing David's gun with a victorious smirk.

"Are you kidding?" the younger girl asked incredulously. "After yesterday, I'm kinda over guns, Chloe. It freaks me out that you have one."

Playing around with guns never ended well, they had all seen that by now. David had witnessed the dangers first-hand, memories that would remain with him forever. He should have locked them up. Joyce was mad at herself; she should have never let him bring them into her house. Max's parents watched the weapon closely, expressions hardening when the barrel went near their daughter.

Kate folded in on herself, scared of guns regardless of who was behind the trigger. Warren sighed, watching the brunette's worry increase by the second. Victoria watched, expression stoic. Courtney shuffled uncomfortably, passing a sideways glance to Courtney, who visibly tensed. Rachel wasn't surprised; Chloe was always eager to play with anything dangerous, showing off.

It was clear to Chloe that Max was uncomfortable around the gun, her on screen counterpart ignoring her concern. The time traveling brunette just wished she had confiscated the gun then and there, dragged her friend away.

"Don't you trust me?" Chloe asked, aiming the gun dead ahead.

Max eyed the gun up nervously. "Yes, but not that gun."

Scoffing, the bluenette rolled her eyes. "You have more power than an army. Don't be scared of my little toy. Besides, we need it for the test..." She offered the beer bottle. "Drink?"

Frowning, Max's face crumpled. "Yuck."
"You are so cute-you haven't changed a bit," Chloe chuckled, passing the bottle a brief glance. "Okay, let's do this. Can you find five bottles while I prep the shooting range?"

"Beers and guns, nice combo," the younger girl remarked sarcastically, pointing them out.

"Chloe…" Joyce sighed. Her daughter's disregard for safety had gotten her in trouble so many times. The bluenette's recklessness coupled with the rewind power sure didn't help her devil-may-care-attitude.

"Always the thrill-seeker," Rachel mentioned, leaning back in her seat.

She and Chloe had done a lot of impulsive, high-risk things over the years. There had been a few broken bones, bruises, and battered egos but nothing serious. As much as Rachel was a catalyst for reckless behavior, Max was the counterbalance.

"You can handle it," Chloe dismissively commented, flashing her puppy dog eyes. "Now find us five bottles. Pretty please?"

While she prepped the shooting range, Max went on a bottle hunt. During her search, she noticed a strange, ghostly doe near the edge of the junkyard. Wowser, that looks exactly like the same doe from my tornado vision… That doe is the perfect photo op… It darted off the second she snapped it, not appearing in the photo after.

"What was that all about?" Warren asked with a curious tone. He was a man of science – and proud to be – but some things were beyond explanation. From his years of pirated movie watching, he had developed an open mind and a healthy curiosity.

Rachel, on the other hand, was captivated by the mystical and supernatural – obsessed with astrology, horoscopes and spirit animals. The latter seemed to fit here. As far as she had read, the doe helped overcome challenges with grave and served as a reminder to treat yourself and others with gentleness.

The only one who knew what the doe had been guiding her to was Max, screen flickering as she recalled the rancid smell. She would never be able to forget it.

Max entered the small gray brick building by the railway. Graffiti and posters lined the walls. Empty beer bottles and pizza boxes littered the floor. A dartboard was fixed near the doorless entrance, a tally underneath showing that Rachel was winning by miles. The makeshift table was covered in makeup, an ashtray, and other trinkets.

This looks like a graffiti museum for Chloe and Rachel… I bet I can find more about Rachel here.

"Well, that building looks like tetanus just waiting to happen," Warren quipped with a smirk.

The bluenette shot him a dirty glance, wiping the grin off his face. To others, it might not look like much but she had a lot of fond memories here. One stern stare from Max and she bit back the torrent of snide remarks. Normally, the brunette looked pretty cute when mad, pouting. This was much more intense, sending a shiver down her spine.

Two frayed bracelets sat atop a DIY bench – one blue and red with a small metal 'C', the other yellow and light purple with an 'R'. That kind of hurts… There was also a strip of photos from a booth. They really were besties. That could have been me instead of Rachel…
On the floor was a battered CD. ‘Rachel Songs’. I wonder if Chloe would ever make me a mixtape.

"I'm sensing a theme here," Rachel cheekily remarked, glancing at Max.

The younger girl smiled sheepishly. "Maybe…"

Honestly, she had been jealous of Rachel. Chloe searched so damn hard, mentioned her with such a gentle tone and gained a new catchphrase, 'I wish Rachel was here'. The way she had reacted when she found out about Frank – so hurt and betrayed – got Max wondering. Just what was Rachel to Chloe? The bluenette had called the blonde 'smart, sassy and sexy', admitting that she crushed on her. Certain… events suggested Chloe might be attracted to women, Wednesday a prime example. Maybe it was a one-sided thing… or the blue-haired punk was more committed than Rachel.

How would Chloe react this time around?

There was a scrunched-up Vortex Club flyer laying on the floor. So Rachel did go to a Vortex Club party… this flyer is dated right before she disappeared.

The Vortex Club connection set off alarm bells given Kate's account. It couldn't just be a coincidence. Nathan seemed to be the main culprit, the group making the same assumptions Max had… one that nearly cost her everything.

Partway through her search, she sat down on a chair up on an old boat to collect her thoughts. Although this junkyard is a dive, I see why Chloe hangs here… She's a steampunk… It actually feels like Chloe and I are kids again, we're hiding out and plotting our future… Despite all the chaos and bullshit, I feel so giddy hanging out with her again… So happy… Like we've both gone back in time…

They had made so many plans, adventuring the world. From sailing the seven seas in search of legendary treasures to exploring uncharted far away lands inhabited by mythical creatures. The only possibility they hadn't considered… making their future journeys alone.

Life was unfair.

Chloe glanced over at her, wondering if she was remembering the same childhood memories. There were so many unforgettable ones to choose from. Gods knew she'd tried to erase those bittersweet recollections.

"A little heavy on the time references, don't you think?" Warren asked with a grin.

"Like you wouldn't be doing the same," Max countered smugly. "That and your impressive arsenal of time-related movie quotes and puns to abuse."

"Hey, I didn't watch all those films to waste an opportunity like that," he pointed out with pride. "You bet I'd be making as many as I could. I have a reputation to uphold after all."

Max managed to crack a smile. "Oh, I get it now. So, that was all pre-emptive watching to collect cool quotes for when you finally got your rewind powers, huh?"

"Anything's possible. You're living proof of that. A human time machine…" he replied in awe. If only he could test the rewind… Still, a power like that came with responsibilities and consequences.
Finding the last bottle, she made her way back over to Chloe. On the way, she stopped to check a message from Kate.

Kate: Max, I want to thank you for giving me such great advice about going to the police and telling them everything about Nathan. I so appreciate you standing by me. Keeps my faith xoxoxo

Max: Kate I'm on your side.

Max: Please don't mention me too much if you can. I'm already in trouble around here.

Kate: And thanks so much for talking to me this morning. I was about to have a serious cry and I needed a friend. You were there. As usual :) xoxoxo

If only she had given more support, maybe she wouldn't have needed her rewind power to save Kate… Losing her scholarship and getting a few threats paled in comparison to the alternative. While Jefferson may have been the catalyst for her pain, the spiteful, ignorant behavior had pushed the blonde to the roof.

"You're serious about this," Max cautiously observed, watching Chloe line up the bottles.

"We're going to shoot all these bottles without wasting a single bullet! Max, you have to help me aim," Chloe excitedly announced, unperturbed by the potential dangers.

The first three shots went without a hitch – the last bouncing off a metal wheel rim for a trick shot – the brunette rewinding to line her up. "Nice shootin' Tex."

Apparently, that wasn't enough for Chloe. Shaking her head, Max pointed out the bumper of a nearby rusted car.

"Goodbye, cruel bumper…" she remarked dramatically, the bullet bouncing back into her chest. "Jesus, I shot myself! I shot myself! Back up, back, up!"

This was the second-time Chloe had been shot. Joyce gasped; once had been more than enough. David was horrified, his own gun almost killing his step-daughter. Rachel frowned, knowing this could have just as easily happened without Max around to save the day. Seeing the bluenette get hurt yet again cut Max deep. It never got easier. She had spent so much time and energy keeping her alive, even now. A never-ending nightmare.

Rewinding, Max adjusted her aim to the tire. It burst, the car smashing onto the bottles.

"Uber-cool." Chloe slapped the brunette's hand, bumping fists. "I cannot believe this is for reals. My best friend is a superhero! Now it's your turn to bust a cap."

"I don't know…" Blood trickled down from Max's nose.

All the excitement slowly drained from Chloe's face. "Max, your nose. Damn…"

"I… don't… feel so super…" Max mumbled, legs giving way underneath her.

"Max!" Chloe shouted, guiding her gently to the ground.

Once again, she found herself near the lighthouse, the storm raging. Wind ripped through as
the tornado threatened to engulf Arcadia.

The sleepy town held many bittersweet memories for Max and Chloe, Joyce too. One strange nostalgia trip… and a huge source of nightmare fuel for the brunette.

When Max woke, head resting in Chloe's lap on the hood of a car, the bluenette rubbed her back, sighing with relief. "You freaked me out there. Do you feel any better now?"

She sat up, groaning softly. "A little. Thanks for helping me, just… give me a minute…"

"Too much action for Arcadia?" Chloe asked, trying to lighten the mood.

"Maybe not enough," the younger girl mumbled as she slid off the hood. "This is kinda fun. Scary and stupid, but fun."

The blue-haired punk lay back, gun pointed in the air. "Let me know when you feel okay."

*God, this power really messes with my head. Glad I feel normal again. I better go chat up Chloe. Max being Max didn't miss the opportunity to take a picture.*

"I just can't help myself, can I?" Max sighed at the oddly timed photo taking.

She had been taking all the wrong pictures, squirrels and bathroom graffiti. Had it not been for Warren, she wouldn't even have a photo to jump back into. Now, she was paranoid about it, capturing several reset points just in case. Photography had become a means of survival, more akin to David's practical use of the medium than for artistic expression.

Out of all of them, Victoria understood the overwhelming urge to capture the world. They were similar in that regard – the burning passion and talent – with different styles and focuses. It only took a split second for the perfect photo op to pass you by, a slight change in angle altering the vibe. Anybody could point a camera lens and press a button. Very few could turn it into something worth photographing.

"You've always been a photographer at heart," Chloe softly mentioned.

Max had been so self-conscious about her photos but even her early attempts had a quirky charm. Without the emotion or unique perspective, it wasn't true photography. That's what her dad always said, anyway.

In her pursuit to become a model, Rachel had come to appreciate the photographer's mindset. Both the model and photographer had to connect, adapt and complement the other. It was a delicate balance, one worth getting right.

While Kate had always been more interested in drawing, she could understand photography from an artistic point of view. It was a chance to create, inspire, make a poignant statement. Art was a visual representation of the human mind.

"Okay, looks like you're ready to lock and load," Chloe announced, dragging her along.

"I don't know about this…" Max mumbled skeptically.

"Are you afraid of getting in trouble? Oh boo hoo, Max is afraid!" the bluenette teased mockingly as she handed the gun over. "I know you can handle this. And I'm here to guide you. Make me proud, sista."
At that moment, a man with short dirty blonde hair and a goatee appeared. He had many tattoos, including a black bird on his neck. Chains hung down from his neck, one holding a switchblade. Everything about him was threatening, from his deep-set frown to his downturned sneer and bloodshot eyes.

Kate didn't like to judge by appearance but he looked dangerous, icy glare sending a shiver down her spine. Warren got a bad vibe from the man, confident in his first impressions. Victoria knew of Frank from Nathan. Towards the end of last year, the boy seemed to frequently visit Arcadia's local drug dealer but she put that down to stress at home, nothing sinister.

Joyce felt like she had seen this man before, unable to put a name to his face. David knew exactly who Frank was; he made it his business to be well-informed. Max's parent didn't know who he was, although they quickly decided he was trouble.

The bluenette knew him, for obvious reasons. While he was rough around the edges and had an explosive temper, he'd never done anything gross or violent to her. He only cared about three things, his cash, stash and mangy mutt. Yeah, he liked to talk big but she doubted he'd ever follow through... not that she wanted to test that theory.

Unlike the others, Rachel had seen a different side of Frank. Underneath the gruff exterior and bravado was a lonely man. He had his faults but he wasn't a monster. Glancing at Chloe, she wondered how the bluenette would react if she found out. Rachel was too impulsive and opportunistic for her own good sometimes, an expert in secrets and lies.

It was then she felt eyes bore into her with burning intensity. When hazel eyes met blue, there was an undeniable tension. Rachel must've known this would hurt Chloe – hence the scrunched-up letter in their hideout's trash can. The moment where the blonde would have to face the consequences was swiftly approaching.

"Hey, it's Thelma and Louise. Or is it Bonnie and Clyde?" he asked with wry amusement as Max hid the gun behind her back.

"Excuse us, Frank," Chloe mumbled, trying to sound confident despite his unexpected appearance.

He took a step closer. "Oh, sorry, Chloe. Don't let me get in the way of your bonding. I heard the gunshots and the breaking glass. It's cute that you're playing with guns. Just like me at your age."

"We're not anything alike, man," she snapped back.

Scoffing, he pointed a finger at her. "We both need money. In fact, you need it so bad you owe me a shitload. Don't you, Chloe? Huh?"

"You'll get your money," she muttered, looking up at him.

"You really wanted to get out of Arcadia..." Rachel softly remarked. The ghost town held no tangible future, a sinkhole of wasted potential. Where dreams came to die.

"I guess I did," Chloe replied. Without Rachel, there was little tying her to Arcadia. Too many bad memories. And to think, Max voluntarily returned to the hell hole she'd been trying to escape from... it was almost comical.
"Don't they all say that? Y'know, even when they're broke and acting tough..." His attention suddenly turned to Max, noticing her hidden hands. "What are you hiding there, girlie? Let me see!"

As he pointed, Chloe spotted a thick, black bracelet with silver-blue patches. "Where did you get that bracelet?"

"A friend," Frank answered, retracting his hand. "And it's none of your goddamn business. You're my business now and I-"

The bluenette craned her neck, interrupting him mid-sentence. "That's Rachel's bracelet. Why the fuck are you wearing her bracelet?"

This revelation puzzled all but two people, Max and Rachel. A shady drug dealer with a short fuse was an obvious candidate. The blonde had given it to him as a sentimental gesture with dubious authenticity. He was a decent guy but it would be a stretch to say she had genuine feelings for him. At the time, he had been another possible escape route from Arcadia. The moment he turned aggressive, she cut all ties. Max knew he was an okay guy once she passed the initial hostility. Unfortunately, he'd been strung along, just like Chloe.

"Calm yourself, alright? It was a gift," Frank snapped, irritated.

"No it wasn't. You stole that shit. Give it to me right now, asshole," she demanded, fear temporarily forgotten.

As she lunged forward, Frank pushed her back and pulled out a switch knife, brandishing it in her face. "You'd better step back before you regret it, girl. I mean it. You want me to cut you, bitch?"

Even though Max knew he meant no harm, seeing anyone threaten Chloe made her blood boil. There was no way she would let it happen again. Kate let out a soft gasp as the blade narrowly missed Chloe's cheek. Victoria remained stony faced, feeling a sliver of compassion. Taylor and Courtney passed her tentative glances, silent. Warren's eyes were trained on the knife, wincing when it got too close. David's jaw tightened while Joyce's brow furrowed. Vanessa and Ryan's gaze switched between the knife, Chloe and Max, eyes widening at the unexpected turn of events just about to take place.

"Please... please step back," Max warned shakily, pointing the gun at him.

He took a hesitant step back, sizing up the situation. "You're kidding. Put that down."

Yet another pair of decisions appeared on screen: SHOOT or DON'T SHOOT.

"Time to choose," Max announced, taking a deep breath and ignoring the steadily increasing ache in her temples as the image on screen paused.

Max's parents knew how much she hated guns, hands shaking. David's eyes zeroed in on the gun, unable to condone shooting anyone knowing what it did to you. While Joyce was glad for Max defending Chloe, she had no desire to let this continue.

"Frank won't take it any further," Rachel reassured. "There's no need to shoot him."

"Let's hope you're right," Chloe sighed deeply. For the most part, Frank was all bite and no bark.
And even though Max put on a brave face, she was clearly terrified.

Victoria shrugged, not willing to give Rachel and Chloe the satisfaction of verbally agreeing. There had been too much violence already. Taylor was visibly shaken by the recent turn of events, as was Courtney. Neither of them wanted this to escalate any more than it already had.

"I'm sure he'll be reasonable," Kate added hopefully.

"No offense Max, but I doubt this guy will consider you a serious threat," Warren pointed out. "So, backing down should be fine, right?"

Max allowed herself a smirk. Her appearance did work in her favor sometimes, opponents underestimating her. If only they knew... "Don't shoot it is."

Sensing her wavering resolve, Frank took a step closer. "Come on, girly. Shoot me." Before long, he had relieved her of the weapon. "Oh Christ. You're more like Abbot and Costello."

He examined the gun thoughtfully. "Nice piece. I'll consider this interest on your loan. Thanks. You have until Friday to pay me. Or I'll track you down with this interest. Have a good play, kids," he called back over his shoulder, skulking off.

"You really stood your ground," Chloe mumbled, disappointed as she watched Frank leave with the gun.

"I freaked. I don't like guns," Max defended weakly, wincing at the tone.

"It'll be hard to keep Nathan off my ass. My step-shit will have his other guns sealed in an electrified bunker by now," the bluenette muttered resignedly.

"Sorry Chloe. I've never held a gun on a human being before. Not cool."

"I know, Max. Really. I'm actually relieved it worked out this way instead... And there are more guns out there." She glanced over at the train tracks. "Let's blow. My secret lair didn't feel secret today. At least Frank is gone, he won't fuck with us again. He just wants his money." Turning, she strode off without waiting for Max.

"Should we really let him just walk around with a gun?" Warren asked worriedly. "I mean, he must have like half the weapons in Arcadia now."

"With David owning the other half," Rachel noted, shooting him a sideways glance.

"Oh, and leaving the gun with Price is a much better idea as we've seen," Victoria piped in with her first sarcastic comment in a while.

Chloe narrowed her eyes and bitterly retorted, "Why don't we just give it to your boyfriend instead, huh? He looks like he needs another gun. That's what we all really need, more entitled rich white boys packing heat with their daddies cleaning up after them when they 'accidentally' pop a cap in someone."

"If you're talking about Nathan, you can fuck off right now," Victoria snarled confrontationally.

Another stern glance made Chloe bite her tongue. Although the brunette was trying to hide the strain, her tense shoulders and gritted teeth betrayed her otherwise calm demeanor. Fighting Victoria wasn't worth hurting Max.
"Frank is the least of our troubles," the young time traveler muttered, tired of the bickering.

Oh man, Frank took Chloe's gun because of me… Chloe's waiting to go for a walk. We both need a time-out from here… Max and Chloe walked along the train tracks. The sky above was overcast, trees gently swishing in the breeze and casting long shadows.

"I can't believe you basically gave him my gun. 'Here ya go, Frank',' Chloe grumbled, stumbling slightly on the thin rail.

"You always did have a talent for guilt tripping," Rachel muttered under her breath. She couldn't really blame Chloe but it did annoy her. They'd gotten into some pretty explosive fights, not talking for days on end. Max, on the other hand, seemed receptive to the passive aggression.

As much as Chloe wanted to protest, she couldn't. She wielded guilt as a weapon, not knowing how else to stop people from leaving.

Max held out her arms to remain balanced. "You can't keep getting mad at me. Especially for stupid shit."

"I'm not mad. It adds up in my mind as people letting me down. And I just liked having that gun, man." The blue-haired punk stretched out her hand, loosely taking hold of Max's.

"Now you have me to protect you," the brunette asserted confidently.

"Always," Max said, her voice low. Until Chloe was safe, she would keep pushing, even if it killed her. Hopefully, it wouldn't have to come to that...

"I'm just glad you were here," Chloe admitted, letting her hand fall limply at her side.

Mirroring the bluenette, Max slowed her pace right down to a stop. "Me too… I think. Chloe, why the hell are you hanging around scary losers like Frank? It's weird."

"Let's take a break and I'll talk." Both girls got settled across the tracks, laying at opposite ends. "Feels like a different world, huh? I wish we could stay forever."

"Can we build another pirate fort and keep the world out?" Max asked, shuffling to get comfortable.

"We need a new secret hangout..." Chloe pointed out with a hint of disappointment. "At least Frank wouldn't find us. Are you okay, Max?"

"I'm still freaked out about what happened," she admitted with a frown. "That was awful, Chloe."

"I'm sorry. But Frank isn't as hardcore as he fronts. All he cares about is his cash, stash and mangy dog," Chloe reassured, relaxed now the immediate threat had been removed.

The same could not be said for Max. "Chloe, are you for reals? Frank just took your gun and threatened us! He's armed and clearly dangerous."

Chloe lifted her head off her interlocked hands. "Max, I know," Chloe agreed, lifting her head from her hands. "Crazy shit is the new normal for me... that's why I planned to leave
Arcadia Bay without paying Frank off…"

Max had to wonder how long Chloe would have waited for Rachel without all the crazy investigation shit. The bluenette was so determined to find her, to the point of being detrimentally stubborn. Would she have ever stopped searching? The young time traveler wasn't sure.

"Now tell me exactly what's going on between you and Frank… Does he have a last name?" Max demanded in a firm tone, wanting answers.


"Hung out? You don't mean you…" the brunette frowned as her imagination ran wild.

"Ugh. No, we didn't have sex. Gross, man," Chloe groaned in disgust. "He never even tried. I just made the mistake of borrowing money so Rachel and I could bail outta here…"

"That's it?"

"Don't try to sound too disappointed." Chloe flashed her a shit-eating grin. "Or maybe you're just jealous? I know that I'm totally irresistible."

Max rolled her eyes at the teasing, especially knowing there may be a hint of truth to it. Not that Chloe would know… yet.

Rachel chuckled lightly, both at Max's silence and Chloe's statement, "If you say so, Chloe."

"Thanks for the support, Rach." The bluenette narrowed her eyes. "It really warms my heart."

She offered up a cheeky grin alongside a wink. "You're welcome."

"No. I want to know how Frank got Rachel's bracelet…" Chloe's tone was steely, pausing to calm herself down. "What do you think?"

"I think we have to be careful," Max replied hesitantly. "And keep an eye on this guy. Without him eyeballing us, okay?"

"It's so weird talking to you about this insane crap. We haven't hung out this much since we were tweens… and it's like no time has passed." Chloe's face fell, her voice hushed and melancholic. "I wish Rachel was here to meet you…"

There had barely been a conversation free of Rachel Amber that week. Max should've been there instead. The strongest of bonds formed through adversity; that theory had been proven. What would've happened if Rachel had survived, Jefferson's plan foiled? Speculation for another time…

"Do you think that Rachel and I would have been friends?" Max asked curiously.

Chloe perked up considerably at the question. "You're not that different. She had-" she paused, correcting herself, "has a great eye for images and for art. Plus, she's a smartass like you. We would all be hella 'best friends forever'."

"I know she must be as cool as you are. I have no doubt we'll meet soon."

"I have to admit, I really am appreciating being showered in compliments," Rachel smirked
smugly, idly twirling a strand of hair around her index finger.

"Don't get used to it," the bluenette scoffed.

"Oh, but it is so nice to see a soppier side to you. It's cute," Rachel teased, her smirk widening as Chloe flipped her off.

Max winced at the carefree teasing, knowing it wouldn't last once the truth was out...

Glancing up at the sky, Chloe sighed. "Railroad tracks always make me feel better... I have no idea why..."

"Kerouac knew," Max replied with a smile. "It's the romance of travel and movement... The sound of the train whistle at night..."

Chloe playfully nudged her knee. "Look at the beat poet here."

"I'd rather be a good photographer," the brunette said as she stood up.

"You are. You just have to stop being afraid."

If only photographic insecurities were all Max had to be afraid off. Now, she had legitimate and life-threatening fears to keep her awake at night. Everything else seemed trivial; criticism and rejection were the least of her concerns. Her life – and that of so many others – hung in the balance, all hinging on her actions. That was a much scarier reality.

Moving away from the tracks, Max lined up her shot. Perfect. Without warning, she stumbled back while holding her head. Groaning, flashes of the storm burned in her mind. Wind ripped through a steady beam from the lighthouse.

The moving images of the storm jerked violently as Chloe's voice broke through. "Max? Help! I'm stuck!"

"Hold on, Chloe!" Regaining some composure, Max raced over to the tracks. Bending down, she tugged at Chloe's now stuck boot, the ominous train whistle piercing the air as the tracks vibrated. What's that noise? The train... Oh shit!

Even with Max's power, the group began to worry. There was only so much one person could do faced with this level of resistance, powers or no. Within the space of two days, Chloe had been shot twice and now this – drawn to death. How many times would she nearly die by the end?

Chloe's panicked pleas echoed as Max grabbed a crowbar left outside the station house. She wedged it under a cable drum to loosen it and gave it a firm push, watching it bash into the track switch lever. I have to help lift Chloe up... She raced to the bluenette's side, pulling her up just in time to avoid the train, wheels sparking from braking to avoid crushing her.

"I'm going to get more gray hairs just watching this," Joyce finally managed after the initial shockwaves had passed.

"You and me both," Vanessa concluded with Ryan nodding solemnly, body tense.

Rachel closed her hazel eyes with a sigh. "I think I can feel one coming. This won't do my modeling career any good."
"I dunno, silver hair might suit you," Chloe managed to mumble. She'd meant it to sound more light-hearted and joking.

"Unlike you, I have no desire to dye my hair weird and wacky colors," the blonde retorted with a smirk, taking a strand of faded blue hair between her fingers.

"Damn, that was close," Max panted, hand firmly grasping onto the bluenette's shoulder.

Limping, Chloe clutched the back of her thigh. "You saved me again. Crazy. Now we're totally bonded for life!"

"You okay?"

"I got splinters in my ass and leg, so I wish there was a less violent way for you to save me..." Biting the bullet she stood up straight, teeth gritting. "And now the trains can't get to the lumber mill... Oops." This thought was fleeting, the blue-haired punk giving a shaky smile as she put an arm around her friend's shoulder. "Aren't you glad I took you away to a nice quiet desolate spot?"

Placing an arm around the taller girl's waist, Max helped curb her wobbly gait – probably caused by leftover adrenaline and shock – as they continued along the tracks. "It was cool to spend time in your lair. But I have to get back to school now before my next class..."

"Um, why the hell are you guys still on those tracks?" Victoria asked in disbelief. "Not that I care or anything, but surely you aren't that stupid."

Kate's eyebrows knitted together in mild concern as she gently agreed, "It does seem to be tempting fate..."

"That's an understatement," Warren chipped in.

Rachel shook her head. "It's not one of your best ideas, and that's saying something."

"Jeez, give me a break," Chloe grumbled quietly, still trying to figure out how things had gone wrong so quickly. Max had been out for maybe five seconds. Without her rewind...

"Since you're the mysterious superhero... I'll be your faithful chauffeur and companion," Chloe commented, light-heartedly yet shaky.

"My powers might not last, Chloe," Max sadly mentioned as they walked along the tracks.

The other girl squeezed her shoulder reassuringly. "That's okay-we will. Forever."

Max's parents caught her eye, understandably concerned with a million questions ready. Joyce was recovering from the close call, frowning. David continued his silence, tense and uneasy. Exhaling deeply, Taylor gave Courtney a weak smile to show she was okay, the other girl nodding. Victoria refused to look at anyone, her eyes briefly wandering over to Kate – who gripped onto her necklace for comfort. The shy blonde would be a priority in the upcoming section.

Rachel gave Chloe subtle, sideways glances but otherwise kept her eyes locked on the screen. Max suspected she was worried to find out about her fate, not that the blonde let it show. It was hard to figure her out. Did she care about Chloe? Or was it all an act?

The brunette hoped for the former; her friend would be unable to face the alternative. Unlike last
time, she would be able to directly confront Rachel. Chloe hadn’t said a word, bottling it all up as usual. Max made a mental note to check in on her when she got the chance… after sorting Kate out, of course.

A sense of dread surged through her, mind reliving the next part. It should never have happened, especially not to someone as kind-hearted and gentle as Kate. Both she and the others would be majorly rattled.

Additionally, Max had to keep herself calm. Her reactions seemed to have a huge impact on her powers, so she didn’t want to get too caught up in the moment. Easier said than done. Already, she could feel her emotions starting to fray.

Chapter End Notes

For any DC universe fans out there, Tyler and I have started an LIS crossover called Nightengale, mostly focusing on the Batman side of things.
Chapter Eight: Out of Time, Part 4

With the nail biting scene over, they all relaxed. So much had happened in the last few hours, an exhausting experience. How had Max coped basically on her own? Little did they know the worst was still to come.

Chloe's truck pulled up outside Blackwell, rain pelting down from an overcast sky. Instead of getting out, Max turned to the bluenette. "Thanks for the ride, Chloe. Right on time for my art lesson."

"Thanks for coming with me. Sorry to be so boring..." Chloe replied with a mischievous smirk.

"Nothing exciting ever happens to us, right?" the younger girl asked wryly.

Exciting wasn't the term Max would use now – terrifying, traumatic and soul destroying... those were much better words. By Wednesday, she had felt nearly invincible. How completely wrong she'd been...

A moment of silence and the blue-haired punk spoke again. "Listen, your rewind power has to be connected to that snow yesterday. That might explain your tornado vision..."

"Explain what?" the other girl asked. "Snow equals a ginormous twister that takes out Arcadia Bay? You're high."

"When isn't she?" Rachel announced with a smug grin, her rhetorical question met with a disapproving grunt from David and a dirty glare from Chloe.

"Wake up, Max. You saved my life twice now," Chloe pointed out. "You altered the course of my destiny, yours, and whoever. Do you know about Chaos Theory?"

"This is creeping into my territory now," Warren mentioned with an eager grin.

Rachel offered him an amused smirk. "I don't think I have ever heard someone so proudly announce their nerdy tendencies."

He shrugged, sounding as casual as possible. "Oh sure, it's earned me some scorn over the years. Nothing I couldn't handle though."

"Impressive," she chuckled at his nonchalant display.

His grin was wiped off immediately as Chloe gave him an intense glare. She got jealous easily – sometimes it was cute, other times a pain in the ass.

"What do you know about Chaos Theory, Miss 'I hate Math'?" Max asked with surprised amusement.
"Five years ago, asswipe," Chloe clarified, narrowing her eyes. "Some people change... and your situation is the perfect storm for quantum physics."

Her expression turned troubled. "Why me? I'm just a geek girl in some town."

"A perfect example of 'strange attractors'. Don't they teach you kids anything at Blackwell? We have a tornado, rewind power and freak snow... Hello Armageddon! So let's party with your powers, rock star!" Chloe sounded almost too excited about the prospect of the world ending.

The predictable answer made Rachel smiled. "Glad to see you're already ushering in mass destruction with such glee. Very punk rock of you."

Chloe merely shrugged. "Anything to make Arcadia more exciting."

"Unlike you, some of us have a life worth avoiding that." Victoria's caustic remark earned her an equally insulting response.

"Oh right, I forgot. Being a total bitch is a very important use of time. It makes you so unique and special. My apologies, your Highness." The unrestrained sarcasm oozed from her mouth, making Victoria bristle up.

To stop the oncoming fight, Max deliberately cleared her throat snapping them from their little antagonistic world. While it did shut them up, it didn't stop the death glares. Small victories...

A smile danced across the brunette's face at her friend's eagerness to welcome looming doom. "Like you said, Professor Price... a superhero needs a sidekick."

Chloe sat there, giving her a truly happy smile. "How can it be such a shitty week and yet one of the best of my life?"

"Because we're back in action again!" Max exclaimed excitedly as they shared their secret handshake.

"Cute," Rachel mentioned, knowing it would drive her mad.

"What did I already say about saying that?" Chloe sighed in irritation.

"I'm waiting for my beat down. Don't be too rough with me," she replied with a suggestive smirk.

Warren awkwardly cleared his throat as Kate looked away shyly. Max didn't react visibly. Internally, she felt jealous, sad and guilty – Chloe would feel so betrayed soon.

"You sound a little too pleased about that," the bluenette pointed out.

Rachel's grin widened, mischief twinkling in her eyes. "I can sound more disappointed or even scared if you want. Whatever works for you."

Chloe rolled her eyes. "Does that messed up libido of yours ever switch off?"

"Not with you around," the blonde replied with a wink. Thankfully, the spiral of chaos stopped there. Not a moment too soon either.

Getting out of the truck, she waved Chloe off as she drove away then headed to the
photography classroom. Along the way, she managed to sweet talk Courtney into getting her VIP entrance to the Vortex Club party, all thanks to her powers. Not only that but she had a borderline civil conversation with David and helped Warren with a science experiment.

Heading out of the science lab, she noticed Kate and Mr. Jefferson having a heated discussion outside the classroom.

"So you can't help me?" Kate asked, her voice quivering.

"Maybe this is your way of getting attention," Mr. Jefferson cruelly remarked. "I'm trying but you have to understand my position…"

"Why? You don't understand mine. Nobody does… nobody…” the blonde interrupted, storming down the hallway.

After witnessing this exchange, Max ended up getting roped into a conversation with him about David Madsen, Nathan, Rachel, and Kate. She expressed her worries about Kate, but he didn't seem too concerned about the whole thing. He even went so far as to blame her for the whole thing - being so pretentious as to quote Shakespeare.

Of course he would try to blame Kate, cover up his tracks. He didn't give a shit about her… or any of them. He played his role of concerned teacher well, too well for anyone other than David to suspect. Max had looked up to that bastard, trusted him. The audio distorted, reacting to her spiraling emotions. She couldn't let him get to her, not now.

Ryan's expression darkened. "That hardly counts as a responsible reply from a teacher. Glad to know it's not just Wells."

Vanessa didn't say anything, in utter disbelief at how bad things had been – not just for Max.

"I agree. Just what the hell is going on at Blackwell?" Joyce questioned angrily.


She was partially right but didn't have the entire picture. While Nathan must've been the one to drug Kate and bring her to the Dark Room, he wouldn't have done it without Jefferson.

Mr. Jefferson got a call, ending the conversation.

Just who was he calling now? Max hadn't paid it much mind before. Maybe Sean Prescott. He had to know what was going on in that underground bunker. After providing Jefferson with a place for his fucked up obsession, he would pay.

Entering the classroom, Max noticed Nathan and Victoria at her desk just waiting to mock her. After trying to rile her up unsuccessfully, they moved and she sat down. Staring out of the window, she noticed David hiding behind a tree taking pictures of Kate. Okay, why is David taking photos of Kate? Now this is so wrong. And weird…

Joyce's brow furrowed. Just what was David playing at? To spy on his own family was one thing but harassing a Blackwell student? There was no excuse. Over the years, she had forgiven a lot – knowing how much he struggled re-adjusting to civilian life – but this was too far.

David watched himself stalk the blonde. There just had to be a reason, all his decisions made with
the best intentions; he tried his damn hardest. This level of paranoia had to come from somewhere. Kate felt uneasy at her behavior. In the past, she had been mocked for her beliefs but nothing like this. However hard she tried to ignore the cruel comments, they hurt. This degree of bullying must be unbearable.

Warren came into the classroom, expressing his concerns over Kate. The bell went, Jefferson making an appearance. "Okay, I know you love me, but if you're not in this class, beat it." Warren, Nathan, and Dana left, everyone else getting settled. "Everybody else, please sit down. We have a lot to cover today and so little time as usual... I see all the usual suspects here..." Mr. Jefferson prowled around, pointing over at the empty chair. "Anybody seen Kate Marsh?"

"I think everybody has seen Kate Marsh by now..." Victoria commented, earning a spiteful laugh from her blonde minion.

Taylor winced at her eagerness to follow the crowd, shooting Kate an apologetic glance. Kate seemed like a nice enough girl, not deserved of the excessive torment. Every mean comment would build up, pushing the poor girl further into despair. Even knowing that, she had participated. They all had. Victoria looked away while her taunting mockery filled the room.

"She's not feeling good," Alyssa called out, shooting daggers at the blonde.

He sat on the desk in front of Max. "Sounds like you're giggling about a video gone viral. Maybe it involves a student, or friend. I wonder how it would feel to have false images of yourself shot out all over the world for people to judge." Her phone vibrated but she couldn't check with Jefferson staring at her. "Usually, people need something to judge so they never take a good look at themselves. We can thank reality TV for some of that. In the end, we can only blame ourselves for participating..."

This was complete bullshit. Jefferson just regurgitated the 'correct' response here, upholding his image and nothing more.

With his back turned, Max checked the disappointed text from Chloe about Frank taking the gun. "Speaking of participation, there are a few souls here who have yet to enter a photo in the contest. Like Max Caulfield, for example. Who I know can't wait to enter, right?"

"Yet more appropriate behavior from our dear teacher," Rachel sarcastically commented. He had been this way with her, too – guilt tripping into playing by his rules – but the blonde had been too headstrong to submit to such underhanded tactics.


"It doesn't seem fair to single Max out like that," Kate mentioned softly, suspecting that it would make the brunette anxious.

Ryan just shook his head. "I would say I'm surprised but after all we've seen, this is to be expected."

With that gripe out of the way, he finally started class. "I'm sure you read the syllabus like it was a Harry Potter book, so you must know today we're studying 'chiaroscuro' - that beautiful word about the contrast between light and dark, the shadowplay that gives photography such... visual power."
As he lectured on, she glanced at the empty chair. *I guess Kate will miss class now… I'm worried about her.*

Kate *never* missed class, not even for illness – how she had maintained her high GPA. When the blonde ran away, Max should've followed without hesitation. It was all so obvious now. Tears stung at her eyes, humming static coming from the speakers. Her guilt soon intermingled with other nagging doubts and fears, all eating away at her. Could one person really change everything? Could she? Banishing those questions to the back of her mind, she closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

She had time to fix this.

"It's basic yin and yang," Mr. Jefferson continued. "Black and white images are effective precisely because of their contrasts. Although we don't technically 'see' in monochrome-"

His words were cut off when Zach burst into the classroom. "Yo, some crazy shit is going down at the girl's dorm! Check it!"

"Zachary, do not come into my class like that ever again…" Mr. Jefferson sternly commanded, everyone rushing to their feet. "Listen! Everybody remain seated." Now alone, he sighed deeply. "Dismissed."

The only person who knew what was going on was Max. The rest of the group could only guess, using the hints. Kate had to be involved; the brunette had drawn so much attention to her ordeal. If that was the case… they feared the worst.

Max followed her classmates to the Prescott Dorm building. A large crowd had gathered on the grass, all staring at the rooftop. Her feet moved of their own accord, rain lashing against her skin. Mutters could be heard, ranging from shock to mockery. Some had their phones out, pointed to the sky.

Warren waited with bated breath, suspecting this would be a rough ride. The closer Max got to the crowd, the more obvious it became to him… and the more he regretted wanting to find out. Rachel and Chloe exchanged brief glances, hoping their shared prediction was wrong.

The Vortex Club trio remained silent, their eyes locked on the screen. Color slowly drained from their cheeks, the harsh reality dawning on them. As for Kate, she couldn't think properly. Part of her wanted to run but morbid curiosity compelled her to keep watching. If Max was showing this to them, it *had* to mean something. David didn't move an inch; crowds meant trouble. Joyce's face fell as the realization hit her. Max's parents glanced over at her, just in time to see the practiced mask of calm crack.

Suddenly overwhelmed by the surge of negative thoughts and feelings, Max felt her composure slip away. Her chest rose and fell rapidly, throat dry. The panic was beginning to show externally, screen flickering, sounds going in and out of focus.

As the brunette walked around the corner, her eyes fell on the rooftop… Kate teetering on the edge, then hurtling to the ground.

A sense of paralyzing dread coursed through the blonde's veins. There were no words to describe her distress. The other person most affected, aside from Max, was Victoria. Now, she could finally witness the drastic consequences of her thoughtless bullying. It was a harsh wake-up call. Some looked away as Kate took a nosedive, others stared in disbelief. There was only so much one
person could take before they turned to drastic measures. People never listened… until it was too late.

The screen went crazy. Warped screams accompanied the jerky looping fall fueled by a surge of fear, panic, and desperation. It had already been burned into Max's mind, plagued her sleep. Whirring and distorted backward whispers rang out, colors bleeding into one another. Brief flashes of the oncoming storm pierced her thought as the fear rose.

A hand on her shoulder broke through the distress. Turning, Max was met with Kate's concern filled expression. Hazel eyes begged her to calm down before she hurt herself. The brunette just had to remember her friend was okay… in this timeline. If she wanted to keep it that way, she had to focus.

As the screen and sounds settled, Max took several deep breaths. She couldn't let her emotions rule, someone would get hurt. In control again, she offered Kate a reassuring smile and turned back to the task at hand. She had to face this. There was still some interference on screen, nowhere near as intense as before. All she had to do was keep a cool head. She couldn't afford to expend unnecessary energy to reign her powers back in.

Just as the blonde was about to hit the ground, Max thrust her hand out and rewound. She could only go so far – just before Kate jumped – before clutching at her head, blood gushing from her nose. Not again, not now… When she lifted her head, she caught Kate's body plummeting to earth again.

I have to try something… I won't be able to rewind again and again… Gritting her teeth, Max rewound through the pain, watching Kate ascend to the rooftop in slow motion. As her feet hit the edge, the world jolted, hazy as everything froze around the brunette.

Warren did a double take, not believing his own eyes. This was impossible… then again, so was everything he had seen up to this point. Just what was Max capable of? For Kate, this was so surreal. Despite the dire situation, it was heartwarming to know someone cared about her this much. Without Max… she wouldn't be here.

Victoria and her minions were rendered speechless, probably for the first time ever. Taylor sighed in relief, Courtney relaxing ever so slightly. Maybe there was still a chance to save the blonde, to partially rectify their grave mistakes. Both Rachel and Chloe were gob smacked, a rare occurrence.

Although Max's parents and Joyce were worried, they felt proud. Max was doing everything she could to save a friend – just like she had with Chloe – putting herself at immeasurable risk. Her body and mind must be in excruciating pain, more than they could ever imagine. David remained stoic, knowing his constant harassment was at least partly responsible for this outcome.

The young time traveler stood in awe for just a moment, examining the still figures. She had to get to Kate. As she pushed through the crowd, head pounding, she noticed familiar faces. Victoria and Taylor stood there, filming the whole thing on their phones. Dana and Juliet were huddled close, expressions filled with horror. Brooke covered her eyes, while Alyssa buried her head in Warren's shoulder. Nathan was at the front, staring up in disbelief – an unexpected reaction. David was the only one trying to help, suspended mid-sprint outside the door, face stiff with determination.

You… can… do it… She forced her legs to move, getting all the way to the top. Yes. Her victory was short lived, her power cutting out. Blood poured from her nose as she tried to
pause time again, groaning in pain.

Kate turned, a brief flash of shock replaced by despair as the brunette tried to unsuccessfully rewind. "Stop! Don't come near me!"

_Not now… It won't work… I don't have any power… Now I have to do this by myself._ Max took a deep calming breath and closed her eyes, mentally preparing herself.

With Kate's life hanging in the balance, Max forced herself to watch. She felt so responsible for the pain, not just the blonde's. Her powers had made them suffer a thousand times over… and she'd do it all again to keep them safe, especially Chloe.

Everybody watched, hearts in their throats as this tentative, life-threatening exchange got underway. Regardless of what they believed, a few silent prayers were made in that moment.

Shuffling back, Kate glanced down at the ground. "Max, seriously, don't some near me. I will jump."

"Okay, okay. I'm right here. Kate, please…" Max pleaded with her.

"Oh Max, I know you want to help me…" The sorrow on her face faltered momentarily, realizing at least one person cared. "I love that you stepped up to David, but it doesn't matter now. Nothing matters."

The brunette took a very tentative step forward, watching for the other girl's reaction. "You matter. And not just to me."

"I do want to believe that…" Kate managed, emotionally exhausted and resigned. Desperately, she wanted that to be true but wasn't convinced.

Swallowing hard at how close Kate was to the edge, Max continued. "Kate, your life is still yours. And we can get through this together… Let me help. Like I helped by erasing all that crap people wrote on your room slate…"

"I'm glad to hear you worry about me… That makes me feel better…" the blonde admitted weakly.

Hearing this, Max stepped forward. "Of course I worry. You're my friend, Kate."

"I did feel better talking to you on the phone. I always feel like you really listen."

Sensing she was breaking through, Max pressed ahead. "Kate, please trust me. Come stand by me, okay? I can help you now… I know I can. This morning I erased the web link to the video… It was written on the shower room mirror…"

Several pairs of eyes flitted over to Victoria then, who pretended not to notice. If only she had known the teasing would lead to this, she wouldn't have pushed so hard.

Tears intermingled with rain on Kate's cheek. "Are you serious? Thank you so much… The fact that you don't care about that video and would come up here to stop me means a lot…"

"I care about you because I believe you were drugged," Max insisted, desperation taking
"We will find out who did this and make them pay."

"You sound so persuasive, Max... If only..." the despair filled blonde mentioned softly, glancing back again.

Picking up on it, Max put herself about two feet away from her friend. "Kate, I believe you. Will you believe me? Please... you don't have to do this..."

Kate's face crumpled. "Max, I'm in a nightmare and I can't wake up... unless I put myself to sleep. Then everybody can post pics of my body... I'm already on the internet forever."

Rapidly running out of ideas, Max reached deep inside to find something... anything. "Kate, this is our chance to beat the bullies. This is the only way we can win against them."

"Can we really, Max? I don't believe in miracles anymore either." This statement was made ten times worse by the heartbreaking tone.

This really hit the point home. Clearly, Kate's faith had never been shaken to this extent before. Through all the worst times in her life, she at least had that to cling to. Thanks to the reactions of her supposed friends, family, and Church, it had poisoned that unwavering source of support and strength... which left her with very little.

"Now I do," Max shouted over the rain, shivering from cold and fear. "You're part of the reason why. If you come down with me, I can tell you more..."

"You're such a good person, Max." Kate's shoulders slumped, eyes closing. "Even if you're full of crap. But I'll come with you... You're my friend."

With another step, Max was within touching distance. "Forever. Can we hug on it?"

Staring at the brunette's outstretched hand, Kate wavered then grabbed onto it. Before she could change her mind, Max tugged her away from the ledge, both girls collapsing.

"I'm sorry... sorry..." Kate apologized over and over again, sobbing her heart out as she clutched on tight.

Without hesitation, Max held her tight – confirming the blonde was here and sheltering her from the worst of the rain. "What are you talking about? You saved me from talking in class!"

A collective sigh of relief echoed through the room, the tense atmosphere fading slightly. Processing all this properly would take time. The immediate reactions ranged from a brief moment of solace to so many questions suddenly emerging. Most of all, they were just happy to see Kate out of immediate danger.

With Kate safe, Max, Nathan, Mr. Jefferson and David headed to Principal Wells' office. After a long pause, the balding man turned to those present, speaking with deliberation. "Now I know today was difficult for everybody, but I'm so proud of the way Blackwell pulled together to save a young girl's life."

"What the actual fuck?!" Chloe spat, frowning. If anything, Blackwell had pushed her to that roof. "This is total bullshit!"
Rachel shook her head in disbelief. "Oh, I can't wait to see how Wells came to that conclusion."

"Talk about taking undue credit for other people's actions," Warren mumbled under his breath, leaning back in his chair.

Ryan was practically shaking with rage. "Just when I thought this couldn't get any worse… now this?"

"I can't believe what I'm hearing," Joyce remarked incredulously.

"This is…" Vanessa couldn't even finish her sentence, that was how ridiculous she found the statement.

Even Victoria could see the transparency in the claim. David had expected as much; people like Wells rarely took responsibility but were eager to get the credit. Kate remained quiet, the utter shock of the last twenty minutes or so still sinking in.

Max noticed this, reminding herself to have a private chat with Kate when she could. The poor girl would need some support after that. Also, she felt like she had to explain herself.

"Then, his eyes focused on the brunette. "Of course, you're quite a hero for getting Kate to come down, Max."

"I didn't do much…" Max mumbled, slumping back in the chair. She looked like she would rather be anywhere else right now, not that anyone could blame her.

"She's modest. Like a real hero," Mr. Jefferson added proudly.

"Yeah. 'Real hero'," David grunted bitterly.

The word 'hero' made Max grimace. She certainly wasn't that. Heroes didn't exist, idealized standards to make people feel better about themselves. What she had done in trying to help, that should be expected of anyone. It was nothing special. Society had it backwards, just like trying to blame Kate. So much hypocrisy and double standards. It made her blood boil.

At times like this, it was tempting to let the world burn in her wake, only saving those she deemed worthy; her faith in humanity had been shaken that much. She wasn't perfect but at least she was trying, unlike some people. Jefferson calling her a hero made it a thousand times worse, feeling more like a taunt than a compliment.

"As principal of Blackwell Academy, I take my duties seriously. I take the well-being of every student more seriously," he announced in his deep, booming voice.

"I'd hate to see him not giving a shit then," Chloe mentioned acidly.

Ryan's face twitched with suppressed rage. "I don't know how much more of this crap I can actually listen to."

"I'm sure he's so worried about all of us. That's why he lets Nathan get away with murder. It all makes perfect sense now. How could we not all see it before?" Rachel's biting sarcasm was laced with bitterness. She doubted Wells had lost any sleep over her own disappearance.

There were no words to express the collective level of disgust over Wells' behavior. Kate had nearly died, but he was acting as if nothing had happened.
"What happened today should never happen in a hall of wisdom and knowledge. Mr. Madsen, as our head of security here, those roof doors should always be locked. That's just standard operating procedure. They were not. And that is indeed your responsibility." David didn't argue this point, jaw tightening. "Mr. Jefferson, I know you can't be expected to know what your student are going through, but Kate assisted you in class, so you should have known something was amiss."

Chloe's short, sharp, agitated laugh filled the air. "Glad to see he's taking the appropriate responsibility for all this. What a fucking great principal."

Under different circumstances, Joyce would've reprimanded the bluenette but Wells deserved it. David merely grunted, his predictions coming true. Ryan shook with fury, ready to lose it. Vanessa, on the other hand, seethed in silence. She had no sympathy for the man who did everything to avoid actually doing his job. Kate found it hard to see his redeeming qualities in this moment. Rachel had expected this – people like Wells always laid the blame at other's feet to save their own ass.

After a brief pause, he turned to Nathan. "Mr. Prescott, since you are responsible for the Vortex Club parties... And since Miss Marsh did attend your last party, you'll have to answer some more questions."

"Oh, come the fuck on. It's so obvious that asshole has something to do with this shit," Chloe scoffed, throwing her hands up in exasperation.

Anybody in their right mind could see that Nathan was trouble. Somehow, he always managed to get away with it. All thanks to his father's money and influence. That was the only way. If she tried to pull that shit, she'd get shut down so fast, kicked out and sent packing from Blackwell. Just like she already had been.

Warren slumped back in his chair. "Anyone else would have been suspended way before now. Especially with the gun incident. I know I would've been."

"Welcome to the Prescott's reign of terror," Rachel sardonically remarked. Despite being a bit of a rich kid asshole on occasion, Nathan just wanted a good time. In the past couple of months, however, he'd started acting very strange.

Ryan's eyes became steely. "The Prescotts have always been bad news, but this..."

Vanessa shared his feeling, not missing the Prescott's influence in Seattle one bit. Joyce had no words, William would be turning in his grave. She couldn't blame Chloe for wanting to leave. As much as Victoria hated to admit it, Nathan was getting shadier by the second. Doubting a friend was horrible, but even she couldn't deny the mounting evidence.

Wells sat down in the chair behind his desk, steepling his hands. "Miss Caulfield, why exactly were you on the roof with Kate Marsh? Did she tell you her plan? Or anything at all? Please, tell us everything."

"Did I miss something here? When did Max become the bad guy?" Warren asked incredulously. Wells sounded almost accusatory, as if Max was somehow at fault. She had seen her friend jump from that roof twice before saving her, not that Wells would know, and he was giving her the third degree.

"Now, apparently," Rachel replied.
"Makes sense. It's not like Nathan is the shady fuck here or anything," Chloe spat, words tinged with bitter sarcasm.

Yet another decision screen appeared, this time with three options: **NATHAN DOSED HER, DAVID BULLIED HER** and **JEFFERSON MADE HER CRY**.

They were so close now, then Max could rest. "It's decision time again."

"I think you know who I'm voting for," Chloe answered immediately. Not like the brunette could blame her. Nathan made the most sense, even if it had ultimately been the wrong choice.

Rachel found Jefferson's involvement a little… odd. Compared to Nathan and David – drugging and stalking Kate – his contribution paled in comparison. What he had done, dismissed her claims, was horrible… but not the main cause. Was there a reason?

The blonde couldn't help the twisted smirk as she cast her vote. "Let's throw Nathan under the bus. It probably won't do anything, but we can try."

"Agreed," Warren stated. That's all they could do in the end.

Kate didn't have the energy to engage in the discussion, simply nodding. The sooner this part was over, the better. Above all else, she needed some fresh air and time to think.

Again, Victoria abstained. She didn't want to condemn Nathan but there was little choice. It would happen with or without her vote. All leads pointed to him as the culprit. Both Taylor and Courtney were thinking along similar lines – Kate's account condemned the boy more than anyone else. Whether it would be that simple in the end, they didn't know.

The adults followed suit, each voting to blame Nathan. Max's parents would've done it simply based on his countless threats to their daughter. David had already suspected him, nothing new there. His policy: guilty until proven innocent. Joyce had the added incentive to make him pay for nearly killing Chloe, too.

In reality, they had all been partly responsible for Kate's suicide attempt – watching the video, passing it around, talking about her behind her back, ignoring the bullying, so on and so forth. Max had managed to avoid watching it, even though she was the nosiest person in Arcadia, if not Oregon and beyond. By watching that video, she would've betrayed Kate's trust. She could not bring herself to do that.

Glancing over at the blond boy, the words tumbled from Max's lips before she lost her resolve. "All I know is that Kate went to a party and Nathan dosed her. She got wasted and kissed some boys on a viral video without a clue."

"I dosed her? Without a clue?" Nathan repeated incredulously. "Have you seen the video? Whatever. Kate was loaded and playing the field-"

"You're a liar. You told Kate you took her to the emergency room!" Max countered, relaying Kate's account.

He just rolled his eyes. "I said I was **going** to take her to the ER. She sobered up eventually."

"Bullshit!" she blurted out with uncharacteristic force. "Something happened to her, and you know it! How about we talk about you waving a gun around in the girls' bathroom-"
"Damn, Max. Going straight for the jugular," Rachel added, impressed by the direct attack. Maybe it was in the heat of the moment, but few would dare go against Nathan.

Chloe was shocked, knowing that the brunette avoided confrontation like the plague. Still, she always stepped up when she had to. It had always been that way. Max's parents and Joyce were equally as surprised by this outburst.

"Hey, that's total slander!" Nathan interrupted angrily. "I could sue you and this school so fast! ...I already have a personal lawyer."

This statement inspired a twisted grin to form on Max's face. He would need much more than a lawyer to escape retribution.

"Careful, Mr. Prescott," Wells cautioned sternly. "I have been told about this alleged gun incident. And I have to admit that the video in question was sent to me by multiple sources."

"So, being a snitch really does pay," Warren said to lighten the tense mood. "I've been lied to all these years."

"Including me," David swiftly added.

"And since Mr. Prescott does appear prominently in the video and was responsible for the party, I have no choice but to suspend him until further notice," Wells confidently ordered.

This outcome was unexpected, especially considering Wells' earlier resistance to follow up on the boy's behavior. At most, they had expected more non-committal statements. While these might be empty words, it was a small victory.

The brief shock turned to suppressed rage. "Whatever. See you in court."

"Not so confident now, are you fucker?" Chloe smirked with mild satisfaction at this sliver of justice. It wasn't much, but it was a step in the right direction.

"Maybe we should take a picture of this moment," Rachel commented. His face was a picture right now. Clearly, he had been expecting to get away with it, like always.

"Excuse me," Mr. Jefferson interrupted, "I think Max and Nathan need a break before we grill them further. A friend and student just tried to kill herself… They don't need this forum right now."

Like he cared whether Kate lived or died. In fact, it would've been better for him if she did jump – tie up loose ends. His concern had all been an act.

"Yes, I'm kinda devastated right now. I'd like to be with my family," Nathan stated with a put-on tone.

Chloe just shook her head. "Just when I thought I'd heard everything…"

"He could at least try to make that sound half-believable," Warren mumbled under his breath.

"That would require him having an actual soul and emotions," Rachel replied sharply.

"All right, Miss Caulfield, please sign here to confirm what you've just told us." Wells rotated a piece of paper on the desk. "I'll continue this investigation from there."
My head is killing me, but I think I can use my power again.

A sentiment the Max sitting in this room also shared. Although, she didn't think that she would survive another rewind this time.

Giving it a quick once over, she signed it. Wells took the paper back and stood, tone regretful. "Well, I think we know less now than when we started. We'll be assisting the police with further inquiries. I know this has been a stressful day... I wish I had the power to change it all for the better... so thank you, for coming in."

This experience was like an endless taunt for Max, a personal attack on her decisions. It felt like every sentence was spoken to fuck with her head. Out of all the possible outcomes, this one had been the best at the time. For someone like Wells to think he could've done a better job made her feel so angry. Especially when she knew what he really meant was that he'd make it better for himself, not Kate. He had no fucking clue what a "stressful day" really was. Nor did he have any idea what she had been through. She didn't want people to applaud her, far from it. All she wanted was for this madness to stop.

Max met up with Warren and the pair sat on the grass at the front of the school. The sun hung low in the sky, yellows and oranges blending seamlessly. "I couldn't even believe it was happening. It was literally slow motion as I grabbed her hand... and then I could feel her grabbing mine..."

"Max, that was the greatest thing I've ever seen. Ever," Warren began excitedly. "You reached out, she reached out... Hugs, tears, applause... Like a superhero!"

"Not quite," Max objected softly. "Look at me, I'm a mess."

He shook his head at her self-dismission. "You're glowing. Seriously. A human halo. I'm pretty sure you've earned your wings today."

Wincing, Max wanted people to stop praising her for this. None of this would've been made possible without her power or Kate's will to keep on living. She hadn't wanted to commit suicide. All she wanted was for someone to listen and help, for everyone to stop blaming her. If more people had been there, it wouldn't have gotten to that stage. If Max had been there more.

Instead of pointlessly arguing the point, Max let it go. "I'm still worried about Kate. She did try to kill herself. All over a video..."

It hadn't been just a video for Kate. That video had been a catalyst for a shitstorm of criticism and scorn, driven her to the edge. Totally devastating. That should've been more than enough to validate Kate's emotions and reaction.

"'Viral' is the right word. Like a disease," Warren mentioned wistfully.

"So you watched it?" Max asked, glancing at him.

He seemed uncomfortable but answered truthfully. "Just one-and a half times..."

Warren's face fell. Even he had succumbed to watching, not just once either. Any faith he'd had in himself was crushed in that moment. He was no better than anyone else. His actions had contributed in some way. He'd become part of the problem. It was a tough thing to face. At least he hadn't tried to hide the fact, unlike some. Not that it made it any better. Kate obviously hadn't
wanted people to watch it. Why would she? Why would anyone, for that matter?

Silence passed between them, Max sighing. "Warren, I don't mean to sound weird, but there's something ominous going on at Blackwell…"

"Today proves that," he agreed.

Determination crossed her face. "And I'm working on proof that Kate Marsh is connected to Rachel Amber… somehow. Along with Nathan and Mr. Madsen."

"I'm not a big conspiracy guy, but I wouldn't doubt it. Nathan did scare me yesterday and Madsen is a straight-up dickhead," he remarked before asking, "So… what do you think is really happening?"

Before she had the chance to reply to him, something strange caught her attention. "What the hell is this…" Her eyes focused on the sun, which was slowly being eclipsed.

Another song began to play from the speakers in the room, yet another indie classic. There were no snide or joking remarks this time, though. This coupled with the weird snowstorm from before – and the oncoming storm – could not be a coincidence. Messing with time had its consequences.

"The weather confirms this weird day. Feel that chill..." Max hugged herself to keep out the cold.

Warren was extremely confused. "Max, there was no eclipse scheduled today… I would know. I would."

When she rubbed her arms to combat the chill, Warren scooted over and put an arm around her. "I believe you, Warren… I'll believe anything this week…"

As with last time, they saw with the others were doing now. David and Joyce were stood in the backyard, the man's head resting on her shoulder as his shoulders slumped. Next, Principal Wells having a discussion by a car in the parking lot, cut off when the car drove away mid-conversation. Victoria was in her room, crying. Nathan arrived, expression tender when he noticed her. The beach was the next location, Frank sat there scratching his dog's head. Then, Kate's hospital room came into view, the bed surrounded by balloons, flowers, and cards all wishing her a speedy recovery.

Finally, Chloe was sat up on the cliff, feet resting on the main plank of a bench as she looked out over the calm waters. Glancing at her phone, she brought a cigarette to her lips, exhaling the smoke cloud deeply.

Chloe: Sorry about Kate. I hope you're ok.

Chloe: This eclipse freaks me out...

Max: Let's find out what's going on!

Max: Together!

In keeping with last time, the final scene included a shot of three red binders, Rachel's visible again. Instead of cutting out, the focus shifted to a desk. There was a glass filled with amber
liquid, pill bottles, and another red binder. This one had Kate's name on it, alongside a black and white picture of the girl.

The group sat in silence as the screen faded to black. Each part added a new ominous layer to the mystery. Kate and Rachel were involved somehow, that much was certain. How it all came together... they would have to wait and see.

After what seemed like an eternity Max stood, all eyes turning to her. "We'll have a break now. This one will be longer I suspect. I shall need to have a word with some of you." Her eyes focused on Kate. Realizing she was up first, the blonde followed Max out of the auditorium.

"Well, fuck..." Chloe sighed, rubbing her face with her hand.

Rachel closed her hazel eyes. "You can say that again."

"I'm not sure what to be more worried about," Warren finally managed. "This storm, those weird binders or Max."

All three were interlinking points for discussion; you couldn't talk about one without the others.

The storm was presumably a consequence of Max's power, whether a catalyst or a component. Where had the power even come from? And why? The binders were connected to Kate and Rachel but how? And Max herself inspired a whole new level of layered questions.

"I think it's safe to assume we should be worried about all of them equally," Joyce pointed out tiredly. "Although, I am getting very concerned about Max."

"You're not the only one, Joyce," Vanessa softly muttered. She so desperately wanted to take her daughter to the hospital, as did her husband. Who knew what damage she had done to herself?

"At least she didn't suddenly collapse on us this time. That's something," Joyce noted reassuringly.

"Yeah..." was all Ryan could manage.

Warren ran his fingers through his hair with a sigh. "Instead, we get a crazy screen freak out."

That had been scary, sensing the spiraling loss of control. Not just on screen but in the room, too. Air charged with electricity.

"Max's emotions must have a direct effect on however she's showing us this," Rachel theorized. That made the most sense considering what they had seen.

Warren stroked his chin, contemplating "Makes sense, I guess. But it does beg the question as to how she's even doing this."

"It must be some extension of her powers," Victoria stated in her usual condescending tone. "How else would she do it otherwise? She's basically showing us memories of things that she experienced in another timeline."

"Well, yeah. But is the connection wired from her mind somehow, or is she directly transcribing it over from the timeline in question. Isolating it and projecting it. Or something else?" Even just thinking about all the possible ways made his head hurt, but also fed his insatiable desire for knowledge.

"How am I supposed to know that?" Victoria grumbled in irritation, her harsh tone making him
"I thought you knew everything," Rachel challenged, knowing the challenge would annoy her to no end. This comment earned her the desired reaction – a disapproving glare and a deep frown.

Joyce interjected here to prevent a huge fight, something none of them needed right now. "However she's doing it, it can't be doing her any good."

"Constantly messing with time would give you more than a headache. That's for sure," Warren agreed sadly.

It was impossible to know what this was really doing to Max, physically, mentally or emotionally. How she had held on this long without going into a coma or worse was a miracle itself. Sheer will power and a disregard for safety would only carry her so far.

"She'll be fine," Chloe abruptly announced. "She has to be..."

Even if it was a lie, it made her feel better. She couldn't think otherwise. If she started, she wouldn't be able to stop. Max had done so much, all to keep her sorry ass from getting hurt. If the brunette got hurt in any way, it would be Chloe's fault. She couldn't deal with that.

Nobody contended the point. It wasn't like Chloe would accept it, however hard they tried. They'd just be wasting their breath and they all knew that.

"Regardless, we should keep an eye on her condition," Rachel gently suggested.

For a moment, it looked as if the bluenette might protest. Instead, she just sighed in resignation. "Yeah... I guess."

Meanwhile, Max and Kate had stopped a short way from the auditorium. The young time traveler tried to search for the right words, drawing a blank. Instead, she did the only thing she could think of. Taking a step forward, she drew Kate into a hug. The blonde seemed shocked and Max remembered how they were practically strangers in this timeline. Just as she was about to awkwardly pull away, she felt her hug returned.

Something warm and wet splashed onto her neck, Kate shaking in her arms. Her heart dropped as the poor girl sobbed, tightening her grip. It must have been tough for Kate to watch everything. Hopefully, these would be the only tears she had to cry in this timeline. Max rubbed soothing circles into her back, reassuring her as the tears dried.

Even after she had calmed down, they were reluctant to part. The brunette smiled tenderly as her eyes met Kate's again. Everything had already been said from the film, further words redundant. Besides, one hug could say more than words ever could. Kate took a deep breath as she dabbed the remaining tears away with a tissue, always organized.

Then, they heard footsteps approach. Turning, they saw Victoria poke her head out of the auditorium. Without hesitation, Max approached her. There were so many things she could say now, most adding insult to injury. Victoria already knew what she had done wrong, her behavior in the aftermath of the other timeline proved that – she wasn't heartless. Still, it was tempting to rip into her, let go of the pent-up frustration, however unfair. Kate had managed to forgive Victoria and Max wanted to respect her decision.

Victoria must have sensed the longing to tear into her, body tensing for the onslaught of rage. Max stopped a foot in front of her, taking a deep breath as she stared into Victoria's eyes – now filled with resigned guilt.
Swallowing her pride, Max simply said, "Do right by her this time."

Before she could change her mind, she strode away not looking back. She did, however, quickly glance over her should, seeing the taller blonde look awkward. There was nothing to worry about. Kate was the kindest, most forgiving person Max knew. If Victoria's apology was sincere, it would be accepted without question.

Leaving them to it, Max made her way back to the others. She needed to check in on Chloe now. When she popped her head around the door, she couldn't find the bluenette or Rachel. Figuring they must be outside, continued around the corner. She found them, leaning against the wall smoking in silence.

"Max…" Chloe called out tiredly as she approached.

"Just thought I'd check in," the brunette said as she came to stand in front of them. "How are you guys doing?"

Rachel let a large smoke cloud from her mouth. "Why does it suddenly feel like I'm third wheeling?"

"You're not," Max assured her. "The question was aimed at both of you."

The blonde must be feeling the pressure now, anxious to know her fate. The red binder reveal sure hadn't helped. "Could be better. Could be worse."

That described Max's time travel adventures well, although she ended up leaning towards the former sentiment by the end. Then, she turned to Chloe, who scuffed her boot along the ground as she smoked.

Just when it seemed like she wouldn't answer, the bluenette lifted her eyes. "To be honest, I don't know what to make of any of this," she admitted wearily. "It's just… so fucked up. All of it."

Max offered up a melancholic smile. "On that, we can agree." And Chloe hadn't even seen the half of it yet.

"I keep trying to get my head around it all. Just when I think I've got it, something else comes along and blows everything out of the water." She brought the cigarette back up to her lips and inhaled deeply, letting it all out in one long breath. "More importantly, how are you coping with all this?"

The brunette just shrugged. "Doesn't matter really."

"Of course it fucking matters, Max," Chloe snapped, regretting the outburst immediately. "You've already passed out on us once and don't think we didn't all notice that weird screen flickering shit earlier. You're always so worried about how other people are feeling and not enough about you."

"You want to know how I'm feeling, huh? You really want to know?" Max didn't sound angry, just scared.

Her hands shook as she waited for the reply. In truth, she felt fucking awful. Her head was in a constant state of pain. The more time that passed, the harder it was to concentrate on anything. Every now and then, her limbs began to tingle and even feel numb, especially in her right arm. Whenever she stood, it felt like she was about to fall over. Not to mention the waves of nausea. Emotionally, she was all over the place.
Chloe flicked the remainder of her cigarette to the ground, stomping it out with her boot. "I'm not trying to back you into a corner here, Max. I'm just... really worried. And I have a reason to be."

"I know you are," Max sighed, "The thing is, however I'm feeling, I have to get to the end of this. Worrying about it all isn't going to help. Just know that getting through this as quickly as possible will help me."

After a moment of silence, Chloe shook her head. "Okay, Max. If you think you can handle it, then I guess I just have to let you do it. It's not like I can really stop you. Trying would probably put more strain on you, anyway."

The agreement was unexpected. Sighing, the blue-haired punk pushed off the wall and wandered back to the auditorium. Rachel just shrugged, throwing her cigarette to the ground and following.

Max watched the still smoldering embers glow a faint orange. She so desperately wanted to sleep but now wasn't the time. After a second or two, she rolled her shoulders and headed back to the group.

There was much to do before the day was over.

Chapter End Notes

And 'Out of Time' is done. Join us next time for the start of 'Chaos Theory'.
Chapter Nine: Chaos Theory, Part 1

With everyone returned – all at varying levels of calm – Max took her set. At least Kate seemed a little happier, her conversation with Victoria obviously ending well. Everyone else was tired and stressed. The next part would offer them a break from the heavy content. The first half, anyway.

The brunette glanced over at Chloe, who was reluctant to meet her eye. Max hadn't wanted to lie and say it was all fine because it might not be. She'd have plenty of time to worry about the consequences later, though. Right now, she had to focus. She shook her head, taking a deep breath as she ignored what she now considered a mild pain. Even though she was pacing herself, it was taking its toll. Could she hold out long enough? Somehow, yes. She had to.

It was night time, the midnight blue sky overcast with a full moon. Owls hooted as the shot panned, focusing on Blackwell Academy. Moths fluttered around the lampposts, a solitary window illuminated – Max's room. A cage sat in the corner, holding Kate's rabbit. Its whiskers twitched, beady eyes peering out.

Kate smiled, grateful to Max for taking Alice in. That someone cared about her enough to not only save her life but deal with the aftermath made her heart swell with happiness. Max's room was messier than before, not that anyone could blame her. Merely hours ago, she watched a friend almost commit suicide. On top of everything else she had to deal with.

Just then, her phone went off, waking her with a jolt. "Kate!"

As she realized where she was, she rubbed her face with her hand and lethargically grabbed her phone.

Chloe: I have something to show you meet me in front of campus

Chloe: Get dat ass in gear NOW

"I dread to think what you have planned," Joyce sighed worriedly. No doubt it would get them in more trouble.

"So long as it doesn't involve a gun, it's a step up," Warren muttered to himself. Hopefully, the hit counter for gun-related injuries would stay at two.

"If they're going out this late, I doubt it can be good," Kate pointed out nervously. If Max was willing to break curfew, it must be important… and therefore dangerous.

"Not only that but having Chloe so excited can only mean they're doing something rebellious and shady," Rachel added gleefully.
Chloe narrowed her eyes, irritated by the prejudice. "Thanks for the vote of confidence…"

"Don't go acting like I'm being unreasonable in my assumptions," Rachel scoffed confidently. "Just wait and see."

*I knew Chloe would be all over this… So I better get moving.* Shoving her phone in her pocket and grabbing her bag, she stood. After shooting a mournful sideways glance at the wilted plant – obviously feeling guilty for not watering it enough – she rolled her shoulders.

"Max… it's a good thing we didn't get you a pet." Vanessa mentioned with a sigh. Her daughter was so forgetful sometimes. Well, most of the time.

"Yeah, probably," Max admitted reluctantly, rubbing the back of her neck. Even in this situation, she still reacted to the mild disappointment in her mom's voice. Old habits died hard.

"That doesn't fill me with much confidence." Kate chimed in half-jokingly, not feeling quite so confident in the brunette's pet keeping skills.

"Are you hungry bunny? Here, nosh on this…" Max crouched down by the cage, putting a carrot in for the rabbit.

"See? Nothing to worry about," Max reassured. "I might not be good with plants, but animals are different."

From a young age, she'd always had a way with animals, not that she had owned any herself. Bongo, Chloe's cat, was her main source of proof. When she went to the Price house, he always demanded attention, often plonking himself on her lap and refusing to move. Maybe her chilled out, shy nature had been a breath of fresh air compared to Chloe's boisterous attitude. Even Pompidou had seemed to take to her, once he'd figured out that she wasn't a threat.

She glanced out of the window overlooking Blackwell's grounds into the darkness. *There's been so much going on I almost forgot about the eclipse… All this atmospheric action can't be a coincidence… and all roads are leading to my tornado vision…*

"That's kind of a big thing to almost forget, Max." Warren quipped. Deflective humor was a coping mechanism in the face of the weird and stressful.

"Yeah, you'd have thought I'd have been a little more vigilant of freak weather. Even with everything else," Max agreed tiredly. After everything, she could sleep non-stop for an entire year and not be 100% charged.

Finally, Chloe turned to her, still not looking overly happy. "You never have been the most observant or mindful."

At least the bluenette was acknowledging her again. Max didn't want to fall out. Chloe's stubbornness knew no bounds, going days without speaking to her over the most stupid things out of pride.

"Says you." Max swore she saw the faintest of smiles on Chloe's lips.

*After checking her laptop, cringing at hypocritical social media messages and frowning at news articles about Kate's suicide attempt, she headed over to the door.*

Chloe leaned back in her chair as she took in all the messages. "Funny how everyone suddenly
'cares' now."

"Always when it's too late." Rachel's tone was wistful, reflective. They were all guilty of that, including her. Acting on impulse and considering the consequences later.

Giving herself a mini-pep talk about Kate being alive, and eyeing up Nathan's dried wall threat, she left her room. There was a door ajar about halfway down, a thin sliver of light lining the carpet. Other than that, nothing.

*Okay, this is scary dark. Let there be-* Switching on her phone's flashlight, she ventured down the hallway. The thin, dim beam of light brushed across the whiteboard beside Kate's door, which had been taped off, her whiteboard full of get well soon messages. *So much hypocrite.*

Victoria winced, the thought mostly directed at her. Taylor and Courtney also felt a pang of guilt. It may not have happened in this timeline, but that was only because of Max's intervention. With emotions running high, it was easy to get swept up in guilt.

*After having a quick chat with Taylor in the bathroom and Dana in her room, mostly about Kate, as well as snooping around Victoria's room, Max headed to the grounds. Expertly, she dodged out of Principal Wells' way, who seemed to have been drinking, before carrying on to the main part of campus.*

Chloe shook her head, crossing her arms. "So, the Principal is a drunk, on top of being a total asshole. Perfect."

"To be fair, I would be drinking too in his position," Rachel stated matter-of-factly.

"I think we all would," Warren reiterated, running his fingers through his hair.

Kate's brow furrowed slightly, watching the pitiful display. "It must be a stressful situation."

"Glad to see the professionalism has continued," Ryan bitterly remarked.

"Did you really expect anything else?" Vanessa asked with forced calm.

"I sure as hell ain't surprised," Joyce agreed, with David nodding stiffly.

Max had no sympathy for him. Whatever Wells was going through paled in comparison to what Kate had been through.

*Out of nowhere, Chloe jumped her. "BOO-YAH! Get it, BOO-yah? Like I'm a scary punk ghost...*"

"More like a scary punk asshole," Max glowered, sounding annoyed. "Hey Chloe, I didn't exactly have the greatest day trying to keep my friend from jumping off the roof. I don't think I need you pranking me tonight, 'kay?"

"Kind of a dick move, Chloe," Rachel softly commented, wincing at the awkwardness.

"Kind of..." the bluenette's brow furrowed at her own insensitive behavior. Her main problem: she didn't think sometimes.

*Blue eyes flickered with remorse at the uncharacteristic anger. "Sorry, but you absolutely balls to the walls did save your friend!"*
"Kate saved herself. I couldn't even use my power… my head felt like it was being crushed…" Max rubbed her face, swallowing back tears. "Then I had no clue what to say to her on that roof…"

"Don't be so modest, rock star. Kate is alive because of you," Chloe reassured, expression softening. "You obviously said the right thing… And your badass power is going to save us all. We just need to connect the players."

"And find out who almost killed Kate. We have to stop this from happening to anybody else," Max asserted, a renewed wave of determination crossing her face.

"Oh yeah, and somehow stop that tornado from wiping out Arcadia Bay… right?" Her tone was light-hearted, trying to improve the mood.

"Didn't you say that it was all about 'Chaos Theory'? I don't see any control over this chaos..." Max sighed, sounding hopeless.

"Oh right, except for your ability to, oh yeah, manipulate time and space. No biggie," Chloe replied with soft sarcasm.

"Chloe, I just feel weird about some of my decisions..." Max hesitantly divulged. "Especially after I just got Nathan expelled..."

"Dude, do not even torture yourself like that. Let's focus on looking for clues, okay?" Chloe suggested, keeping her focused.

Shaking away the doubts, Max nodded. "Right, for one thing, there's too much coincidence between the people around Kate and Rachel."

"Like step-prick and Nathan Prescott?" Chloe asked, her jaw tightening.

"Not just them."

If only she had really believed that instead of rushing to a conclusion. Her focus had been too narrow, pinning all the blame on Nathan. He had been a tool for the real mastermind, realized all too late.

"Yep… I just want to beat the shit out of those particular bros..." the blue-haired punk's tone darkened.

Max nodded sympathetically. "And even though I don't know her, it feels like Rachel is guiding us to the truth..."

"That's me, your friendly spirit guide." Rachel joked, unaware of her fate.

Chloe shook her head. "If we had you as a spirit guide, we'd be screwed."

"And what's that supposed to mean?" the blonde narrowed her eyes, playfully offended.

In response, the bluenette simply shrugged. "We'd be going on a magical mystery tour since you can't seem to focus on one thing for longer than five minutes."

"You make that sound like a bad thing. It'd be fun at least." Rachel easily brushed aside the
criticism, manipulating it into a compliment.

"For you, maybe," Chloe muttered with an eye roll.

Wincing, Max wondered whether Rachel had in fact been guiding them. If so… she kinda wished the girl would’ve left well enough alone.

"Fuck the truth, I just want my friend right now…” Chloe replied angrily.

Rachel turned to her with a teasing grin. "Ouch friend-zoning me, huh?"

"I don't even want to know," Victoria huffed loudly.

Rage fading, she sighed. "It scares me to think where she could be… Do you think she's…"

Her voice trailed off into silence.

"Kicking it in Los Angeles?" Max tentatively suggested, trying not to jump to the worst possibility for her friend's sake. "That would be the best-case scenario…"

This option did not sit well with Chloe. "She wouldn't leave without me, okay? And how often do missing girls turn up?"

"I have to admit, the odds of that aren't looking great right now," Rachel pointed out.

Those red binders had been a game changer. Rachel had been prepared to do anything to get out of Arcadia, willing to abandon everything to make her dreams a reality – people included.

"Guess not," Chloe mumbled to herself, not liking the alternative explanations. With what happened to Kate, the morbid options were becoming more likely. Optimism clashed with logic.

"We have to find Rachel soon. We have to…” Desperation flickered in her voice.

"I promise you we will. Like you said, it's time to start the search for clues," Max replied reassuringly. "Now tell me what's your secret?"

"Drum roll please…” The older girl held up her hand, a bunch of keys dangling down as she smirked mischievously. "I present the spare keys to Blackwell. Thank you, step-prick."

"You are such a boss, Chloe. I just don't want you to get into any more trouble…” Max sounded impressed by her acquisition, eyes zeroing in on the keys.

"Since when did you get so daring, Caulfield? Before you would have stood there and lectured me for like three hours on why it was oh so wrong of me to swipe those keys." Chloe smirked before adding as an afterthought, "Probably set me a huge ass essay on it, too."

"Well, most of that is your fault. That and…” She held up her right hand, gently wiggling her fingers. Her powers certainly had made her more reckless.

"Shame you didn't have crazy rewind powers when we were kids then, or at least some of that confidence." Chloe lamented over the lost opportunities of their misspent youth, all thanks to Max's stubbornness. Sure, logically her rejected ideas would've ended in trouble but she would never know now.

"What, so I would have followed all your insane plans?" Sometimes, Max did regret not being
more adventurous in her childhood. Not quite to the extent Chloe wanted, but she could've been more flexible. Some of the suggestions would've been cool, others dangerously stupid.

"And had some fun with it," Chloe added eagerly.

A smirk danced across Rachel's features. "Maybe broken a bone or two."

The bluenette sighed deeply at the lack of support. "Oh well thanks, I really appreciate the backup on that one, Rach."

"Happy to help." She grinned gleefully.

Ryan, Vanessa, and Joyce were all surprised by this hesitant show of rebellious behavior from Max. It just wasn't like her, or how she used to be, anyway. She had been Chloe's impulse control, which may at least in part explain why the older girl had gone so off the rails when Max left for Seattle.

Chloe shrugged, pocketing the keys again. "Look at all the trouble dropping in Arcadia Bay. At this point, who gives a fuck anymore?"

Time travel, freak weather, life threatening situations and missing students had only been the tip of the iceberg. There were still so many unknown consequences and unanswered questions – the origin of her powers and how to use them properly being at the top of the list. Maybe it didn't matter anymore but Max was still curious, nonetheless.

"We're in it to win it, Max. Lead the way." They walked down the path towards the main building, sticking close together.

"I'm so glad you're my partner in crime."

"As long as you're my partner in time," Chloe replied cheekily, earning her a deep sigh.

"Insert groan here..."

Their conversation was interrupted by two people exiting the main building. Diving behind one of the many billboards on campus, the pair got a closer look. The figures were Victoria and Mark Jefferson.

Rachel raised an eyebrow curiously. "Well, well, what's going on here?"

"I have no clue, but I seriously can't wait to find out." Chloe didn't even try to hide her excitement.

Victoria's voice carried over. "Thank you again so much for helping me put together a portfolio."

"Hopefully the rest of the class will follow your lead," Mr. Jefferson replied, unconvinced. "I'm sorry I was distracted. As you know, it has not been a good day for Blackwell."

"I know this has been an awful day and you can talk to me anytime, Mr. Jefferson."

"Are you fucking serious? Is this actually happening right now?" Chloe asked incredulously.

"Want me to pinch your arm to check?" Rachel suggested with a smirk.
"I think I'm good without that, thanks."

"Unless we're having a group hallucination, this is definitely a thing," Warren muttered to himself. "Definitely didn't read about midnight teacher meetings when looking up Blackwell. Guess I must've glossed over that part."

"Just when I thought this school couldn't get any more professional..." Vanessa bitterly remarked.

Ryan echoed his wife's irritation. "I'm starting to wonder if there is a single decent member of teaching staff here."

"They're not all bad," Max chipped in. People like Ms. Grant actually tried to be good teachers, despite all of Blackwell's bullshit. "Some actually do their job, surprisingly."

"Thank you, Victoria. I'm glad it had a relatively happy ending."

"I don't know what I would have done if Katie jumped..." Her sympathy sounded so insincere.

He seemed surprised by the suggested closeness. "'Katie'? I had no idea you two were that close... did she?"

The only reason Jefferson would get so hung up on this was a matter of self-preservation. He just wanted to know if anyone knew about that night. That thought made Max's fists clench, staring at the screen with burning hatred.

Instead of letting him finish, Victoria turned to her real motivation. "Well... how does this affect the 'Everyday Heroes' contest?"

His brow furrowed before he answered. "It doesn't. The contest is still a go and I still have to pick the winner to best represent Blackwell. I've got all the photos except one from Max..."

"Mr. Jefferson really wants you to enter, doesn't he?" Kate quietly observed.

"Seems that way." Max knew his intention were not inspired by her best interests, quite the opposite.

Rachel wasn't surprised by his borderline invasive pushing. "He can certainly be... forceful."

"Some people just can't take a hint," Max muttered to herself, finding it increasingly difficult to keep her cool when she saw that bastard. Soon, she wouldn't have to maintain the pretense.

"I'll give you a one-word sneak preview of Max's photo - selfie," Victoria scoffed dismissively. "Listen, you've seen my entry, you know it's better than that. Wouldn't that be so cool to hang out together in San Francisco, Mark?"

Mr. Jefferson's voice came out low, as if he was worried there were people listening in – which admittedly, there were. "Stick to Mr. Jefferson, Victoria. Please? And, uh... I haven't picked a winner yet."

To stop him from leaving, Victoria grabbed firmly onto his arm. "You already love my work, so it's not like you're playing favorites. Just imagine if you picked my photo though... we would have to spend a lot of time together. That could be... fun, don't you think?"
After seeing what Jefferson had done to Victoria, an icy chill crept through Max's veins as she watched with morbid attention. How had she missed all the signs?

"And I'm the only one who gets a bad rep for playing the field..." Rachel muttered, recalling the unsavory graffiti decorating Blackwell. While not unfounded, rumors could get explosively out of hand.

"Seems that theory doesn't hold water," Chloe remarked as she watched Victoria's downright awkward attempts to get Mr. Jefferson to pick her photo.

"Evidently," Warren added, with Kate frowning lightly at the unexpected scene – both feeling uncomfortable from secondhand embarrassment.

"Don't even say another word," Victoria warned menacingly.

Taylor and Courtney shuffled in their seats, ready to abort mission if this went nuclear. They did not want to get caught up in that fight.

Rachel held up her hand, smirking. "Hey, I'm not judging or anything. It's none of my business what you do or who you do it with."

"I said... don't." The venom in Victoria's tone only intensified with her rival's input.

"What? Can't take it when it's you under fire? Not that I'm surprised." Chloe spat, returning the bitterness.

The taller blonde's eyes narrowed, brow twitching. "You are walking on very thin ice now, Price. Don't push it."

"Or what?" the bluenette challenged sharply. "You'll get your little minions to spread rumors about how fucked up I am? Tease and torment me so much that I can't actually go anywhere without getting harassed?" She let out a dismissive laugh. "Well, jokes on you, because you're too fucking late. I already did a good enough job messing up my life on my own." Pausing, her brow furrowed. "There is literally nothing you can do to fuck with me. So, I dare you to try."

Before Victoria could retort, a shudder ran down her spine. It felt like she had been hit with raw energy, temporarily paralyzing her for a few seconds. Chloe was experiencing something similar. This was enough to make them feel uncomfortable, eyes turning to Max – whose head was bowed, hair covering her face.

The atmosphere surrounding the reluctant time traveler, much darker and strained, was unsettling. Almost eerie.

"I have asked you not to cause a scene. More than once. I understand this is stressful, but I can't keep going if this continues." Her voice resonated around the room, temperature plummeting as the air filled with static. "I can't afford to expend any more power than necessary. Not at this stage."

Her entire body shook as she forced a steady tone, the throbbing in her head refusing to let up. "If you want to fight, save it for when I don't feel like I'm going to implode. Especially over something so fucking trivial."

Max hated how weak and feeble she sounded but it could work in her favor. Every second wasted was another enduring unnecessary crippling pain. Not only that but if her powers were connected to the storm, she did not want to make it worse. It was insane enough already.

Thankfully, Victoria and Chloe shut up. Apologies could wait. With a ragged breath, she allowed
Her forcefulness did not sit well with him. "I'm going to think that you didn't say any of that."

"You might as well choose me… otherwise I might have to tell people you offered to choose my photo for favors or something..." she threatened, using all her tricks.

"As a favor to your future, I'll also ignore that undisguised threat," he replied, stern and cold. "This conversation is officially over, Miss Chase, I suggest you go back to your dorm now." Without another word, he strode off to the parking lot.

"Wait, I only... Are you fucking kidding me?" Resigned to her failure, she skulked off. "That's so stupid!"

Now alone with Chloe again, Max relaxed. "Just when I think Victoria can't get any more evil."

"Shit is about to get real at Blackwell," Chloe whispered eagerly.

"Let's go find out." The brunette grabbed onto Chloe's hand, pulling them closer to the door. Before long, they were inside the main hallway. "Chloe the Keymaster," she whispered, sounding equal parts impressed and nervous.

"You know it."

Using Max's phone flashlight, they headed towards Principal Wells' office. "Dude, I don't know about this... we're both already in so much trouble..."

"Not to mention the weed you brought into my room..." Chloe mentioned wryly. "Joking!"

Max wasn't amused with her attempts to lighten the mood. "I'm serious. We're not kids anymore. We're breaking and entering..."

"If I have a key can it be breaking? They can't charge us for just entering!" the blue-haired punk pointed out.

"Oh, the classic Price logic," Rachel chuckled. Joyce shook her head slightly, sighing. "One I know all too well."

"Hey, technically I'm right." Chloe defended.

"Tell that to the police when they catch you," Warren grinned. "I'm sure that will hold up in court."

"I'm serious. We could go to jail..." Max insisted, sounding extremely worried.

"Not if I'm related to the head of Blackwell Security. Step-shit will not want me in the hands of the local police... So we better find out what's in the Principal's office first." Chloe started working on the door, glancing over her shoulder. "You can rewind if we get caught, right? You have mad powers, Max."

Shifting uncomfortably, Max realized how reliant they had been on her temperamental powers.
The more she used them, the more unstable the result. Not like she had another option, though.

"But my powers didn't save Kate... Maybe I did on my own..." Max muttered to herself.

"Come on. One more door and our work here is done," Chloe prompted as she entered inside, striding to the office door to try all the keys. "That's it," she rejoiced prematurely, finding the last key useless. "What the fuck? The security officer should have the key to the Principal's office."

"Because that's not suspicious at all." Rachel wryly remarked. There must be all kind of juicy secrets inside.

"It does seem strange," Kate agreed, finding it increasingly difficult to give Principal Wells the benefit of the doubt.

"Strange doesn't do it justice," Warren mumbled under his breath.

"I wish I could say I was surprised," Ryan muttered to himself, beyond the point of being shock by the sketchy behaviors of Blackwell's faculty.

"I think we all do," Joyce sighed, with Vanessa simply nodding in agreement, unable to express her anger through words.

David already knew this would happen – one of the reasons he didn't trust Wells. How involved was Blackwell's principal in all this? He was in the Prescott's pocket thanks to their extensive funding. And he'd already covered for Nathan on several occasions.

"He's hiding shit. Like everybody here," Max replied, looking at the keys.

"Well now we definitely have to get this door open. Believe it or not, I know a little about lock picking- thanks to Frank." Chloe crouched down and pulled makeshift lock picking tools from her pocket. "I might as well test my thief skill..."

Rachel crossed her arms and leaned back in her seat. "Oh, this should be good."

"Sounds like your doubting my skills," Chloe accused with mild irritation.

"No... why would I?" The blonde flashed her an innocent smile.

"Because you always do," the bluenette retorted skeptically.

Rachel tilted her head slightly. "Let's just say... I'm curious to see your skills at play."

"I don't think I am particularly," Joyce exhaled deeply, glancing over to her daughter.

"Go for it. We're already in this deep."

"Well, you could look for the key... just in case," Chloe suggested before getting back to it.

"Why yes, I could." Without further hesitation, Max began searching around outside the office, coming up blank. "No key for thee... We have to find another way in."

"Guess I didn't spend enough time with Frank," Chloe sighed, glaring at the lock as if she had expected to be easy.
Joyce let out a sigh of relief, muttering to herself. "Thankfully."

"But I'll use my DIY lock-pick tools while you come up with a better plan." She resigned herself to the lack of ideas.

"My plan has a name," Max announced as she gave Warren a call. Discreetly explaining the situation, she came up with a solution – to make a bomb. Leaving the bluenette to her own devices, she searched around for the necessary ingredients then returned to Chloe. "Take it easy on the door, Chloe. Let's try this instead."

"Boom. Literally." Chloe grinned as Max fixed the bomb to the door, pumped. "Yes! Time to blow shit up!"

"I know I've become a co-conspirator here, however unwittingly, but I have to question this plan," Warren mentioned, having reservations about their grand scheme.

"It does seem a little counter-productive." Kate mirrored his concern over this very loud option, although saw little alternative than them giving up.

"Stupid more like it," Victoria mumbled softly, trying hard not to start an argument with Chloe and anger Max further.

While shaking her head, Rachel turned to her blue-haired friend. "You never could do things quietly, could you?"

"I can confirm." A fond smile crossed Joyce's face, tinged with melancholy.

She'd inherited that trait from William, who always made three times as much noise as necessary. It drove Joyce mad. Sometimes, she wondered if they teamed up to annoy her – not unlikely. When he died, the house felt so… empty. God knew she'd put up with it twenty-four hours a day for the rest of her life if it meant he was still here.

"I would like to point out that this wasn't my idea," Chloe grumbled with mild indignation.

Rachel didn't seem too convinced. "I don't see you protesting against it too much."

"If you'll light the candle…" Max prompted, watching Chloe dig around in her pockets for her lighter.

"This is so cool," she whispered excitedly as she lit the fuse.

"Get ready to haul ass." They dove behind the desk, one resounding boom blowing the door wide open.

"That was so fucking cool." Chloe's excitement didn't last long, a high-pitched alarm triggering.

"Oh, we are toast. Here comes the whole Arcadia Bay fire and police department!" Max exclaimed, mentally kicking herself for getting too carried away.

"Guess I was right to have my doubts," Warren asserted, brushing a stray strand of hair from his face.

"It's cute how surprised you guys are. What did you expect would happen?" Rachel wryly
"commented.

Kate winced at the shrill tone. "Not that obviously."

"Common sense prevails yet again." Victoria scoffed, keeping her voice low so only Taylor and Courtney could hear her.

"Uh... So what should we do?" Chloe hesitantly asked.

Moving faster than she ever had in her life, Max got into the office and rewound the explosion. When the door was intact, she let time resume, hearing her friend's grumbled protests on the other side.

"Welcome to my domain," she greeted smugly as she opened the door.

Stunned, Chloe entered the office and took a seat at the desk to check the computer, commenting on the ugly yet very cozy chair. While she did that, Max got to work snooping.

The first thing she came across, a disgruntled letter from Nathan's father threatening to stop funding until his son's suspension was resolved. It also 'advised' wells not to cancel the Vortex Club party. *So Nathan Prescott's dad is a bully too... shocker.*

"Major plot twist," Chloe scoffed sardonically. "Definitely wasn't seeing that one coming."

"You're not the only one." Warren sighed. While he didn't know much about the Prescotts, it didn't take a genius to see their reign of terror running throughout Arcadia.

Kate frowned, not wanting to believe it. Max's parents didn't say a word, not surprised. Even before the move, the Prescotts had a bad reputation. Joyce just shook her head, wondering what William would make of all this. If he was still alive, they'd probably have moved by now. As much as Chloe wanted to leave, there was too much here to leave behind.

Unlike the others, Victoria knew Sean Prescott. She'd met him once and heard a lot from Nathan. He was more worried about his family reputation than his son's well-being. Her parents were nothing compared to the current head of the Prescott estate.

While Max had never seen the man, his reputation preceded him. If Nathan was anything to judge by, she didn't want to ever meet him in person. Only to exact revenge.

**Next, she moved onto the student records, finding Nathan's clean. This asshole has a spotless record.**

Warren frowned, finding it impossible to believe. "Ass kissing much?"

"Can't say I'm surprised," Vanessa muttered to herself, getting increasingly frustrated about the lack of punishment.

Ryan's jaw tightened, just as angry as his wife. "Can any of us?"

"Who wants to place bets on the percentage of Nathan's real file that's been hidden, or how much of the Prescott fortune has been used as bribery to keep it out of the public eye?" Chloe bitterly posed the question.

"I'm going to say a good 90% was 'conveniently erased', probably more," Rachel suggested,
sounding confident in her high estimate.

"Not a bad guess," Max affirmed, although she was sure all of Nathan's file was a lie.

Victoria's record was the same, exulting her vast academic achievements. Warren's GPA was high, although his talkativeness and science pranks left were a point of concern. Max's file was mixed, her GPA and quietness left a lot to be desired. It wasn't all doom and gloom, her photographic potential noted. There was also something about Kate's incident attached at the bottom.

Hers was not the only file that mentioned the Vortex Club drama. Kate's otherwise impressive file was overshadowed by notes on her deteriorating condition. The school nurse had recommended that they all keep an eye on her and there was some acknowledgment of the video.

Chloe's eyes narrowed. "So, that bastard did know everything then."

"Of course he did," Rachel echoed matter-of-factly.

Warren skimmed over the text, growing progressively desensitized to the immense level of hypocrisy. "And he still prefers to blame literally everyone else. Classic."

"Just when we all thought he couldn't get any more useless," Ryan grumbled, swiftly running out of anger to express. He'd very nearly used up all the possible hatred and rage inside him, the same with Vanessa.

Max turned to ex-student files, namely Rachel and Chloe. The two files were so different, Rachel presented as the model student with healthy ambition and Chloe as the student from hell, rebelling pointlessly despite her potential. Of course, Rachel's file had been hijacked by notes regarding her disappearance.

"I don't think our files could have been any more different if we'd tried." Rachel mused.

"Yeah, because you played the good student. Unlike me," Chloe pointed out.

The blonde could literally fit into any crowd, an almost scary ability. For anyone else, it would've been impossible to maintain that level of social flexibility.

"Or because you lack subtlety," the blonde immediately countered.

Chloe just shrugged. "If I'm gonna do something, I'm going all out."

Smirking, Rachel shook her head. "And it's that kind of attitude that got you kicked out."

On paper, the two of them seemed to be polar opposites, at least before all the drug accusations. In this setting however, they appeared to be thick as thieves. That was also the image Chloe had painted for Max over that week in October. As always, things were much more complicated.

Satisfied with her findings, she returned to the desk, ready to exchange information.

"Max, you better come check out these files..." Chloe called her over, continuing to scroll through the computer files. "Nathan accuses Rachel of bringing drugs on campus? And my step-troll went along with it because he thinks Rachel was a bad influence on me. Assholes."
The brunette bent down to look at screen better, frowning. "If David is teaming up with Nathan Prescott… That's a bad sign."

"No shit, Sherlock," Chloe mumbled, shooting a sideways glance David's way. Nathan was the last person she could see him teaming up with in all honesty.

"Seems almost too perfect," Rachel noted. If he had resorted to working with the blond boy, maybe the situation was worse than they could imagine.

There was no way David could see himself teaming up with a stuck up, bratty rich kid like Nathan. So, why now? It made him look like the enemy. Whatever the answer, he suspected none of them would like it.

"'Nathan Prescott the Third.' Oooh, he's so money." Chloe muttered to herself mockingly. "And you know the Prescotts dropped major bank to bury Nathan's real file… Look, it reads like a rap sheet - bad grades, teacher complaints, secret probation… But I was expelled?"

"At least Nathan was finally suspended," Max reminded her as her friend scrolled through. "Check out that note… Open it."

Without further prompting, she clicked on the note. "That's just some crazy drawing…"

It took a few seconds for the brunette to respond. "It's not a drawing… look, 'Rachel in the dark room… Rachel in the dark room…' Over and over. That's it."

Chloe squinted at the note to confirm, her eyebrows raising as she realized Max was right. "That's… fucked up. What does this mean? Nathan is truly psychotic. I know he has something to do with Rachel missing…"

Rachel looked over the note, trying to make sense of it. "Well, I personally hope not."

"Me neither. If Nathan's involved…" Chloe couldn't finish her sentence. Just thinking about what Nathan could've done made her feel ill and incredibly angry, too.

Nobody was feeling overly optimistic, especially with Nathan's ever increasing involvement. As much as Victoria wanted to defend him – the only one who really knew what he was like under the bravado – she couldn't after everything they'd seen.

"Whoa, listen to this, 'David M. always asks what's going on in my head… David M. always helps me follow those he follows…' Pretty cryptic."

"No, it sounds like they've formed some sort of weird team - 'The Super He-Bros'." Chloe replied, sounding irritated by this unholy alliance.

"Jesus, David was stalking Kate, harassing me, and now we know he was all over Rachel too…" Max concluded, sounding worried at the possibility.

"Oh, we are so going into his garage files… Plus I'm getting a little paranoid in here. We got out info, let's bail. But maybe we shouldn't leave without a gift…" Chloe leaned back in the chair with a mischievous grin.

"No, you are not taking the cozy chair." Max refused her outright, not even needing to hear it.
The bluenette was more confused than angry by the immediate rejection. "Max do your powers include mind-reading? Or did you just rewind because I tried to steal the chair? Shit, I'm confused."

"It's the powers of best friendship. I know how you roll..." Max smirked lightly, glad to see that some things never changed. "We should definitely get out of here. We pressed our luck enough."

Taking the liberty to rummage through the drawers, Chloe pulled out a suspicious brown envelope. "Hullo, what have we here?" Her eyes widened as she uncovered the sizable wad of money. "Holy shit, jackpot! Cha-ching!"

"Wowser, that's a lot for the 'handicapped fund'," Max whispered, temporarily forgetting the urgency of escaping.

With deft fingers, Chloe flicked through the money to roughly count it up. "Dude, there's five thousand dollars here. I could pay Frank back tonight... This will chill him out after our knife showdown yesterday..." She sighed at her friend's silent disapproval. "Are you going to make a big issue out of this? Or just rewind and take the greenbacks for yourself? I hope you do that instead of lecturing me."

As with previous morally obscure situations, a decision screen appeared: LEAVE THE MONEY or STEAL THE MONEY.

Chloe kicked off the discussion with a predictable response. "It's probably dirty money anyway, so who even cares?"

"I'm inclined to agree. Definitely a strong possibility," Rachel concurred confidently.

"It does seem weird that anyone would leave something that important in a crumpled envelope in his desk drawer... Then again, this is Wells we're talking about," Warren chimed in.

This brought a wry, yet vaguely melancholic, smile to Rachel's lips. "He's certainly not winning any awards for competence."

"What if it is actually money for the handicapped fund?" Kate hesitantly asked. If there was even a slim chance, she couldn't condone stealing it.

"Not only that, but you two could get in trouble... more trouble," Joyce corrected herself, turning to speak to Chloe more specifically. "You sure as hell don't need more of that."

"I would prefer if my daughter remained out of criminal activity where possible." Ryan chipped in, his expression stoic.

"As would I," Vanessa echoed. Max had a strong moral compass so would hate the idea.

"If that money is actually for the handicapped fund, it should stay there. Someone might need it," Taylor added forcefully.

Her mom had gone through a difficult time with a back injury recently. There were numerous consultations planned, which would most likely lead to surgery in the coming months. She couldn't bring herself to deprive someone with a serious disability. It would be hypocritical.
Courtney glanced over at her strong reaction while Victoria simply shrugged. "I don't see a reason to take it particularly."

At the time, Max wouldn't even consider stealing the money. Now, she wasn't as certain. Sure, she'd feel like an asshole but her priorities had changed drastically. Her time struggles made her more willing to act on selfish desires. There would always be casualties, no matter the choice. To keep Chloe and the others safe, they had suffered a thousand times over in various timelines.

Clearly, Max wasn't comfortable stealing the money. "You really want to take money from the handicapped fund? I know you need to pay Frank back, but… I've got my power to protect you, right?"

"There's a lot of power in that horse-choking wad of cash..." With a sigh, she roughly sealed up the envelope and shoved it back in the drawer. "But yes, Moral Max is right again. I guess... Let's get the hell out of this office morgue."

*I know that money would have helped Chloe and me...* With that thought, she followed the bluenette out of the office.

There were so many parallels between this and the alternate timeline. Chloe's entitlement over all things related to disability hadn't appeared out of thin air. Her disregard for handicapped parking spots, the desire to take the money, hell even her fascination with the damn office chair, all pointed to her alternate fate. Certain things transcended time, like Max's lack of contact with Chloe.

Instead of getting ahead of herself, the brunette focused on the near future. She was both looking forward to and dreading the next part. It would be a break from the bullshit but would no doubt bring about... awkward conversations.

Honestly, she only cared about how Chloe would react. Since the bluenette had taken the lead, hopefully it would work out fine. Maybe Max would finally get some answers. Whatever happened next, she could only wait around to find out... however nerve-wracking.
Chapter Ten: Chaos Theory, Part 2

When Max left the office, she found her roguish friend looking like she was plotting something major. "That impish look scares me."

Chloe pulled the keys out of her pocket, eyes lighting up with mischief. "Care for a midnight swim? The Blackwell pool is ours."

"Swimming? You want to take that risk now?" Max asked incredulously.

"First a bomb and now… swimming. Do you guys actually want to get caught?" Warren questioned, wondering how either of them could think that was a good idea now.

Rachel waved away his concern. "Stop being such a downer. Swimming in the pool at night would be awesome. Sign me the hell up."

It seemed Chloe had been right about the enigmatic blonde – up for anything, the riskier the better. Whether she was brave or stupid, a little of both, it had ultimately led to her death.

"It does seem a bit too risky considering… well, everything," Kate added with a predictable stance on breaking curfew.

"Idiotic, more like," Victoria muttered to herself, still conscious about how Max had reacted to earlier open hostility.

"It's been a cray week. You didn't let me take that money to pay Frank off, so if he pops a cap in my skull at least allow me to have a little carefree fun for a few minutes…" Chloe grabbed hold of her hands, coaxing with a grin. "Splish splash?"

Any lingering apprehension disappeared from Max's expression. "You're right. We hella deserve it. Splish splash!"

"Did you actually just say 'hella'?" the bluenette asked amusedly. "I think I'm a good bad influence on you."

"I don't know about that," Joyce sighed, wondering just how much more trouble they could get into.

They headed inside before they could get caught. "We're inside the Otters' lair!"

Chloe didn't seem as impressed. "Big fucking deal. I want that heated water!"

"We still have to play it cool, okay? I still go to school here," Max reminded her nervously.
"Did that only just sink in now?" Warren asked amusedly, his sarcasm holding up.

"Apparently," Rachel added with a smirk.

"It was more of a friendly reminder to a certain someone," Max mentioned, shooting a sideways glance at her blue-haired friend. "Not mentioning any names."

"I'm sitting right here, you know," Chloe grumbled, squinting back with mild indignation.

"I know. And I plan on keeping it that way." Every time Max took a step forward, she was pushed three steps back. More like three miles, really. Even now, she was still going backwards, her changes temporary.

Chloe is so psyched up for 'girls' night out' so, I better follow her evil plan.

"You can own this hellhole once you figure out your rewind power…" Chloe mentioned as she approached the changing rooms. "Boys or girls?"

"Am I sensing a hidden question in that, I wonder?" Rachel asked teasingly. Sometimes, the bluenette was too easy to read… unless your name was Max Caulfield, it seemed. Either way, she was interested to see how this played out.

"I am not even going to answer that. You're just trying to trick me into saying something embarrassing," Chloe countered, refusing to play along.

"Partially, yes," Rachel admitted.

Chloe crossed her arms, not backing down. "And I'm not falling for it."

"Boo, you're no fun." Rachel pouted at the predictable response.

As Max watched their petty squabble, she realized that the blonde would be having a field day soon enough. The others, she wasn't so sure. Not that it really mattered what anyone else thought, other than Chloe.

"Girls of course," Max answered on instinct.

This answer seemed to amuse Chloe. "Girls? Ooh-la-la… Let me check to see if the pool's heated..." Without another word, she headed off to the left into the girls' changing room.

After thoroughly searching through the girl's locker room, finding an interesting discovery of selfies in Victoria's locker, Max headed on out to the pool.

"Damn and she gives you shit over taking selfies." Chloe shook her head at the hypocrisy. Just another incident to add to the ever-growing list.

"She's probably just jealous," Rachel stated matter-of-factly. That was the only logical reason for such one-sided animosity. She'd also been on the receiving end of similar snide and character assassinating remarks.

Victoria scowled at them. "Don't fucking talk about me like I'm not here."

One stern glance from Max was enough to shut the argument down before it got out of hand. She could be surprisingly scary and threatening, especially knowing just how much power she had at her fingertips.
The bluenette sat poolside, dangling her hand in the water. *Chloe just couldn't wait to splish splash in the pool.*

"Max, try to find the light for the pool. I want to see the sharks!" Chloe announced excitedly, enjoying this rebellious behavior.

The brunette lightly shook her head at her friend's eagerness. *"Otters don't like sharks. They bite."*

An evil grin danced across Chloe's features. *"So do I... Hit that light!"

"This had better not be some kind of skinny dipping session. Otherwise, I'm leaving." Victoria stated outright. Honestly, she wouldn't be surprised.

Joyce sighed, rubbing her face and praying that wasn't the case. Her daughter probably would just to add another layer of daring. David remained expressionless, tensing at the possible outcome. His eyes wandered away from the screen, just in case. Max's parents seemed to be siding with Joyce and David on this one, not enthused about the thought. Warren just looked really confused about the whole thing and Kate was clearly uncomfortable.

"Don't worry. It's not," Max swiftly reassured. She had some dignity left. Even if… something like that happened, there was no way in hell she'd share it publically. There was personal, and then there was personal.

"It would've been if I was there," Rachel added gleefully. Now, Chloe would've probably ended up going along with it, whereas Max would need some serious coaxing. Maybe she could've swung it her way. Persuasion or, as some may refer to it, manipulation, was her strength.

"Figures…" Victoria muttered under her breath, biting back so many inflammatory responses. Right now, she just wanted to get through this so she could get on with her life.

To sate the impatience, Max went to the office and hit the lights. Unable to wait, Chloe stripped down to her underwear and dove into the pool with a loud splash. "Ohh yeah, baby! Feels like a hot tub! Too bad you made me feel like the Queen of Assholes because I wanted that cash stash... Tell me you're not going to stand there watching me like a zombie." To hurry Max along, the blue-haired punk splashed her.

She stepped back to avoid the worst of it. "Don't you dare!"

"Come stop me, hippie!" Chloe challenged, ready to provide more motivation if necessary.

"Okay, you asked for it!" Max began stripping down too, with Chloe glancing away halfway through.

Noticing the odd behavior, Rachel turned to her punk friend. "Now, what was that shy glance for?"

"Don't look at me. How am I supposed to know what I'm thinking when I haven't even experienced any of that shit?" Chloe defended, now regretting being within Rachel's teasing radar.

It was getting to the point where she would quite happily risk moving next to Victoria to escape the heat. Her deflective statement wasn't entirely true; she had some idea but there was no way in hell she'd give Rachel the satisfaction.
"Sure. You'd have absolutely no clue," the blonde replied skeptically, dropping it for now.

Now in her underwear and ready to swim, Max dive bombed into the pool. "Cowabunga!"

"Why look, an otter in my water!" Chloe hummed the Jaws theme gleefully.

"You are so obvious. And I still get freaked out by that movie, so stop." Max splashed her, issuing a challenge for a splash war. "I can't even watch any of those shark shows." They splashed each other a few times before winding it down. "I'll just rewind and harpoon you. Otter's revenge!"

Mischievous blue eyes narrowed. "Cheater!"

"Yeah, you would know about that!" Max countered playfully.

Chloe shifted onto her back, floating on the water's surface, her expression distant as Max joined her. "I wish Rachel was here. She would totally love being in here at night. Wish you guys had met each other…"

"Damn right I would have!" Rachel agreed excitedly.

Chloe rolled her eyes. "Anything to cause chaos and break the rules."

"To have fun, you mean," Rachel corrected.

"That too. You'd have probably somehow managed to rope half the dorm into it." Chloe hypothesized. Very few people could deny Rachel Amber.

"I'd have probably been in the half not up for it," Kate pointed out. She probably would be the only one either.

Rachel offered her a charming smile, hazel eyes twinkling. "Oh, I don't know. I can be pretty persuasive."

"And everybody says I'm a bad influence," Chloe sighed, sounding all the part of the victim.

Nobody bought her innocent act, least of all Rachel. "Because you are."

"We will," Max reassured. "With all this stuff going on, I'm starting to think everything is related… And I wanted to find out for Kate's sake. She almost died today..." The pair swam over to the edge of the pool.

The mention of the earlier incident brought the mood down to somber. Kate had been so close to death, as had Chloe. They had all tried to push it to the back of their minds for now, unable to deal with so much so quickly. How Max had managed to keep her composure was a miracle. There had been so much pressure on her shoulders and stress to combat. Would any of them have coped as 'calmly' with all this?

Chloe glanced over at her old friend, deep in thought. "Your power is changing everything, Max. Especially you. I can already tell. You're not so chickenshit anymore."

"Thanks, girlfriend."

When they finally reached the edge, they rested their arms up on the side to keep afloat.
"You know what I mean. You're becoming like this force of nature."

"That's one way of putting it. I mean, you can basically bend the rules of time and space. Have everyone at your mercy if you choose. I don't know anyone else who can boast that," Warren added, his sciencey side taking over.

Remove all the horrible events from the week and it was a fascinating discovery. Humanity had dreamt of time travel for years, using endless films, games and other mediums to facilitate that desire.

"It's not really been something I've felt like boasting about, to be honest…" It had reached the point where Max felt like she was just using her powers to fix all her mistakes, not changing anything. What else could she do, though?

"More like luck of nature." Max's expression became disheartened. "Come on, my power failed trying to rescue Kate… Maybe I'm just stumbling back and forth in time… for what reason?"

That last sentence summed up exactly how Max felt about her time travel even now. These powers had been thrust upon her without instruction. She'd been blindly feeling her way through, using them for what she deemed necessary only to have it blow up in her face.

"Your powers may have failed but you didn't, Max. You saved me." Kate eagerly challenged that statement.

"Not yet I haven't," the brunette muttered to herself.

"You didn't stumble when you saved me, Max," Chloe pointed out, both to reassure and gain some affirmation.

"Not that time," she agreed. "But that's because you were there to kickstart my power…"

"So it's time to start moving forward in time. And we're obviously connected since without me you would have never discovered your power, right?" the bluenette suggested hesitantly.

Max's eyes and tone softened. "Absolutely. You make me feel like I know what I'm doing…"

"And you make me feel like I have a reason for still being in Arcadia Bay." This was the most vulnerable Chloe had been this whole time.

"I hope so…"

Chloe scoffed at her self-doubt. "Stop being so goddamn humble. You're like the smartest, most talented person I've ever known."

"More than Rachel Amber?"

"Do I detect a hint of jealousy?" Rachel asked, curious to see what Max thought of her. She'd heard a lot of opinions over the week.

"I…" Max began, frowning as words failed her.

Honestly, yes. The blonde had such a huge impact on the world and people around her. With ease, she charmed her way into people's hearts and minds, the total opposite of Max – who took on a
background role. What was more, Rachel had taken her place in Chloe's life. It was stupid and selfish to think like that since she hadn't even bothered to get in touch over those five years. Still, she couldn't help how she felt.

That silence was enough of an answer for Rachel, so she didn't push.

"Dude, I'm not her groupie, okay? And I'm sure you have Blackwell bros all over you-like Warren..." Chloe countered.

That made Warren cringe thanks to his earlier awkward attempts. Thankfully, nobody teased him this time.

"You're the bro killer. Tats and 'tude..." Max pointed out, glancing down at the colorful tattoo sleeve.

Chloe's brow furrowed. "You did not just say that. Plus I am not down with these Arcadia Bay hillbillies."

Her mild indignation inspired a small smile from Max. "I don't blame you... Anyway, we have bigger fish to fry, right?"

"No worries. Once you get over yourself, you're going to make the world bow," the bluenette eagerly mentioned.

The younger girl rested her head on folded arms as she looked at her childhood best friend. "As long as you're there with me..."

"Don't look so sad. I'm never leaving you..." Chloe reassured, her eyes focusing in on Max's.

While Chloe had been bitter about the poorly timed move to Seattle and lack of contact, deep down she knew Max had still cared. Problem was, the brunette had been too scared to get in touch... and so had she. Neither girl wanted the other to hate them. Twisted logic dictated they avoid the problem rather than face it. The easier option in some ways. In others, not so much.

Rachel couldn't keep the smirk off her face. "You know, I much prefer these heartfelt scenes to the others you've shown us, Max."

"Believe me, I feel the same way," the brunette agreed. Unfortunately, those kinds of memories were swiftly running out. After breaking into Frank's RV, everything had gone downhill, crashing in flames by the end of the week.

"I bet." Rachel grinned knowingly.

"I think we can all agree on that," Kate muttered, happy for the momentary respite.

Warren was quick to mirror her relief. "I'm sure not going to argue."

"You're not the only one," Joyce exhaled deeply, rubbing at her temples. This experience was set to age her a few years.

Even David managed to offer a stiff nod of agreement. This was a breath of fresh air, however temporary.

With one last playful splash, the pair got out and dressed again. The sound of a door opening
made them freeze, exchanging worried glances before hiding from Blackwell's security patrol.

"Who'd have guessed this outcome?" Warren mentioned smugly.

"It was only a matter of time," Vanessa sighed, hoping they would evade detection. Max didn't need anything else to stress about.

Ryan sighed, overwhelmed by everything that his daughter had been through so far. At least she and Chloe had a moment to relax, even if it had been cut short.

Successfully dodging detection, the pair headed to the parking lot. With the threat of getting caught at an all-time high, Chloe coaxed a slightly reluctant Max into staying the night at her house.

As they sped off, the bluenette screamed with delight. "Hahaha! Later, fuckers! Max, you rock. We are so fucking awesome!"

Her friend let out a soft chuckle, leftover adrenaline coursing through her. "Yes, we so are…"

Taylor watched as they sped off into the darkness. "Well, that wasn't the most effective escape I've seen."

"Me neither," Courtney chimed in.

"Someone would've noticed," David mentioned. Even Blackwell's limited security team would pick up on the suspicious activity. And he would certainly recognize the truck on his rounds. Wherever Chloe was, trouble followed.

Pulling into the driveway, they headed up to Chloe's room for the night. Max was first to wake next morning, soft rays of morning light filtering through the window. Dazed, she stretched and glanced over at the sleeping girl beside her. Once more awake, she went for her obligatory daily selfie. _Always remember this moment…_

"Nothing stops you from taking photos, does it?" Rachel observed, not blaming her. Anything for a distraction.

"Apparently not." Max couldn't even remember the last photo she'd taken for herself, not as a reset point. Maybe one day…

"You've always been the same," Chloe pointed out fondly, hoping that she could go back to enjoying photography again. The brunette deserved that much.

Chloe shuffled up close behind her, hijacking the photo. "Photobomb!"

"Photo-hog." Max grinned, taking the photo anyway before shifting onto her back. "It feels like a different world from yesterday…"

"We left a skid mark on Blackwell last night," Chloe proudly observed.

"Like it needs another one." The younger girl shifted onto her side. "I'd like to do something good for my school and Arcadia Bay. I can't even submit a photo to represent… I just don't
want to be rejected."

"Every great artist gets rejected before they get accepted. So you have to enter a photo." Chloe's words of encouragement earned a brief smile.

At the sight of the smile, Rachel raised her eyebrows. "Seems that you know just what to say."

"Hanging around with a smooth talker like yourself helps. You pick up a few things," Chloe replied, glad to see Max smiling again.

"Don't think it'd hold the same weight coming from me, though. Right, Max?" Hazel eyes connected with blue, eager to see the reaction.

The direct question caught Max off guard. Instead of replying, she bit her lip. Honestly, Chloe's was pretty much the opinion that actually mattered to her. Her encouragement was worth more than a thousand others.

"Even though I'm pimping the school and town you want to torch?" Max asked, shifting onto her back again.

"Come on, I don't want to see Arcadia Bay burned to the shore, I just say shit like that because I've been trying to get out of here since-since you left, basically." With this painful realization, she turned her back on Max and switched the Hi-Fi on. "If I could find Rachel, then pay Frank off, I'm still leaving to start a whole new life..."

After William's death, nobody could really blame Chloe for wanting to leave. Arcadia hadn't been kind. If only Max could change it all for her, she would. From experience, it just wasn't possible...

"Wish we could just hang out all morning like we used to..." Max announced as soft guitar strumming filled the air. "Maybe we should get up, I have to get back to Blackwell soon."

"Oh, does the schoolgirl have a test today?" Chloe lightly teased.

"I'm starting to feel like going to Blackwell every day is a test," she replied with a sigh. "I just need to get on my regular school schedule again."

They laid there for a while, enjoying the well-deserved respite. Eventually, Chloe spoke up again. "I am so wiped from last night. But it was awesome."

"I have to ponder what kind of criminal I've become," Max chuckled softly.

"Last night was only the tip of the iceberg," Chloe gleefully stated.

"I have to admit, it was pretty cool to take over the Blackwell gym."

Chloe eagerly capitalized on this newfound sense of daring. "Today the gym, tomorrow the world. We need to step it up."

"We still have to be careful how I use my power... I don't want to get stuck in time."

This was still a huge concern for Max. As hard as she researched time travel, she only had speculation to go off. Most of those suggestions took a morbidly fatalistic approach. Some definitive answers might be nice for a change.
Standing up and locating her clothes, she turned back to the blue-haired punk. "I love this morning light, it's so peaceful…"

"Wouldn't it be wicked if we could just hang out here forever like when we were kids?" she asked with a nostalgic smile.

"Yes, but… sadly we're not kids anymore," Max replied sadly.

"At least you can date now, right? My dad was terrified of the day I would discover boys," Chloe revealed with a smirk.

"That he was," Joyce recalled fondly, heart feeling heavy at the memory. William often teased his daughter about dating. He would have a fit over her rebellious backlash, hanging around with rough crowds and god knew what else.

"I can relate," Ryan muttered, glancing over to his daughter. Max seemed happy enough on her own, something he had figured might change at Blackwell. As far as he was aware, the lack of interest in dating had remained constant.

Max stayed quiet, waiting for the bomb to drop. Skipping would be too strenuous and unfair on Chloe. She deserved to know and make her own judgments.

"As Blackwell proves, boys are trouble," Max swiftly interjected.

"And way fucking gross. As you'll discover soon enough," Chloe mumbled as if speaking from experience.

That made the younger girl smile. "Oh okay, Woman of the World. Please tell me what it's like to get that first magic kiss!"

The almost defensive display inspired a soft chuckle. "Sorry, sorry. Didn't mean to get you all worked up. I just don't think anybody is good enough for you… besides me."

Her transparent statement didn't go unnoticed. Rachel simply shot a meaningful glance and smug smirk in Chloe's direction. Joyce, Ryan, and Vanessa seemed mildly shocked at the semi-serious afterthought. The blue-haired punk refused to look at anyone, a little embarrassed.

*Time to put on your daily armor, Max!* Her nose wrinkled in disgust at the damp clothes. "Ew. Still reeks like a chlorine factory."

"See if you can find a suitable outfit in my fashion hole." Chloe motioned over to her closet.

*Okay, time for some Chloe cosplay…*

"Hey, there you go. Rachel left a bunch of her clothes with me… She's your size." The bluenette pointed them out to her.

At the time, it seemed like a fun idea. Now, Max couldn't help but feel miserable. It kinda felt like Chloe was using her to fill that Rachel-shaped void. Throughout the week, she had been constantly compared to the blonde, living in her long-reaching shadow. People like Frank and David had been direct, even mocking in their parallels. Wherever she went, there was nowhere to hide from Rachel Amber. And Chloe had mentioned the girl every five seconds. It made her feel like a stand-in at times. Maybe she was just being too sensitive.
"But not quite my style," Max concluded as she examined the red flannel shirt and dark ripped jeans.

Chloe shuffled off the bed to stand in front of her. "Max, you don't have a style yet. At least give it a try."

Warren winced at the comment. "Ouch, that's a bit harsh."

"Says the guy essentially wearing the same brandless, nerdy shit," Chloe countered, maintaining her stance.

"If you call that fashionable, then you need you head tested," Victoria added, for once in rare agreement with the bluenette.

"Again, ouch," he repeated at the personal attack on his fashion sense. Sure, he didn't claim to be the snappiest dresser but he did put a bit of effort in… sometimes.

Kate gave him a reassuring smile. "I don't think it's that bad."

"I'm glad someone thinks that," he sighed, resigning himself to the disapproval.

"I, for one, am looking forward to seeing what you look like in my clothes, Max," Rachel announced, finally breaking the chain of fashion criticism.

"I wouldn't get too excited about that," Max muttered, knowing that her mini-catwalk debut would be hijacked by… other things. Besides, she'd seen pictures of Rachel and could confirm that it looked way better on her. "I definitely can't rock it like you."

Rachel was quick to interrupt the self-conscious rambling. "As much as I appreciate the flattery, I'll be the final judge."

"You can always rewind back to your chlorine brand T-shirt and generic jeans," Chloe mentioned with a cheeky grin.

"You suck. I like my shirt and jeans… but it would be cool to try on Rachel's clothes, just to see if they fit," Max admitted as she glanced over towards the closet.

"Stop second guessing yourself, Max!" She lightly nudged Max's shoulders, suddenly hesitant. "Put this on and let your inner punk-rock girl come out! You can afford to take chances! Whenever and whatever you want to try… A mischievous, plotting smirk quirked at her lips. "For example, I dare you to kiss me!"

Max's eyebrows shot up to her hairline, wondering if she had heard her right. "What?"

Everyone was thoroughly shocked over the unexpected dare. Even Rachel – who was the most likely to predict this turn of events – was astonished by the bold move. At most, she had expected sickeningly cute exchanges. Nothing so direct.

Both sets of parents knew Max and Chloe had been close before William and the Seattle move, but maybe they had… underestimate just how much. Dares like that generally didn't come from nowhere, not the average suggestion you suddenly dropped on a friend… without certain intentions, at least.

"I double dare you. Kiss me now," Chloe repeated more confidently.
This reaffirmation of the dare brought with it a new decision screen: **KISS CHLOE** or **DON'T KISS CHLOE**.

"Well… I think I might actually be speechless for once. Looks like I'm not the only one either," Warren finally said, breaking the silence.

"Yeah," was all Kate could manage as she watched the options hover on the screen.

"I should have guessed there would be something like this…” Victoria muttered to herself, sighing heavily. Not malicious, just surprised.

Courtney and Taylor began whispering amongst themselves, glancing between the screen, Victoria and the rest of the group. Much like Kate, David remained quiet just staring, his brow furrowing.

"This is hardly an option we can decide, Max. So, I assume this is more for Chloe's benefit, yes?" Rachel asked, confident.

"Yeah, it is," she confirmed, wanting to give Chloe a say.

When the bluenette came to her sense, she gave Max a hesitant glance. Her friend was staring back at her with uncertainty and worry. Suddenly, it felt like they were the only two people in the room, time standing still. With Max's powers, more than possible. What should she choose? Every decision had its consequences. And this wasn't just her choice.

Swallowing all the weird and wonderful feelings, Chloe finally managed to speak. "What did... you choose?"

"A dare's a dare," Max replied weakly. Whenever they played 'Truth or Dare' as kids, she outright refused to do certain dares, like jumping out of a bedroom window.

That made the answer clear enough for Chloe. "Who am I to argue with that logic?"

**In a heartbeat, Max stepped forward and pressed her lips against the taller girl's. Astounded, Chloe stepped back, eyes wide. "Damn, you're hardcore, Max! Now I can text Warren and tell him he doesn't stand a chance... unless he's into girl-on-girl action," she joked, returning to the bed.**

"You're such a dork." Max grinned as she turned back to the closet. **Oh man, that was priceless when I kissed Chloe. She didn't think I would...**

"Oh, come on, Chloe. You can do better than that," Rachel sighed, disappointed. As much as they both tried to pass it off as a joke, it clearly meant more to them judging by their body language, facial expressions, and voices.

"How very anticlimactic," Victoria scoffed, crossing her arms. "That's fine by me, though. It's not like I wanted to see you two at it."

Taylor and Courtney simply sat there in a silent daze.

Warren exhaled deeply, feeling a bit sorry for this timeline's version of himself. He didn't stand a chance. "Damn… even though I knew it was coming, that was kind of a surprise still."

Kate nodded in agreement, blushing. She felt kinda guilty for witnessing such a personal moment, even if Max had decided to show them all. While people at her church might be jerks about it, the
blonde was open-minded. It wasn't her business and love was love. Nobody had the right to judge or mock.

"You're telling me," Joyce managed, glancing over at the two girls. They had been truly inseparable as kids. Who knew, if William was still alive and Max had stayed in Arcadia, maybe this could've happened sooner.

Max frowned as the aftermath of the kiss played out. Why had Chloe moved away? Was it because of Rachel? Or another reason? Deep down, she felt a flicker of hopefulness knowing the blonde's betrayal might end… whatever was going on with Chloe. Guilt surged through her at the selfish thought.

"Do you know why? Why you pulled away? Why you made it seem like a joke?" As hard as she tried, Max couldn't keep the hurt confusion from her voice. "I just… need to know, if you can answer me."

Chloe had to wonder that too. She had posed the dare, so why shy away? Was she testing Max… or herself? Rachel factored in somehow, alongside the five-year separation. Whatever the reason, she knew it wasn't just a joke.

"Max, I… can only answer for me. Well, the me here, but… I don't think it was a joke. Guess I underestimated how I'd feel about… things," she replied, insecurity looming. "That… doesn't mean I didn't mean it, though."

That was enough of an answer for now. All Max had wanted was confirmation that it had been real, if confused and rushed. In depth discussions could wait.

Changing into Rachel's clothes, she swaggered over to the bed for Chloe to check her out. "Lookin' sick, Max. A couple tats, some piercings and we'll make a thrasher out of you yet."

"Not bad," Rachel commented, giving her a once over. Despite the apprehension, it suited her.

"At least it's not 'generic hipster' anymore," Victoria added, glad to see a change… even if these were Rachel's clothes.

For Chloe, it was a very weird sight. Seeing Max in Rachel's clothes gave her conflicted feelings.

"Ready for the mosh pit, shaka brah." Max accompanied this with some dorky hand gestures.

"Maybe not," Chloe deadpanned. "Go on down and say hi to Joyce. Free breakfast! I have to, er, wake 'n' bake first."

"I promise not to tell."

"Let's not rewind and find out, 'kay?" the bluenette added as Max entered the hallway.

Oh my god, that smells so amazing… It's like when we were kids here.

Their childhood felt like a thousand years ago now, so much happening since then. Even though Max knew it was impossible to change, she found herself wanting to go back and just… enjoy it. Relive a time when Chloe was carefree and happy, where they could mess around without worry. That wasn't really an option, as much as she wished it could be.
Getting a predictably appreciative text from Kate about the rooftop incident, Max shot her back a promise that she’d visit as soon as possible. Then, she headed to the bathroom to freshen up, grabbing a toothbrush from the pot. *Chloe never used to care when I borrowed her toothbrush. What's ironic is I always hated it when Chloe used my toothbrush…*

"Probably should have done that *before* now. A bit after the fact, wouldn't you agree?" Rachel grinned, trying to lighten the mood.

"Maybe," Max agreed, glad for the playful quips… even if they were at her expense.

Her teeth now clean, she splashed her face with water. *Feels so good to wash my face after all that chlorine… and hiding.* A crusty looking skull and crossbones towel hung from the shower shield. *Chloe has had this damn dirty pirate towel since we were kids… Serious flashback.* Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed the tube of blue hair dye. *You know, I haven't gone through a 'dyeing my hair blue' phase yet… maybe it's time.*

Chloe glanced over to her friend, eyes narrowing. "As much as imitation is flattery, blue's kinda my thing, Max."

"I don't know about blue, but I could totally see you rocking red hair," Rachel suggested, imagining the result.

"Maybe one day." A change of style might be just what she needed to distance herself from the old Max. Maybe she could even get a tattoo, a reminder. Chloe would be all over that. Her parents… not so much. Hell, a tattoo would pale in comparison to the pain of her rewind.

Now freshened up, Max headed on downstairs to the kitchen finding Joyce cleaning the stove top. "Good morning, Joyce…"

The older woman turned, eyes registering shock. "Rachel! Uh… I-I mean, Max… Whew, you startled me. You fit those clothes well. Thank God you're not a hellraiser like her or Chloe. Now tell me exactly what you want to chow down on."

"I'm dying for some of your famous pancakes." Max decided after some careful thought.

This got Joyce smiling, both amused and melancholic. "I thought you would have missed those. You ate more than William, and he loved them…"

The brunette joined in on the reminiscing. "I remember. We would race each other to grab them from the stack."

Joyce, Max, and Chloe all reacted strongly to this bittersweet memory. William had been a huge part of their lives, given in different ways. He wasn't afraid to act like a total goofball and make a complete fool of himself. They had to wonder what he would have made of all this. Unfortunately, they would never know.

"So this time you can help me with the ingredients. I need you to grab me the eggs and milk."

*Eggs and milk, no problemo.* Before searching, Max went for a wander around in the backyard, dead birds covering the grass. Moving to the rusty swing set, she sat down on the swing. *I remember when Chloe and me would take turns in the swing… We would push each other hard so we would fly way up in the air… Chloe always wanted to swing all the way*
around… I always got scared and would jump off before I flew off… And Chloe is still trying to get high...

After locating both ingredients, with some difficulty for the eggs, Max returned to Joyce. "Thanks." Max began mixing the ingredients together while Joyce prepared the stove. "After all these years and everything that's happened, it's great to see you and Chloe together again. She hasn't had a good friend since you or Rachel… Those clothes remind me so much of her. Such a sweet girl. I'm just hoping she's living large in L.A."

"I didn't realize you thought so highly of me. You'd pretty much be the only one," Rachel stated. Everybody had acted like her friend, a courtesy she had returned, but just how many really cared? If they knew the real her, not the mask, they'd avoid her. Her perfect image would crumble, leaving her with just herself. That was a scary thought. Living up to expectations was difficult, but falling short was terrifying.

"Should I not?" Joyce asked curiously.

Rachel couldn't answer that. If she had to, she'd honestly lean towards no.

After theorizing over Rachel's fate – not coming to an overly optimistic conclusion – and addressing the 'slight' jealousy Max felt towards the missing blonde, Joyce served up breakfast, retrieving an old family photo album. "Seeing you again… ahh, made me remember so much… I know these photos don't measure up to your work, Max…"

Leaning in closer, Max joined in with the photo viewing. "My favorite photographers probably take pictures similar to yours. You make David happy, Joyce."

The older woman slowly flicked through the pages. "He wants us all to be happy, Max. He's just not great at showing it."

David's expression softened. He didn't deserve such kind acceptance of his flaws. One way or another, he would try to fix his mistakes, or avoid making more at the very least.

"Uhh, I don't think I can rock this outfit like Rachel," Max mentioned self-consciously, looking at the various pictures of the blonde, most with Chloe.

"You have your own cool style," Joyce reassured, turning the page.

At the sight of a photo of a young her and Chloe, Max's eyes widened slightly. "Wowser, I totally remember that day…"

"I'm glad… William took this picture with his instant camera. It was the last picture he ever took… He had his car right out after this and-and…" Her words faltered while recalling that day.

"I know, Joyce. I'm sorry…"

"I didn't show you this to be morbid. In fact, I want you to have this…" Joyce handed the picture over to Max. "This was when my baby was so full of life and light. She was so hopeful, positive… everything she's not today. And this was the last time I ever saw Chloe truly happy."
As hard as that was to accept that, it was true. Chloe's happiness now was tainted. Nobody could
go through what she had and come out the other side unscathed.

On cue, Chloe turned up and devised a plan to keep Joyce busy while Max snooped around in
David's garage workshop, aka start an argument. Using the distraction, the time traveler
managed to break into his computer using the date on an old Two Whales receipt as a
password – marking when Joyce and David first met, 11-27-08. Score! Max the Hacker
strikes again!

In hindsight, perhaps Joyce should have waited before introducing someone new into her family.
William had only been dead a few months. At the time, she had wanted to move on. Chloe,
however, saw it as an attempt to replace her father. Neither she nor David gave it a chance, hostile
from day one. The man in question relaxed at the receipt, remembering the visit like it was
yesterday. If he could go back and start over, he would. Mostly with Chloe. His aggressive
behavior hadn't helped ease tensions.

There was a document labeled RACHEL AMBER PROFILE, detailing odd behavior –
mostly cutting class and meeting up with Frank. There was also a photo of her standing
outside his RV, and a police report suggesting she had been carrying drugs on campus.
Whoa, spoiler alert! Rachel definitely hooked up with Frank… But why does David care?

Chloe frowned at this picture. Obviously, Rachel knew Frank, anybody taking drugs in Arcadia
would. He was the only dealer around. Well, the only half trustworthy dealer. Something about this
photo seemed… off, suspicious. Maybe she was just overthinking things. Noticing the shift, Rachel
glanced over to Chloe. If she ever found out about Frank, she would be devastated. It was kinder to
keep it a secret… or at least easier.

The next file was titled KATE MARSH PROFILE, again mentioning drugs. Although, the
evidence for that was flimsy at best. It was all just assumptions and speculations. The final
file was for Max – her student card, online aliases, and timetable. This is so wrong… Creepy
bastard.

Just as she returned to discuss her findings with Chloe, David arrived home. "Nice
breakfast," he gruffly announced.

"Here comes trouble…" Rachel muttered knowingly. With Max around, Monday's weed incident
still fresh, this would not end well.

Chloe sighed and leaned back into her chair, fully expecting an argument. "Let's see how this goes
down."

After complaining about the Blackwell pool break in – not knowing the culprits were literally
right there – his eyes shifted to Max. "Figured you'd be here. Is that your Rachel Amber
Halloween costume?"

"You know more about her than me!" Max accused, standing up to meet him.

David drew himself to his fullest height, not taking any backtalk. "No, you and Chloe think
you know more than anybody. Like all teenagers."

"Leave Max alone, David. Stop threatening students," Joyce cautioned.
Moving towards him, Chloe began her verbal assault. "He threatens them with surveillance cameras. So he can spy on everybody… like he spies on all of us here."

"Don't start, Chloe. Not now." He took a threatening step towards her.

It didn't seem to faze her. "Yeah, I'm just starting shit, right? You're a total paranoid, David."

David raised his hand menacingly. "Not now, Chloe."

Max tensed, expression darkening. There was no mistaking it, David made a preemptive offensive move. If anyone threatened or hurt Chloe now, they would be sorry. She had literally no mercy left.

"You used to call me a loser for getting kicked out of Blackwell… So who's the loser now, David? Who haven't you accused or harassed? Between your investigations into Rachel and Kate what have you done besides get in trouble?" Chloe glanced back to Max, looking for some support.

Another decision screen appeared with two choices: SIDE WITH DAVID or SIDE WITH CHLOE.

"I think we all know which way I'm voting," the bluenette grumbled, not needing to explain. Even if David had a point – which he didn't – she would still side with herself.

"Make that two." Rachel swiftly added. Again, her vote was predictable.

It wasn't so easy for Joyce, loyalties torn. With nobody in David's corner yet, all eyes turned to her. "I just… don't know."

"I think I'll abstain," Kate added softly. She just couldn't condemn him. Besides, this was a personal family matter.

Warren seemed to agree, nodding his head. As much of an asshole David had been, there had to be a wider reason. Max's parents, while angry at his treatment of their daughter, could sense it too. If things went to shit, he might even be the only one capable of fixing it.

"As much as it pains me to do this, I have to side with Price." Victoria weighed in. Out of the two of them, David was acting the most suspicious.

"Me too," Taylor agreed, sounding more uncertain.

"I suppose I'll lean that way too." Courtney finally decided, just as tentatively.

Max's expression hardened, her voice injected with uncharacteristic force as she laid down her accusations. "You're a bully, David. I saw you harass Kate Marsh when she was going through hell. You could have totally helped her. Everybody at Blackwell is a suspect to you, except for Nathan Prescott… That's why the student and faculty don't like you. You even threatened me. I do respect your service, but you don't respect anybody."

"Uh… you were smoking pot in Chloe's room. That's illegal," David defended, trying to draw attention away from himself.
"So is spying on people in your family and at your work. Why do you have photos of Kate Marsh and Rachel Amber in your files anyway?" she challenged, too far to back down now.

This discovery shocked Joyce. "What? Is this true, Max? Yes, David, why do you have these files at all. I find this very disturbing."

"I do not have to take this kind of interrogation. Not from you punks!" David growled, slowly realizing he was fighting a losing battle but not retreating for pride's sake.

"Maybe you should calm down..." Joyce suggested as calmly as she could.

Her lack of support was the last straw. "Oh, you're turning on me now? Of course, women always stick together. Well, screw you!"

"David..." Joyce seemed conflicted about this entire situation, hesitantly choosing a side. "You better go to a hotel until we figure this out..."

"You can't kick me out of my own home!" he exclaimed, incredulous.

"It's my home, David. Paid for and in my name. You know the law, right?" Joyce stood firm, despite her obvious reservations.

"I thought I knew a lot of things... like when I'm outflanked." He skulked over to the backyard sliding doors, radiating anger.

"Have a nice day," Chloe muttered, extremely pleased with this outcome.

"Chloe, for once... just please shut up," Joyce sighed, taking a seat at the table.

_I hope Joyce doesn't hate me for tearing into David._ Deciding that she had caused enough trouble, Max joined Chloe by the door.

"Max, that gave me chills. And you better not rewind this one!" The damage done, they left the house, ready to continue their search for Rachel Amber.

"That went about as well as expected," Joyce mumbled guiltily. She just... had no idea what to think now. David was acting so strange, all the evidence pointing towards him. Hopefully, he would prove them all wrong eventually.

As much as David had expected this outcome, it hurt. All he wanted was for them to be happy, Chloe included. Maybe one day he would get it right. If it wasn't already too late to salvage his life. Chloe frowned at her mom's torn expression. Before, Joyce brushed her off, claiming that she was overreacting. And now, she'd actually gone and kicked him out. Still, it felt like a hollow victory.

Rachel was also shocked by the bold move. Chloe had complained about David numerous times and vice versa, Joyce acting as reluctant mediator. Honestly, the role was too much for one person. While she looked miserable, Joyce seemed to be sticking with her decision.

Max's expression softened, hating seeing Joyce so disheartened. David hadn't helped himself but her input had really twisted the knife. Still, he had proven himself, even saved her from Jefferson. Refusing to give up, he kept fighting even when the world was against him.

Maybe they really weren't so different after all...
Chapter Eleven: Chaos Theory, Part 3

The tension from the David/Chloe situation lingered over the group as they continued to watch Max's story unfold. Emotions were running high and it would only take one push to tip anyone of them over the edge, Chloe especially by this point. God only knew how she would react to learning about Rachel… nothing good, that was for sure.

Max and Chloe's next location was the Diner, the brunette taking the chance to review what they had found on David's laptop. "Listen, when I went through David's laptop, I found pictures of Rachel and Frank... being more than friends."

At that suggestion, Chloe frowned. Why would Rachel mess around with someone like Frank? He must be twice her age, a total deadbeat. Teasing maybe, but nothing serious. Most likely, she was trying to take advantage of his drug connection. The blonde in question had noticed the stifled rage flickering in Max's eyes. Was she about to get exposed? If so, Chloe would react a certain way and there was nothing Rachel could do. She wouldn't blame or hold it against the bluenette.

Max took a deep breath, trying to remain stoic. Out of all the people who had hurt Chloe the worst, Rachel would be right up there at the top... alongside herself. While she didn't know the full picture between Rachel and Chloe, she was still angry. Trust was fragile. The screen flickered again as she considered her own betrayal of trust, snapping her out of guilt ridden thought.

Honestly, neither Victoria nor David doubted what they already knew and had seen of Rachel. Others, like Kate and Warren, didn't know what the think about the suggestion.

Chloe shot her down almost immediately, hands tightening around the steering wheel. "Right. No way, Max. She was just posing to tease Frank."

"If you're not going to believe me, why don't we check out what Frank has in his RV?" Max suggested, pointing it out as the RV came into view.

"What's that gonna prove?" Chloe asked irritatedly as she pulled into the Two Whales' parking lot.

The brunette bit her lip at the increased tension. "Frank has Rachel's bracelet. What else does he have in there?"

"Motherfucker better not have anything. For his sake," Chloe growled as the truck came to a stop. "Let's check the door. Frank gets so wasted he sometimes forgets to lock it."

They both got out of the truck, approaching the beat-up RV. "I can't believe you hung out with him."

"Not anymore. We have to be casual ninjas here..." Chloe rattled the RV's locked door, getting an aggressive bark in response. "Shitballs. Okay, here's the plan. I'll go to the diner and distract Frank by telling him I have his money, but he needs to come with me. Then you
come in and rewind so Frank doesn't see me, then you tell Frank he needs to check out his RV and then you rewind after you get the key, and… uh… and…"

Everybody got lost trying to follow the hastily explained 'plan', even Chloe. Warren's eyebrows came together in confusion. "I'm no expert here, but this does seem over-complicated."

Rachel nodded in agreement with the summary. "I agree. Never become a professional criminal… not without me there to help at least."

"I don't see how you would help anything." Victoria's comment was surprisingly tame, clearly having learned to keep her snide, inflammatory marks to herself.

Matching her mild tone, Rachel simply shrugged. "Let's put it this way, I wouldn't make it any worse."

Joyce passed a glance Chloe's way, glad she wasn't particularly good at criminal planning. Otherwise, she'd be risking more than parking tickets. "I'd be impressed if you could."

"I think we all would be," Taylor echoed, with Courtney seeming to agree. 

Chloe narrowed her eyes at the overwhelming doubt. "At least I was trying to help."

"That is true," Kate added, coming to her defense.

"I'm glad at least someone can see that," the bluenette mumbled under her breath.

Max smiled at the long-winded and confused plan. "Chloe, I got this. I'll be right back."

While Chloe was busy getting something to pacify Frank's dog, Max kicked off her attempts to get Frank's keys. She entered the Diner, approaching his table and slamming her hand down to get his attention.

He stopped eating, looking up from his plate with cold, angry eyes. "You have serious balls, little girl. But hanging out with Chloe, playing with guns and dressing up like Rachel doesn't make you cool or tough. What the fuck do you want?"

"How do you know these are Rachel's clothes?" Max pushed to get any information she could.

"Because she looks beautiful in them and you look like ass," Frank stated matter-of-factly. "You're lucky I took that gun from you…"

That statement made Chloe scoff. "I don't know if lucky is the right word there."

"It's not," David grumbled, watching the exchange. As far as he was concerned, Frank was a dangerous man – a menacing drug dealer who may have a connection to Rachel's disappearance. Not to be trusted.

"If you do plan to go inside Frank's RV, I'd bet the gun is still in there somewhere," Rachel pointed out casually. She doubted that he had time to either use or sell it on yet.

Joyce didn't know whether to feel more relieved or worried by that. Chloe was just as likely to hurt herself, maybe even more so. "I don't know where it's safest, to be honest…"
"Thanks for the faith, mother." Chloe didn't even sound surprised by the doubt.

"You can hardly tell me you're careful with it," Joyce insisted. "Even if you were, guns are still dangerous."

"And it's so much safer with Frank than me," the blue-haired punk retorted sarcastically. It was too late to back down now.

"You know what I mean and don't play the guilt trip card," the older woman sighed, getting increasingly frustrated.

The argument was slowly escalating out of control, Chloe's composure strained. "If you're so opposed to guns, maybe you shouldn't have let any into the house in the first place."

Joyce opened her mouth to protest, deciding against it. Her daughter did have a point. While she shouldn't have taken the gun, it shouldn't have been accessible. They were both at fault here so it was pointless arguing. Besides, she didn't have the energy or will to fight anymore.

"Grab your keys and let's check out your RV..." Max ordered with surprising confidence.

"Let's not. You fucking creep me out." Done with humoring her interrogation, he returned to his food and ignored her.

In other words, Max, no keys. Next came a balancing act of information – between Nathan, a police officer, and Frank – to get the right answers. Eventually, she managed to get his keys on the table, pulling a swipe and rewind.

"Can I ask how this is any simpler than my plan?" Chloe asked incredulously, watching the complex display. Admittedly, it was pretty entertaining to watch Nathan reaction to her knowing things she shouldn't.

"It worked, didn't it?" Max shrugged, mentally preparing herself for the trip inside Frank's RV.

"Mine could've worked," Chloe grumbled, frustrated. "We didn't give it a shot."

The stubbornness brought the ghost of a smile to Max's lips. "Maybe if you looked like you could understand your own plan, we would have. And you have a track record of bad plans."

Key brought, now back to Chloe. She headed outside, saving Alyssa from getting drenched by a passing car on the way.

Chloe stood by the RV, bone in hand. When Max dangled the keys, the bluenette grinned. "I should have known. The Amazing SpiderMax."

"I couldn't have done it without Frank. Now let's get in and out." Max took the bone from Chloe, throwing it into the parking lot with all the force she could muster. "Get the treat treat, boy!"

There was no need to give them this choice. It had no bearing on the overall story and nobody would throw the bone into the road, especially knowing the outcome. Why waste a rewind on such a small choice?

As planned, the dog raced after the bone giving Max and Chloe time to enter Frank's RV. The interior was filthy. The sink full of dirty plates and empty beer bottles. A greasy pizza
box sat on the side, a couple of old slices leftover with an unwashed knife on top. The windows had been covered, letting only a few thin slivers of light through.

Victoria's nose wrinkled in disgust. "I suppose this was to be expected. It might even be worse than Price's room."

"It's definitely worse than my room, thank you very much," Chloe stated firmly.

Warren gave the RV a comparing look. "Let's be real, they're both pretty bad."

Tired of being at the center of judgment, Chloe snapped. "And who asked for your opinion?"

He held his hands up in the universal sign for surrender. "No need to rip my head off…"

"Damn, I thought my room was a shit hole," the bluenette muttered to herself.

"You're not a creepy drug dealer," Max reminded her.

"Frank has issues, but he's not creepy… At least I didn't think so until I saw him with Rachel's bracelet." Sighing, Chloe sat down in the driver's seat, hands on the steering wheel. "Oh, we could cruise everywhere in this bad boy." She glanced back over her shoulder at Max with a grin. "Can you see us heading down the coast to Big Sur and beyond?"

"Yes, we'd probably be tearing up the highway," Max smirked smugly. "And you'd probably want me to kiss you again… Chloe, we're on a schedule. We need clues about Rachel."

The bluenette shook herself back to reality before shifting over to the computer. "I know. Just daydreaming. You go scope out the area while I hack his computer for info."

"Oh yes, because now is a good time to be daydreaming," Rachel added sarcastically, turning to Chloe with a broad grin. "About what, I wonder?"

"Whatever you're implying with that smug grin of yours, the answer is definitely no," the blue-haired punk interrupted abruptly.

"Aw, but you didn't even hear my theory yet," she whined to prolong the teasing.

Chloe rolled her eyes. "I don't think I have to.

"Or want to," Victoria was quick to interject, having no desire to hear what Rachel would come up with.

"Fine, it seems Chloe's secrets are safe… for now." Rachel threw an over-dramatic stage wink Max's direction, trying to get a reaction. Unfortunately for her, the brunette wasn't in the mood to humor her.

Wandering around, Max headed into Frank's bedroom. She noticed a loose vent panel, using the knife from the kitchen to prise it open. Inside was an unassuming black book. Flicking it open, her eyes widened at the pictures and notes tucked within – all suggesting Rachel and Frank were close… and having trouble in paradise.

As each item was revealed, the tension in the room increased tenfold. Nobody dared to say anything. Not even a snide remark or a denial. Even without the full context, it was easy enough to assume that Frank and Rachel's relationship was more than a simple buyer/seller one. Yes, there
had been rumors and theories but nothing concrete. However much they might not understand or want to accept, it was hard to deny such decisive evidence.

Sifting through, she pocketed the book and returned to Chloe's side. Reluctantly, she handed the book over and watched the bluenette's aura shift from confusion to anger. "It makes me ill that Rachel posed like this for Frank... or wrote him love letter... I can't believe she was banging Frank! Rachel straight up lied to my face! Why didn't she say anything?"

Unlike her on-screen counterpart, Chloe stared in stunned silence. Her heart dropped, stomach dropping. This... couldn't be real. No way. It just wasn't possible. She just couldn't accept it. If it didn't make sense, it wasn't true. But Max wouldn't lie to her, which meant... she turned to Rachel, wanting her to say something, anything. Even if it was an excuse, a lie. Instead, she received silence. If all this was true... Rachel was yet another person who betrayed her.

With the increasingly darkening atmosphere, the rest of the group kept their opinions to themselves. This situation had a high potential to go nuclear without third party input.

Max bit her tongue, knowing this had nothing to do with her... logically, anyway. Emotionally, that was a whole different story. Honestly, she was just as angry at herself for defending Rachel. She should have been supporting Chloe, not trying to 'diffuse' the situation. Chloe had every right to be angry. The brunette should've let her say her piece while reminding her she wasn't alone.

Max winced at the harsh tone. "Because she knew how you would react."

"Then she wasn't much of a friend, huh?" Chloe snapped angrily. "Just another person who shits all over me. Why does everybody in my life let me down? My dad gets killed, you bail on me for years, my mother gloms onto step-fucker... now Rachel betrays me..."

"Chloe, Rachel is missing. Nobody betrayed you," Max mentioned softly.

"Bullshit, who hasn't?! Fuck everybody!" After this explosive display of anger, Chloe stormed out of the RV.

"Chloe!" Max called after her, quickly following outside just in time to watch her hurl Frank's keys onto a nearby roof. The second the brunette got in the truck, Chloe sped off down the road tears in her eyes. Awkward silence ensued. "Chloe, you can't keep blaming me and everybody for everything wrong in your life. It's so not fair."

"I gotta blame somebody. Otherwise it's all my own fault. Fuck that," Chloe mumbled, eyes firmly focused on the road ahead.

"So now it's Rachel's fault too?"

"Jesus, she was banging that pig Frank! Bitch lied to my face, Max!" Her expression and voice were the very embodiment of betrayal. "I can't trust anybody again. Everybody pretends to care until they don't. Even you!"

Hearing that a second time hurt even more than the first. Every word cut deep, made worse by the wavering voice and hopeless expression. She wanted to turn away, shut her eyes and cover her ears... but that would be irresponsible, childish. This wasn't about her; it was about Chloe.

Rachel winced at the anger. While she had expected it, seeing it was very different. All the lies and secrets were starting to come crashing down around her. Now, she had to deal with the
consequences. She did sneek a glance at Chloe, who seemed numb and unresponsive. Almost trance-like.

Joyce was shocked, to say the least. The two girls had been thick as thieves, inseparable. For David, this wasn't a huge surprise. He had never trusted Rachel Amber. Being right was a hollow victory. Normally, Victoria would unleash all manner of snarky insults, taking great pleasure in declaring that she had been right about Rachel all along. Now definitely wasn't the time for that.

"Chloe Price, you better take that back. Right now." There was something unusual in Max's tone, stern but also hurt.

"Okay, fine… But you just don't understand. It's like I'm being punished by the universe…" she muttered, emotionally drained.

Hesitantly, Max glanced over at her. "So who do you most want to blame?"

"My fucking dad of course… hello!?" Chloe snapped, a deep frown forming.

Out of all of them, the bluenette was the most shocked by her own outburst. When she got angry, she often blamed other people… but she never really meant it. William hadn't chosen to leave, he never would, which made it much harder to accept. It just… wasn't fair.

Max could almost see her friend's thought process watching the emotion fueled journey. This was so much to suddenly dump on her but it was necessary to understand what she had done next… yet another memory she had little desire to relive. After the photo rewind, things had spun out of control.

At William's name, Joyce's face fell. If only he were here now, none of this would be happening. It wasn't his fault, it never would be, but she just wished things had been different. A fresh start would be welcomed… or a second chance. She had mostly come to terms with the direction her life had gone after William's death, but she still found herself wondering.

"You blame William? Really?" Max asked incredulously.

"Yes, I do. Damn right," Chloe asserted as she continued to drive. "He chose to go out of that door and leave me forever."

"Chloe, your dad didn't choose to… 'leave' you," the brunette tentatively corrected.

"I know that, Max. My mom actually blames herself… just because she wanted a ride home from work. Sometimes even I blame her…" The anger in her voice gave way to mild resentment and resignation.

Joyce glanced at her daughter, not taking any of this personally. Still, it hurt to hear. What Chloe had said was true. She did blame herself for the accident. It was hard not to when the sole reason William had gone out was for her. That doubt returned every now and then, eating away at her even after all these years.

Although he didn't show it, David had noticed the change in Joyce. She hadn't mentioned William much since they had met, but every now and then she brought something up. He hadn't wanted to push too hard, so let her be. She clearly loved him a lot. Unfortunately, their story had ended in tragedy, followed by years of rage and fighting. David wanted to reach out… but it might just make things worse. Maybe one day he'd get it right and hopefully it wouldn't be too late.
"No, you don't."

Chloe shook her head. "Yes, Max, I do. Do you know what it's like to wait for your father to come home when you're a kid... and he never does?"

Max's expression softened at the heartbreaking question. "No, of course not. But I was with you that day. It was just a terrible accident!"

"I wish that made me feel better. But ever since he died, my life has been dipped in shit." Her voice wavered; fluctuating between anger, bitterness, and melancholy.

"You don't want to hear this, but you're still here. Alive. With me. And that's no accident." Max compelled her to listen, trying desperately to find a way to fix this horrible situation.

"You're right. I don't want to hear this," Chloe mumbled, her expression stony and emotionless. She had closed herself off from the world, and Max. There would be no further conversation on Chloe's part about this.

"Chloe, I can't do this out on my own. I need you with me. And Rachel needs you..." Her pleas fell on deaf ears as Chloe pulled up outside Blackwell.

When the bluenette refused to look at her, Max reluctantly got out and watched the truck speed off down the road.

This was all too much for Chloe. Whatever the hell was going on with Rachel was one thing, but the mentions of her dad were the final nail in the coffin. Tears stung her eyes, a lump forming in her throat. Without saying a word, she stood and all but ran towards the exit. Somebody was shouting after her, maybe a couple of people, but that didn't slow her down. If anything, it made her move faster. Far away from her problems and the truth. The question was, how far would be enough?

Max reached out, intent on stopping her, but her mind clouded as everything fell apart. The pain sent her to her knees, voices filtering and echoing in her mind, not all of them coming from the room. The more she resisted, the more she realized how at her limit she was. No matter how many times she stretched out her hand to rewind, she hit a power wall and felt a sharp stinging in her mind, saw flashes of white light. A low, pathetic groan came from her throat as her body reacted to the relentless force. After a few more attempts, she had completely worn herself down but at least she was still conscious.

This time, she had to be there for Chloe.

Chapter End Notes

Hello, cliffhanger. Tune in next time for the final part of Chaos Theory.
Chaos Theory, Part 4

Chapter Twelve: Chaos Theory, Part 4

In the aftermath of yet another power-related overexertion, Max shakily got to her feet. Everyone was crowded around her in concern, especially her parents and Joyce. On closer inspection, she realized Rachel wasn't here; she must've gone after Chloe.

"I need to find Chloe," Max muttered to herself, focusing on the door leading out to the campus grounds.

Before she could run off, Ryan grabbed hold of her wrist and gently pulled her back. This had gone far enough. "Max, we need to seriously talk about… whatever the hell just happened. You're not well."

"You need to go to the hospital," Vanessa added, feeling just as worried about her progressively worsening condition.

Joyce nodded in agreement. "I second that."

Tired of everyone telling her she needed to stop this, Max exhaled deeply to keep herself calm. She didn't blame them, but it was getting old now. Way past old. "I'm fine. Just… let me go and find her."

"You are clearly not fine," Ryan insisted, not willing to give this up without a fight. "I won't stand by and silently watch you destroy yourself like this."

Just as firmly as her father, Max maintained her point. "I have to do this."

Taking a slightly softer approach than her husband, Vanessa tried her hand at convincing. "Nobody is saying that you can't continue later. We just want to make sure you're okay first. That's all."

That just wasn't possible. If it was, she'd have done it. "This is the only chance I have to do this. There won't be a later if I stop now. So please, don't try to stop me. I don't want to have to waste energy on arguing."

Neither Ryan nor Vanessa were happy but they both knew how stubborn their daughter could be. As shy as she might appear, she could really put her foot down when necessary. With her power, there was very little they could do to stop her, their efforts only aggravating her condition. After a brief stare off, Ryan reluctantly let go of her watching as she staggered out of the auditorium. It didn't take her long to locate Chloe, following raised voices.

"What do you want me to say? I fucked up, okay. I know that, but I can't change what I did." By simple deduction, that had to be Rachel.

"And you think that makes it all better?" Chloe asked angrily, her voice guiding the time traveling brunette.

Their voices seemed much closer now. Pushing past the haziness, Max gritted her teeth desperate to get to them before she either passed out or Chloe ran off.
A deep sigh carried over as she reached the corner. "No, I don't think that at all. I don't have any excuses. Certainly none you want to hear."

"Why? Why would you do something like that? After everything..." Chloe's voice trailed off as Max finally rounded the corner. From the looks of it, she had just given up.

It took a few seconds for them to realize Max was there. When they did, Rachel offered her a forced smile. "You're just in time to see the domestic dispute, Max. Almost as good as the Blackwell drama, huh?" Her attempt at deflective humor did nothing to ease the tension.

Eyes darting between the two girls, Max silently approached them. She had no clue what Chloe and Rachel's relationship had been – if there even had been one. Not like she could fix it even if she did, as much as she wanted to. All she could do was act as damage control.

Chloe turned to her, expression hard to read and voice wavering. "I guess you knew this was coming."

"Yeah, I did," Max confirmed guiltily. As tempting as it had been to skip, it would've taken too much energy on a power she wasn't confident on. Besides, Chloe deserved the truth.

"Right, of course you did," the bluenette muttered to herself, frustrated.

"Would you rather I'd hidden it from you?" Max asked cautiously.

It took a moment for her friend to answer that, hesitant. "Honestly, I don't know, Max."

An uneasy silence hung over them, drawing out with no sign of ending. This was worse than arguing. Nothing would get done this way. As much as Max wanted to give them time to process this in their own ways, she didn't have it to spare.

"Look, I don't really know what's going on between you, and I don't have to. I'd love to be able to give you all the time in the world to think this over, but I can't right now." She could feel the uncomfortable tug of her powers pushing her closer to the limit again.

"Kind of hypocritical for a time traveler..." Chloe mentioned, trying to inject humor into the observation but failing.

Max realized how strange the concept seemed – a time traveler with no time – but that was how she felt right now. "You don't have to tell me that."

Taking one last glance at Rachel, who had been uncharacteristically quiet, Chloe kicked a loose stone. "I don't really want you to keel over and die anytime soon, so... I guess this'll have to wait until after." Without another word, she wandered off back to the auditorium.

Rachel wisely hung back, waiting for some distance to follow. Max wished this could've ended better. No matter how much she wanted to control this, she couldn't. When they made it back, the blonde decided to sit a little further away from Chloe than before, on Max's other side. It was best to give her some space.

Still feeling a bit dizzy from her recent episode, Max grabbed a water bottle. "I won't be able to give you another break for a while. So, I suggest you grab anything you want now before I start back up again."

With that done, Max sat down. Nobody wanted to be here, least of all Chloe, but she had so much she still needed to show them. Taking a deep breath, she resumed the flow, feeling the strain ease a
Max sat on her bed, staring at the picture Joyce had given her. Out of nowhere, muffled voices echoed as the image blurred. In her shock, she dropped the photo. *Oh my god. What is happening now…*

She carefully picked up the Polaroid, almost afraid it would bite her, and held it in her hands. It went fuzzy again, colors bleed and more hushed voices uttering out of context sentences. Focusing on the photo, the image pulsed as voices got louder.

One flash of blinding white light and a click, the camera it came from lowering to reveal a blond man with a kind face. On closer inspection, they appeared to be in a kitchen.

*A young teen with long, strawberry blonde hair appeared. "Someday Dad will get one of them newfangled computers."*

Only some of the group knew who this man was, some peripherally like David and Rachel. Others personally.

Joyce stared at the screen in disbelief, eyes focused on her husband five years dead. He had been a good man who died much too soon. Such a devastating tragedy which had turned her and Chloe's lives on their heads. And now… here he was. Alive again because of Max's power.

Max's parents were just as stunned. William had introduced their daughter to photography, given her an arsenal of terrible puns and so much more. His death had affected her immensely, made her more withdrawn from the world focusing on photography with newfound determination. Maybe she hoped to keep him alive in her own way.

As for Chloe, her brain refused to process this. Her dad's death had been the start of her transformation. Max had traveled all the way back to his final day on earth. So many questions barraged her brain, looking at the brunette for answers. The girl in question refused to meet her gaze, guilt eating away at her. She knew what was to come, all thanks to her stupid meddling.

*A vaguely familiar shorter, young brunette with soft blue eyes and pale freckled skin stood there with them. The man turned to her, camera in on hand and photo in the other. "I hope the flash didn't scare you, Max." He glanced down at the photo, his grin widening. "This is a keeper."*

The blonde girl snatched the photo from him. "Not until I see it first! You know the rules, Dad!" She turned to the other girl, now identified as Max, looking for back up. "Max, tell him...!" One of her blonde eyebrows raised slightly. "Whoa, hey, you look totally pale. Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I just… Uh, yeah, I'm fine…" Max stuttered, watching Chloe and William discuss the fate of the recently taken photo before getting back to pancake making. *Now what is this… William is here! And Chloe is just a kid… Am I that far back in time? I'm 18 years old inside my 13-year-old self… How? Chloe is just so damn happy and carefree… and this is the last time unless I change it. I love William like he was in my own family… I won't let him die today. I won't.*

At the time, Max had been thrilled at the chance to save William. Chloe and Joyce would have their family back, years of heartbreak erased and replaced with happy, precious memories. How naïve
and stupid to think she could mess with such a pivotal moment in time consequence free…

The question on everyone else's minds: if Max had intended on saving William… why wasn't her alive now?

The phone in the hallway rang, which William answered as Max examined her surroundings. Everything after the stairs was a white blur, restricting her movement. *Whoa, it's all blurry here, like I can't step out of the photographic boundaries… I have to stop William from taking his car today.*

William put the phone down after finishing his conversation. "Excuse me, ladies, I have to go to rescue yonder Queen at the Sav-Mart. She doth have many bags of delicious grub for is to feast upon."

Joyce winced, five years' worth of accumulative guilt flooding her body. If she hadn't called asking to be picked up, William would still be here. One seemingly inconsequential phone call had changed their lives forever. If only she could go back to change things... just like Max was.

"You are ridiculous," Chloe called from the kitchen.

"You'll be grateful for that someday." He went over to the table, searching underneath all the papers. "Shit, where are my keys."

"That's a dollar for the swear jar!" she exclaimed mischievously, happy to have caught her dad out.

"You mean your college fund," William called back before muttering to himself. "-keys, please." Once he had located the keys – underneath a baseball cap on the table – he made his way over to the door. "A-ha! You can't hide from me forever!"

Before he could get far, Max rewound and snagged the keys. After several failed attempts – all thanks to William's key location device – she dropped them in the sink.

"I know I had those keys right here... I know it..." he muttered in irritation, walking around and pressing the small device. "Forgot all about you, little buddy... Release the keys!" After another few tries, yielding nothing, he sighed. "Of course. Last time I order from SpyGuy Electronics..."

Seeing her opportunity, Max swiftly made her way over to William. "You can take the bus, right? The stop is right down the street!"

He thought it over for a second before resigning himself to the idea. "This I can do. Good call, Max."

Not good enough, apparently. This was all so painful to watch knowing the inevitable outcome. She had gotten carried away, too caught up in supposed victory. If only Max had known what she knew now…

"Oh yeah, the bus is great! It comes every 15 minutes and there'll be plenty of room for you and Joyce and groceries and it will save the environment." As Max was making her case, Chloe stepped out of the kitchen to investigate, confused by the eco-ranting.
"You sold me already. I'm off to yonder bus stop. Joyce will love this." William walked over to the door, waving as he entered the white light and disappeared.

By this point, Max was trying to contain her excitement. She had fixed everything.

"Max, you are being so fucking strange. You feel okay?" Chloe asked the moment he had gone.

Max grabbed onto her arms, literally jumping up and down with joy. "Chloe I am… awesome. We are awesome!"

The screen distorted, folding in on itself. Images flashed, history re-writing itself. William's funeral became a happy family picture. Chloe running away turned into her smiling, an arm around her father's shoulder. Joyce and David together warped to one with William present instead. A tense birthday now showed Chloe with a new truck. All images faded one after the other, finally settling to white.

When the image settled, Max was sat in front of Blackwell on the grass surrounded by Vortex Club members, not wearing her usual hoodie/jeans combo.

Victoria was sat on her immediate right, normally disapproving sneer replaced with a friendly smile. "Hello, are you even listening, Maxine?"

This interaction confused a few people, Victoria most of all. Max definitely wasn't the type of person she would hang out with, and definitely not as a Vortex Club member. Not in a million years. Yet, here she was. Courtney and Taylor were equally surprised, both frowning and exchanging glances.

Max shuffled on the grass, trying to understand what the hell was happening. "Max, never Maxine."

"I know, sorry, Mad Max. You're not pissed at me, right? Right?" Victoria almost sounded worried, searching for approval and reassurance. "Do you want to go hit the girls' potty and smoke 'em peace pipe?"

"I think Max is high…" Courtney pointed out, standing a little way to the left of where Max was sat.

"She's acting, like, so weird… You cool, Max?" Taylor asked, sounding genuinely concerned.

"Nobody listened when I said we shouldn't let her into the Vortex…" Courtney scoffed, placing a hand on her hip.

"Courtney, you don't want anybody in the club," Taylor observed.

"Like whatever, bitch," the other girl offhandedly remarked, waving away her comment.

Courtney's eyes went wide at the way she addressed Taylor and her general attitude. From the looks of it, she must be a pretty high ranking member of the Vortex Club to behave like this. Even the thought of that was too weird to accept. Taylor too was shocked. Courtney was her closest friend, yet here they seemed fairly distant in comparison. That was a sad thought. She was glad to live in this timeline because of it. As for Victoria, she had never seen herself so sickeningly
pandering before. This went beyond the ass kissing she sometimes resorted to in order to get what she wanted.

Max stood up, dazed. She paid the confused onlookers no mind, desperate to see what had changed. Warren and Stella were stood at the top of the stairs leading down to the main road, holding hands. Warren… He hooked up with Stella? Oh no… this is totally fucked up! What else have I changed? Chloe!

Here was what they had all been waiting for… the catch. There was no way saving William would go without a counter action. A general sense of anxiousness passed over the group, worried to see what would happen next. Max was panicking, desperately stopping herself from just running away instead of facing that alternate reality again. The screen began to glitch, patches becoming discolored and fuzzy while reacting to her emotions again. It took a few seconds for her to get it back under control again. Now was not the time to lose herself.

Max caught the next bus to Chloe's house, shocked when she found David in the driver's seat. The sun cast an orangey haze over Arcadia, hanging low in the sky as the bus sped down the road. It stopped just a short way from the beach, with all the passengers aboard going over to the left-hand side window. On the shore were several beached whales, something very different from the other timeline.

Freaking now, she got off the bus and ran all the way to Chloe's house, which had now been fully painted. Once she approached the door, she knocked.

The group was deathly silent, hearts in their throats as they waited. Something felt wrong. They just didn't know what yet.

The door opened, revealing a blonde man. William Price. "Max Caulfield! Taking a break after taking Seattle by storm… We thought we'd never see you again after you left for the big city."

Max shook her head, shaking slightly from anxiety. "No… I'd never do that to Chloe."

"Speaking of… I know she's been dying to see you. Hold on." He turned back inside and called out. "Chloe! You have a visitor!"

Still outside, Max's expression suddenly changed to one of disbelief and guilt, her hand brought up to her mouth at the unexpected state of her childhood friend. Now, Chloe was in a wheelchair, hooked up to all kinds of machinery. Her hair was still short but strawberry blonde, and her clothing style was completely different. A small smile formed on her lips when she saw Max, her eyebrows raising.

On that note the screen faded to black ready for the next transition, leaving all those present utterly speechless.

Chapter End Notes

So, that's it for Chaos Theory. We'll be moving on to Dark Room next, oh that'll be fun.
Hey guys, welcome back. I'm still working from my tablet (laptop is in the process of being fixed, not sure how long it'll take) so hopefully not too many typos.

Chapter Thirteen: Dark Room, Part 1

For a long time, the group stared silently at the screen, trying to get their heads around what they had just seen. Sure, they had been expecting some consequence for saving William… but not this. It was a huge shock for all of them, a word that didn't really do their feelings about this justice, especially to those who knew Chloe personally. Nothing could have prepared them for this.

A scene from the film 'The Butterfly Effect' came to Warren's mind as he tried to get his head around everything. Something similar had happened in this case, only to the time-traveling protagonist. Movies did get some things right it seemed. Trying to change the past, particularly on such a drastic scale, would always have a counterbalancing consequence. That much was only becoming clearer the longer he watched.

Victoria might despise Chloe but she would have to be a complete monster to not feel some sympathy. For all the things she and Rachel had done to undermine her authority at Blackwell and insulted her, both to her face and behind her back, Chloe didn't deserve this. Even though Taylor and Courtney didn't know her beyond what Victoria had told them and peripherally through a few brief somewhat hostile encounters involving Rachel, but still wouldn't wish it on her or anyone else for that matter. The question was, how far did her disability go? That much they couldn't tell until they saw more.

Kate felt conflicted. Obviously, this was a terrible thing to have happened but that didn't necessarily mean that Chloe's life wasn't worth living anymore. They had yet to hear her thoughts or see how she was coping. It was unfair and wrong to judge from the very brief snippet they had seen whether she was happy or not. Through her volunteer work, she had come into contact with people confined to wheelchairs and so much more. Each case was different, but most of the time they were just happy to still be alive with their friends and family. A disability might make life more difficult, much more in some cases, but not inevitably doomed to fail or worthless. Far from it. There was still a large chance of coming back and living just as full a life as before. People could express a mind-blowing ability to adapt in the face of obstacles and an iron-like determination when the situation called for it. Until they knew the details, how Chloe felt most importantly of all, there was no way they could even begin to judge or condemn.

Although usually unperturbed, Rachel couldn't help but react to this. Yes, she had majorly screwed up and put Chloe through things she shouldn't have, but that didn't mean she didn't care. Anything but. She wasn't the only usually composed person to show an obvious reaction. David too was startled by what he had seen. While he might not show it very well and Chloe would almost certainly proclaim otherwise, he did care a great deal for her. Seeing her get hurt like this was too much. For Vanessa and Ryan Caulfield, this was very painful. Chloe had been like a second daughter for them and she still was. Max and her had been inseparable during their childhood,
meaning that they spent a fair amount of time with Chloe. Both because of that and Max's fondness for her, it hit them hard.

Seeing Chloe like this made Joyce want to cry. No parent wanted to see their child hurt like this. William wouldn't want to either. He would quite happily accept his fate if it meant Chloe could live on uninjured. That much she knew without a doubt. And she was certain that Chloe herself would choose the other option. Losing William had been so hard on both of them, broken them almost beyond repair. Joyce herself didn't know what to think. She loved William, and still did. While she would give almost anything to have him back... this was too much and she knew he would agree. She would do exactly the same, no hesitation.

Chloe felt as if she'd been punched in the gut, winded. What she was seeing contradicted every logical explanation, but then so had this whole experience. To think of a timeline where her dad lived and she was in a wheelchair... it didn't seem possible. Yet here she was. Max had managed it. Gone back so far in time to try and fix things. William's death had marked a huge change in Chloe's life, a pivotal moment where everything went to shit... a crossroad. So, how would retracting that tragic event affect her? Beyond the obvious physical disability. It was surreal and unnerving to even begin to think about it. Another pressing question, just how had this happened? One final concern, if there was a timeline where her dad was alive, why had Max come back? That was the most worrying question of all. It seemed like a small price to pay for having William alive again, which meant something really bad must have happened.

As for Max, even though she had experienced this before it didn't dampen the effect it had on her. If anything, it only renewed and intensified every single negative emotion she'd felt at the time. Confusion, fear, panic, dread, and so many others - guilt most of all - overwhelmed her in that moment. Of course, she had known this would be difficult to witness again, but she hadn't realized just how hard it would be. She had grossly underestimated. Out of everything she had gone through, this just might be at the top of the list for most traumatic experience. More than being trapped in the dark room, and that was saying something. In fact, that didn't rank very highly at all in the grand scheme of things. Her worst experiences nearly always involved Chloe getting hurt or... she didn't want to think about that, but she didn't have much of a choice now. Not with what was to come very soon.

She felt a significant tug as her emotions battled with her powers, both conflicting. This time, it extended beyond the screen. Distortions of both sound and sight were beginning to creep into reality, blurring the lines. Everything was muffled and distant, making her feel isolated. She knew she had to get herself back under control, but knowing that didn't seem to help much, if at all. Just when she thought there was no hope, she felt something warm on her hand. That was enough to break through, remind Max why she had to continue regardless of how much she might not want to. She looked over to see Chloe staring back, hand over Max's to get her attention and hopefully calm her down a bit. Chloe's eyes said it all. Despite how weird and painful this must be for her, she was still concerned about Max. Her best friend had been through all this and so much more.

There were no words exchanged between them. Words weren't necessary.

Feeling a little calmer now, Max lightly squeezed Chloe's hand back to show that she was okay... as much as she could be, anyway. She had to remind herself that there was still a chance to make things better. That just because she had seen these horrible things, it didn't make them inevitable. She had the means and motivation to prevent them from happening in this timeline at least.

When the image on screen materialized, it showed the shoreline of Arcadia Bay's beach, the water creeping closer towards the land before receding once more. A solitary crab shuffled along the sand, just out of reach of the white foamy water's edge. Seagulls lazily swooped overhead, squawking loudly as they circled. The sun cast a warm haze over the area as dark
clouds drifted through the sky. Thin wisps of grass poked through the sand, swaying in the
gentle breeze. On a sloping mound of sand laid a beached whale, its mouth open and body
unmoving. It was not the only one of its kind beached. Coming down the walkway were two
women, one in a wheelchair. They crossed the beach, not rushing. More beached whales
became visible in the background, all deathly still.

The shot focused in on the two women, estranged childhood best friends.

"It's weird hanging out with you again," Chloe softly admitted, her voice no longer holding
that mischievous, confident tone it had in the other timeline. It was much weaker now.

Already, there were very clear differences between this Chloe and the one currently watching
events unfold. Appearance was a huge one. Their styles were completely different, nowhere near as
punk rock, and the blue hair was gone, although it was about the same length. The alternate Chloe
seemed less angry and bitter, her expression almost calm and serene. She was almost like a totally
different person, and in a way she was. Experiences and memories made up a huge part of
someone's personality and character, affecting them in many ways for many different reasons.
While some characteristics and traits might remain, others would be lost or dampened. They would
all have to wait and see by just how different the two Chloes were.

Max already knew, of course. She had seen so many things that suggested both Chloes were similar
to a degree, just like her and her own counterpart. They shared the same memories and experiences
up to a point, then went their separate ways. Not through choice but by circumstance. One event
could change everything.

"I know… I'm glad we are, though," Max agreed, looking very unsure of herself as she
glanced over at Chloe, frowning at the tube coming from her neck.

"It was nice that you sent me actual letters. That's more than any of my other friends have
done…" Chloe sadly pointed out, gradually rolling along the walkway. "And you even wrote
on that cool parchment paper. That's so Max."

"So pretentious. But I love writing on it, like an English poet." Max paused for a moment,
her next few words sounding mildly guilty. "You deserve the best stationery."

"Probably easier to write than to visit me. I don't mean that in a bitchy way. Not totally."
Chloe added, seeming more aware and conscious of the effect her words and actions could
have on those around her than her counterpart. "You probably wanted to avoid awkward
conversations like this."

"Uh… pretty much, yeah." Max stuttered, figuring that was at least one of the reasons for
her not visiting in this timeline either.

That was something that seemed to transcend timelines, Max's universal abandonment of Chloe
over those five years. At least this Max had bothered to get in touch, for what little good that did. It
was still a step more than she had taken.

"Look, the worst thing you can do is treat me like a baby. I still want to laugh and talk shit
with my best friend." Chloe's wheelchair slowed and turned to face the sea, before moving
forward slightly to get a better view. "Can we stop? This is seriously the best view of the
sunset. What do photographers call that?"
"The golden hour'," Max replied, lightly wringing her hands as she looked over to the blonde woman beside her.

"See? Without you here, I'd have no clue. Bet you could take some amazing shots..." Her voice was softer than in the other timeline and hoarse. Blue eyes wandered over to the lined up, motionless whales unceremoniously sprawled on the sand. "Those beached whales are so sad. I kind of know how they feel... At least I'm alive here with you."

"You're a real survivor, Chloe. I know you have to deal with so much." Max guiltily mentioned, knowing that it was all her fault she was in a wheelchair right now.

"I don't want anybody else feeling sorry for me," Chloe announced, her voice louder and more assertive than before. Her eyebrows furrowed as she looked out over the beach and then to Max, only able to move her head in very restricted motions because of her numerous injuries. "I can do that... along with my parents. My dad still feels guilty for buying me that car."

"Are you okay to talk about the accident?" Max hesitantly asked, not wanting to bring up bad memories but also desperate to know just how much devastation she had caused by messing around with time.

"We never actually have, huh? There's not much to say. Some prick in an SUV cut me off and I flew into a ditch." Chloe stated matter-of-factly, although there was a hint of emotion underneath the forced calm.

Max fidgeted awkwardly as she lightly pressed for more information. "Do you... remember anything?"

"I saw everything in bullet time. I felt my back snap and..." She paused for a moment, her next few words so soft and distance as she relived the accident. "And that was the last thing I ever felt in my body. When I woke up in hospital, I literally couldn't move a muscle."

The details of the accident were difficult to hear, especially for Joyce. After everything she had seen her daughter go through - being shot, nearly run over and so many other things - this just might be the most hard hitting. Maybe the reason was that this Chloe felt so different from the one she knew, much more subdued and... almost nothing like herself. David swallowed hard as he watched, his jaw tightening. He felt helpless right now, unable to do anything but stare at the screen and take it all in. The rest of the group had troubled expressions to varying degrees, nobody daring or even able to talk. If only they knew what was still to come. It wouldn't get any easier from here on out.

Max felt the familiar pang of guilt as she listened to this yet again. Time and time again, she had used her powers to try and save Chloe, make her happy. In the end, she ended up hurting her and making her miserable in so many ways. Paralysed from the neck down, her family drowning in debt and, worst of all, made her want to... end it all, for both her own sake and her parents. This was a situation she had made possible through ill thought out, idealistic action. Good intentions meant nothing. Not when the stakes were this high. Max had learned that all too late.

A pained expression crossed Max's features as she listened to the brief story. "Jesus! I... I don't know what to say."
"Don't say anything." Chloe turned her head as far as she could towards Max. "I'm just happy I did get to see you again. I could have ended up vanishing out of the blue like that girl from Blackwell."

Even in this timeline it seemed that Rachel was missing, or at least that was Max's best guess. "You mean Rachel Amber? When was the last time you talked to her?"

Chloe looked confused by the question. "Uh, never. I just read about her in the news. I didn't even know her name. You did?"

Since Chloe presumably never made it to Blackwell in this timeline, her not knowing Rachel personally made sense. It was where they had first met after all. Both Chloe and Rachel could remember it like yesterday. The two had hit it off almost straight away, quickly becoming partners in crime. Unlike Max, Rachel had only encourage reckless, rebellious behaviour, getting her thrills and kicks anywhere she could. On paper the pair couldn't be less alike. A straight A student and a college dropout. Outward appearances rarely aligned with the 'real' person, Rachel Amber being a prime example. She could play her various parts with ease and confidence, switching between them seamlessly. Nobody really knew her or what she wanted, not completely. Sometimes, even Rachel herself didn't know the answer to that… who she really was underneath all the masks she wore. So, she rarely questioned it and just went with the flow. Her impulsivity and spontaneity was partly a result of that fear to find out.

Max decided to keep her answer vague here, not wanting to get herself caught out. "Kind of. This is such a different world than when we were kids, isn't it…"

"After that snow and eclipse, it's more like the end of the world." The Chloe in this timeline didn't seem as excited by that concept as her counterpart.

From the sounds of it, the same events were occurring in this timeline too. Max delved a little deeper into it just to make sure. "Do you think so? I haven't kept up with the details."

"I have more time on my hands than you… Plus I'm a science nerd," Chloe playfully added before turning serious again. "But, none of this makes sense."

The freak weather seemed to be one fixed constant in the time travel chaos. In fact, things almost seemed worse here. Maybe it was just because beached whales made a much larger impact than dead birds, harder to miss or ignore. Either way, both timelines had experienced the extreme fluctuations. Was this all down to the rewind power? Or was there something larger going on? Maybe she was speeding along a process that had been in the making… or maybe she had been its sole creator. Even to this day, Max wasn't certain herself. She had a feeling that she would never find the answer to these kinds of questions. It wasn't like she could go ahead and ask someone about it. As far as she was aware, she was the only one with time travel powers. Even if she wasn't, it was likely that other time travelers would be just as confused as she was. Was this the start of some new phenomenon or were her circumstances purely a random event with little chance of repetition? The more she thought along those lines, the more her head hurt from the sheer number of possibilities. At this point, it didn't really matter. Wherever her powers came from and whatever she was 'supposed' to do with them were irrelevant. All she knew was that she had them and she was doing her best to work them out, use them to her advantage.

"I know things seem out of control, but… as long as we're together, I don't feel afraid." Max managed to say, sounding as if she was struggling against her emotions.
Chloe's lip curled up into a small smile then, tinged with sadness. "Hanging out with you makes me feel like a total kid again. You don't even know..."

Max swallowed back any potential tears, her voice thick with emotion. "Listen, Chloe... I'm sorry I haven't been out to see you more. That was wrong. You're my best friend."

Hearing that brought a genuinely happy smile to Chloe's face and her blue eyes lit up, although there was a moment of confliction before she smiled. "Max, thanks for coming out to see me. You're... you're doing awesome."

That statement did not have the intended reassuring effect. "I don't think so."

"Um. My... my nose is getting cold. Maybe we should get back to my placed." Chloe suggested softly.

"It is hella cold out here." Max mentioned sadly while glancing over to her best friend.

A slight frown formed on Chloe's face then. "'Hella'? I hate that word, no offense."

Max was quiet for a moment, processing this difference between this Chloe and the one from her own timeline. "None taken."

For people who knew Chloe, this was a testament to just how different the two Chloes were. It might be a subtle change, but that just made it all the more obvious. Just how much else was different? Were their differences only skin deep? How much of the Chloe they knew had been a product of circumstance?

Chloe turned her wheelchair around and they both began to slowly make their way back down the path, the shot panning to show one of the lined up beached whales before the screen faded to black again. The Price house materialized, showing a distant shot through what used to be David's garage workshop. Now it had been transformed into a room for Chloe. There was a retractable hospital-like bed in the middle, surrounded with all manner of medical equipment. The shelves and cupboards were filled with some many lotions and potions. In the corner near the door sat her wheelchair. On the wall near the room modified to a bathroom was a corkboard with some postcards, letters and pictures from various people wishing Chloe well, Max and her parents included. By the computer in the further right hand corner as you entered the room was a mouth controlled joystick, a punk rocker style bracelet and a small pile of makeup. The chest of drawers in front of the bed was covered with snow globes and some stuffed animals too.

Even from a quick glance, it was clear to see the extensive setup. Had the situation been different, the group may have even been impressed by it. The deeper they watched Max dig, the more apparent Chloe's dire situation became. It painted a very grim picture to say the least. Someone needing this amount of medical attention didn't bode well.

Kate had seen her fair share of medical equipment through her volunteering, especially involving the elderly. She had never seen something of this scale, though. Warren had seen enough medical dramas, among other things, to know that the outlook wasn't promising. As a rule, the more machinery and medication there was, the bleaker the situation. Common sense dictated that much. Taylor was reminded of those nerve wracking moments she had spent in the hospital, waiting for the result on her mother's various scans and tests regarding her back injury. Not memories she

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enjoyed recalling. She couldn't even begin to imagine how Chloe's family felt, her experience paled in comparison. They were all slowly beginning to put two and two together, realizing that this might be the reason, or at least part of the reason, why Max had come back. That made them feel extremely uneasy.

Another question hung over them… just how could the Price family afford all this? None of this could have come cheap. Even with William here too, surely they wouldn't be able to earn enough to cover this. Insurance would only amount for a fraction, that much was certain.

"This is a pretty high tech lair," Max observed from her chair placed beside the bed.

"Feels like a high-tech cell," Chloe corrected her gently. "But I'm lucky my parents bust their ass to take care of me. I know it's hard for them."

Max looked around the room, examining a reality she had made possible because of her time meddling. "They're grateful you are here with them."

"Right. Especially when they can't even take a walk alone. Sometimes I act like a total teenage brat just to give them an excuse to yell at me. Pathetic, I know." The self-depreciative tone of this confession made this already dismal situation even sadder.

"Chloe, you're a great daughter. You're kind and sensitive, when you don't even have to be," Max reassured.

Chloe stared up at the ceiling, not looking directly at Max. "Trust me, I still get my rage on. Especially when a nurse has to watch while I take a dump, so she can wipe my bum." She looked over to Max then, who had her head resting on her hand as she tried to process all this. "Or when doctors flip me around like I was a science doll…"

"I can't even imagine…" She turned to face Chloe then, placing her hand on the bed. "But you're still amazing. You always have been since we were kids."

"Thanks again for coming, Max. I, uh… need to get my drink on," Chloe's voice was raspy and hoarse. "Can you bring me some water?"

Max stood up almost immediately after hearing the request.

*Instead of handing Chloe a bong, I'm feeding her water… Did I give her a choice?*

Choice… Max had thought a lot about this word since gaining her powers, seen just how much one seemingly small decision could make a devastating impact. She had been presented with a lot of choices recently, the toughest ones of her life. None of them had worked out the way she'd hoped. In most cases, hell maybe even in all of them, there was no 'right' or 'wrong' choice… just options. Admittedly, some turned out better than others in the short term, but that didn't mean it was the best choice in the long run. Each decision she made had its own circumstances and problems. Somebody always suffered when she chose… usually Chloe, the very last person she had wanted to hurt.

That particular thought made Chloe think… would she chose this timeline just to have her dad alive again? William's death had been a major blow to her and she would do anything to have him back, even if that meant she was paralysed. In her mind, it was worth it. If that was the price she had to pay, she would gladly do it. And she knew her dad would die a million times to see her alive and
She took the plastic cup of water with a straw on the bedside table and brought it over to Chloe. "Drink up, buttercup…"

Chloe sipped at the drink through the straw. "Oh man, no wonder my throat is dry. I don't think I've talked this much the whole year."

"Have you ever thought about doing a podcast or something?" Max asked.

For the first time since entering this timeline, some of Chloe's own brand wry humor pushed through. "I wish I could punch your face right now. A podcast? Dude, I am a pod in a cast. Boring."

Max placed her arms on the back of the chair. "Ouch. It was just a thought…"

Chloe's expression softened then. "I know you're just trying to help."

"Yeah, that's become a bad habit of mine..." Those words carried more burden and weight than this Chloe could ever know.

Noticing the solemnness, Chloe tilted her head to get a better look at her childhood best friend. "You sound like an adult now. It seems like we were kids in another life."

"What do you remember about us as kids? We all have different memories..." Max prompted softly.

That brought a small smile to Chloe's lips. "I think about us as little pirates, running and jumping through Arcadia Bay."

Max nodded, clearly finding these memories bittersweet. "Me too. But, we're still pirates in our own way."

"Uh, yeah, right. Check me out, 'Chloe of the Caribbean'," Chloe mentioned skeptically. "No way will I get on a fucking boat now. Unless you're with me. As you can see, I can't keep all my other friends away."

Max was quick to interject here, desperate to make that lonely expression disappear. "You have me. I'm not leaving you, Chloe."

There was a slight pause before Chloe spoke again, as if she was a bit conflicted. "Well, you didn't visit me a lot either. I mean, I loved your cards and photos, but…"

"I know I wasn't around much. No excuses, I'm a loser. But, I am trying to make things right."

Trying wasn't anywhere near enough. That much was obvious to Max by now. Now, she realized that if she really wanted to make this right, she would have to be willing to sacrifice almost anything. There were some things she outright refused to give up, Chloe being one of them, but apart from that she was prepared to go to any lengths to fix her mistakes.

"How? Dude, you're not Super Max," Chloe mentioned, not sounding angry like her
counterpart might have in the same situation. "And I'm not trying to guilt-trip you. That's what my parents are for..."

Clearly wanting to break the awkward silence that had settled between them, Max changed the subject. "I know this is a dumb question, but... Are you lonely here?"

"Yes, dumb question," there was a moment of hesitation before Chloe answered. "I don't mind being alone. I can't exactly go party like a rock star, though... or get in any teen trouble with the folks."

Max nodded, the guilt very obvious on her face. "I think Joyce and William are incredible."

At the mention of her parents, Chloe's face dropped. "Max, the accident has been so hard on them. Our insurance sucks and the medical bills are fucking insane."

"I bet. This tech must be crazy expensive." Max looked around the room, always in eyesight of some kind of life saving machine or pill.

"Along with the drugs, the nurses, the supplies... Mom and Dad are always broke and they get so frustrated... Is it worth it?" From her tone, Chloe was seriously considering this question.

"Chloe, you're priceless. Uh, no pun intended..."

Chloe's serious contemplation faded to something much more relaxed. "You are such a geek. That's why I love you. Of course, I know a geek when I be one. See, I'm practically a human entertainment system. It would be sweet to chill out together and watch a movie, like when you'd spend the night at my house..."

If only they could both go back to their childhood and just stay there forever. Before all the heartache and bullshit. Max had considered it so many times, just replaying the best parts of her life over and over again. Of course, that would mess things up more than they already were... but it'd be worth it just to see Chloe truly happy again. Getting stuck in the past didn't seem like that bad of an option right now...

Despite her years of built up anger and resentment, Chloe had fond memories of their childhood sleepovers. She often found her mind wandering back to those times, finding comfort in them. Of course, it was a bittersweet feeling, but better than feeling empty. If she had Max's power, she'd probably go back to one of those times just to experience it again. Commit them to memory.

"What do you want to watch?" Max asked, keen to draw their attention away from such morbid topics for both their sakes.

After some thought, Chloe finally replied. "Uh, I think I'm in, like, a mellow 'Blade Runner' mood. I always cry at the end. Plus you know I always wanted to have cool colored bangs like Pris."

That made Max smile. "I know. You would look incredible with blue hair. Now let's get this show on the road. And you better not fall asleep on me, like you always do when we watch movies."

"I remember, Max. Swear I won't fall asleep. Not when you're here. Not yet."
That ominous statement hit Max hard. This was a prelude to that soul destroying request Chloe had asked her to fulfill. She must have been thinking about it the whole time, trying to find the best time to bring it up and the right words to use. It must have been so hard for her to work up the courage to say it. That was not something you decided lightly.

Joyce had often found the pair passed out in front of the TV, fast asleep. She'd actually taken a few pictures of them like that without their knowledge over the years. Chloe would kick up a storm if she ever found out. It had been too good an opportunity to miss and William had only encouraged it.

Max grabbed a tissue from the side and began to wipe at Chloe's eyes with it to remove the stray grains of sand. "Thanks. I think you missed a grain stuck in my eyeball."

"Hard to believe how just a little sand can cause such a big mess," the young time traveler muttered more to herself than to Chloe.

"It's like that Chinese proverb, 'A spark can start a fire that burns the entire prairie.' You know, like that butterfly thing…"

"So I've heard..." Max mentioned softly.

Her case was the butterfly effect in the most literal sense possible.

After thoroughly snooping around Chloe's room and getting a good look at all the medical supplies and the equipment hooked up to keep her best friend alive, Max located the Blade Runner DVD. In the process, she uncovered an old mixtape entitled 'Pirate Power'. Oh my God, I made that mix for her when we were twelve.

Max bent down and put the DVD in the player before getting settled on the chair at Chloe's bedside. She looked over at her best friend with a small smile then focused back on the screen once more. When Max had looked away, Chloe shot her a brief sideways glance before the screen faded to black again in the usual transition. From the light and background noises, it was morning when the image re-appeared on screen. Max was still in the chair, her head resting on the bed with her arms used as a pillow. Chloe was already awake, watching over her friend.

Within the next few seconds, Max stirred and rubbed at her eyes. Not fully awake yet, she looked back at Chloe with a sleepy smile. "I cannot believe you fell asleep so fast. How dare you."

"I know you were beat down after the day with me. And Blade Runner is a pretty dreamy movie to watch at night. Uh, do you think Deckard is a replicant?" Instead of answering the question, Max just looked at her. It was clear from her half-lidded eyes and dazed expression that she wasn't ready for a huge discussion like that. "Sorry, I can see you're not wide awake like me."

"No, I'm sorry I crashed so hard. Were you... okay?" Max asked worriedly.

Given the effect the rewind had on Max, it wouldn't be too much to suggest that it had affected her sleep pattern and alertness too. Constantly pushing herself to the limit and barely resting, not for lack of trying, had taken its toll. More so now than ever. In fact, she couldn't remember the last time she'd slept soundly. Time travel made it difficult to ground herself. A day, or any other
conventional unit of time for that matter, wasn't the same for her as for other people. One minute for them could be several for her, thanks to her rewind. When she did manage to close her eyes, she was plagued with twisted nightmares. She had enough traumatic experiences to make for some very scary dreams. The reality had been bad enough, but the nightmares… they were something much more grim. Worse still, some of them could actually happen if she messed up more than she already had.

It was hard to miss the effect time travel had on Max. They could all see it. She looked extremely haggard and exhausted, far beyond the usual state of tiredness. Right now, she was running on fumes, spurred forward by sheer determination to escape the fate she had witnessed. Her parents were particularly worried for her state of mind and health. Seeing Max passing out not once but twice had them on edge. If it happened again, which hopefully it wouldn't, they would really have to put their foot down. Others, such as Kate, were also concerned for Max. After everything Max had done for her in the other timeline, she didn't want to see her get hurt… more than she already had. She wouldn't want that anyway, but especially not now. None of them knew the right way to deal with this.

"I do have a mother and father when you're not falling asleep on me," Chloe pointed out.

Max shook her head, stifling a grin as she leaned back in the chair. "You are a bitch in the morning."

"It's the company I keep…" Chloe added cheekily. "Yesterday was such a blast."

"It was great, seeing you," Max agreed, her expression softening and tinged with sadness.

"I know things were different when we were just dorky kids, but being with you made me feel like when we were little pirates, jumping and running through the forests again. It meant a lot to me just to chill out with you and bullshit," Chloe's face suddenly scrunched up in pain. "Ahh… Fuck. Um, I'm getting my regular head pains… Uh, can you pretty please go upstairs and get my-my morphine injector in the bathroom?"

"Morphine injector?" Max repeated hesitantly.

"It's-ahh," she paused momentarily, fighting through the pain before explaining. "It's total Star Trek shit. You can't even see the needle. Seriously, I need it. Um, my parents keep the swag upstairs because they think I can't get to it… but you can, Max. Like a pirate, right?"

"I'm on it, Chloe." With that, Max made her way out of the room through to the lounge.

William was sat at the table, looking through some papers and muttering to himself. Before Max could go over to him, her phone bleeped signalling that she had a text. She frowned as she looked over the texts, all of which were very out of character responses. This timeline's Max almost seemed to have Victoria wrapped around her little finger.

Even in this situation, Victoria wasn't all too pleased about that. She had spent a lot of time and energy asserting her authority at Blackwell, done some things she shouldn't be particularly proud of. To think that Max Caulfield, after what she had seen of the shy hipster through this experience, could ever be seen as an equal or even of a higher social ranking was ridiculous. Yet… it had happened in this timeline. It was unlikely that she had changed all that much in this other timeline since William being alive wouldn't really affect her personally, other than never having the 'pleasure' of crossing paths with Chloe. Nowhere near as much as Max would have changed. As
had been proven so far, one change, however big or small, could alter everything, tip the world
they knew on its head.

Victoria wasn't the only one considering the differences between the two Maxes. From the texts, it
was clear to see just how much had changed. This Max was tied up in the Vortex Club, that much
was apparent from her conversations with other members. There was nothing from Warren or Kate,
two of her more frequented contacts from the original timeline. A short chain of messages from
Alyssa showed that she had well and truly taken up the mantle of Vortex Club asshole. Another
change… her journal. The Max on screen had taken some time to check the rest of her bag after
seeing to her messages. There were barely any diary entries, and the ones included were brief with
huge gaps in between days. Nothing like the Max they all knew or had seen so far. Even more so
than Chloe, she had become a totally different person.

Max approached the table cautiously. "Hey, William. Am I bothering you?"

Slowly, William tore his eyes away from the headache-inducing papers. "Why, yes, Max, I
love going through bills. Kidding. How can you bother me? I haven't seen you in forever."

"I know. You look exactly the same. It's so cool." It was clear that Max almost couldn't
believe her eyes when she looked at William.

He offered her a tired smile. "Good, or I'd be as scared if I didn't look like me… Of course,
you seem more adult now. So, what's on your mind?"

"Being around you and Joyce again is so nostalgic."

"Very old school, as they say. I think it's great for Chloe to see you. It makes Joyce happy,
too. So it's not all bad news in Arcadia Bay. Or is it?" His expression became more serious as
he said this.

"What do you think is going on with all this crazy weather and animals dying?" Max asked,
curious to see William's take on the situation.

"Nobody knows, right? It is Nostradamus type shit, pardon my French. But all I actually care
about now is Chloe and Joyce. My family." He seemed very resolute about that.

William had always cared about his family more than anything. Anybody who talked with him for
more than five minutes could tell that much. He was always proud of Chloe and gushed about her
to anyone who would lend an ear. As much as she protested about his embarrassing behavior,
anyone could tell she actually loved the attention. Who wouldn't? Chloe had to wonder what her
dad would think of her. A college dropout, drinking and smoking herself into debt. No prospects,
no future, a record of criminal activity… would he be so proud of her now? Disappointed might be
the right word to use.

Pressing swiftly forward, Max moved to her next inquiry. "I was reading about that missing
girl… Rachel Amber?"

William's eyes flickered with vague familiarity when he heard the name, "Oh yes, she went to
Blackwell, right? Poor thing. That's a real nightmare for a family… I get scared thinking
about Chloe and that we might… lose her someday." That brought the mood down
considerably.
Eager to change the subject and stop William from making such a heartbroken expression, Max asked something else. There was a lot she needed to assert. "The Prescott family might be bad news. What do you think about them?"

"Evil," William answered immediately, not even having to think. "Next question?"

"Sounds like you know them well," Max lightly pressed, keen to know as much as she could about the timeline she'd found herself in.

"More than I want to. But Joyce has to work for those greedy bastards at Pan Estates. I don't even like to think about it." He shook his head, obviously annoyed just thinking about the Prescotts.

Eager to move on from the Prescotts, she turned the conversation back to Chloe. "I was impressed by Chloe's room and all the high-tech equipment."

"You should be. We could buy a few mansions for what it all costs. Insurance helps, but..." he glanced down at the papers on the table, not looking at all confident or reassured, "I don't know, Max."

"I know it must be hard on you guys, financially."

"These bills are more like crushing. We have to mortgage our home and that's pretty scary... but we'll get through it. The Price is always right. Get it? No?" His smile was a bit strained, trying to make light of a tough situation.

After shuffling her feet and grabbing onto her arm, Max continued. "I don't know how to say this, but I am truly sorry about what happened to Chloe."

William sighed deeply before responding to that. "Me too. All it takes is a few minutes to change a girl's whole life. But she's alive. And she's been a trooper."

Max's guilt only intensified hearing that. "Is she mad at me for not staying in touch? She should be, I have no excuse."

He didn't reply right away, clearly trying to find a diplomatic way of putting it. "She was disappointed, but she knows you care. And I know how hard it is to process all this. It's taken us years."

"William, I just want you to know that whatever happens, I'll always be here for Chloe. Always," Max promised, determined to keep it.

William nodded slightly as he looked her directly in the eyes. "I know you will, Max."

Keen to get back to her mission from Chloe, Max decided to end the conversation. William had things to do as well. "I have to go see if Chloe needs anything. It was so great talking with you again."

He smiled at her warmly. "You act like it's the last time. And please, keep me from these bills whenever you want."

If the Price's financial situation had been bad before, this was on a whole different level. Debt
seemed to be yet another constant, although the size and scale differed across timelines. From the way William was acting and what he'd said, things didn't look good. He was always optimistic, so for him to admit that they were in trouble was worrying on many levels.

Before going upstairs, Max had her usual snoop around. The most worrying things she discovered from her search was just how in debt the Price family was now. They had struggled in her original timeline but this was... something else entirely. When she finally went upstairs. She poked her head into the main bedroom, finding Joyce one the bed reading.

When Joyce noticed her, she put her magazine down. "Good morning, Max. You and Chloe are so much quieter now than when you were kids."

"I remember. It's nice waking up in your house again."

"Oh, William and I love it. Finally seeing you and Chloe together after all these years..." Joyce hesitated, her voice much quieter when she finally managed to speak again, "after the accident..."

Eager to change the subject, Max diverted the conversation elsewhere. "How are you doing, Joyce?"

After gathering her thoughts, Joyce responded. "I'm doing the best I can, Max. I won't lie, it's difficult... but nobody said life was easy here in Arcadia Bay."

"Plus, you guys have to work, too." Yet another thing for her to feel guilty about causing.

"Bill and I have no time for ourselves, and we're working more than were living. I even had to take a part-time gig at Pan Estates. Ugh." The disgust was clear from the way Joyce spoke about the Prescotts... a running theme it seemed.

"Do you know the Prescotts?"

Joyce gave her a serious look. "I know that Sean Prescott won't be happy until he owns everything in Arcadia Bay. Stay away from his son, Nathan."

With that ominous warning duly noted, advice Max knew all too well to heed, she moved onto another topic. "So, what do you think is going on here with all this eco-havoc?"

"Maybe Arcadia Bay just wants to be left alone... I know the feeling," Joyce suddenly seemed to snap back from her thoughts to reality again. "Honestly, I don't give a shit about too much outside our house."

"I don't blame you, Joyce."

Something shifted in her eyes and she began to backtrack a bit. "Except now we have dead birds and beached whales outside our front door... So maybe I should care, for Chloe's sake."

"I have to tell you how much I love seeing you and William together again." Max sounded genuinely happy about this, but also a little sad given the cost.

Mentioning William brought a smile to Joyce's lips. "He's been such a hero through all this.
Chloe and I are lucky to have him."

"Chloe and William seem like they still get along so good."

"Yeah, those two are closer now more than ever," Joyce divulged, seeming somewhat conflicted. "Chloe will actually listen to William, while she usually ignores me. Oh, it's so cute when they gang up on poor ol' me…"

"You rule, Joyce."

Her smile returned at that, although it was more melancholic than before. "Shit, things would be different if I did… I like how you think, kid."

It didn't take long for Max's guilt to finally manifest itself, "I wish I was a better friend. I know Chloe doesn't get many visitors."

"Oh, Max, you're Chloe's best friend for a reason. You're here exactly when she needs you," Joyce reassured.

Max didn't look as convinced, but let it slide. "I hope so. You guys do such an amazing job taking care of her."

"We can only do so much… and she gets damn sick of her parents. That's why it's so important you came to spend time with her. Max, Chloe's condition is not improving. Her respiratory system is very weak and she… she…" after exhaling deeply to calm herself down, Joyce carried on as best she could, "do you know what I'm saying?"

Max's face fell as she realized the implications of what she was being told. "Oh, Joyce, I'm so sorry you have to go through all this."

"Bad or good, I embrace every moment with my daughter and my husband. This is what it means to be a family… and we'll always be one, no matter what." Joyce's voice wavered as she said these last few words.

Figuring that she really should get back to Chloe soon, Max excused herself. "I better get back to Chloe now. It's good talking with you, Joyce."

"You too, honey."

There was little point in denying it now. Chloe's condition was slowly killing her. All hope of arguing otherwise was futile. She was living on borrowed time. That realization hit them all hard. How were they supposed to react to that?

For Chloe, hearing her own death sentence was surreal. She was trying to detach herself from the situation, separate her circumstances from this other Chloe's… but that was easier said than done. One things was for certain, if it had been her in that position as she was now -well, it sort of was her but not exactly- she wouldn't be taking it so well. Would she even be able to cope with it? Knowing that she was gradually dying and putting more strain on her family. It would drive her insane.

Max's fists clenched. She knew what was coming next. The moment she had feared almost above all else. No matter what, she had to stay calm. Easier said than done…
When she re-entered the hallway, her eyes wandered over to Chloe's room, well... what used to be her room anyway. Cautiously, she pushed on the door and stepped inside. The room was predictably empty with a few cardboard boxes stacked in the corner. It was clear from her expression that she had mixed feelings about being in here, but still sat down on the empty spool table propping the mattress up against the furthest wall.

_I'm still overwhelmed by this new reality. And I feel so guilty for putting Chloe and her family through this. I could give Chloe the choice of keeping William alive, but that would be cruel. But then I see that they're a family again, and… who am I to judge?_

Done contemplating for now, she headed out of Chloe's room towards the bathroom and grabbed the morphine injector from one of the cabinets above the sink. _Here it is. Never thought I'd be delivering morphine to my best friend._

Now that she had the morphine injector, Max made her way back to Chloe's new room. "Finally. Give me the blue pill..."

"I'm sorry. I'm nosy, but not precise," Max admitted as she approached the bed. "Go ahead and plug it in. It's so easy. And painless," Chloe reassured, doing her best to calm her friend's nerves.

Max fiddled around with machine, not looking very confident about what she was doing. "Um, okay, but get ready to yell for your folks if I screw up."

"Oh, trust me, I will," Chloe promised as she watched her friend at work. "Of course, my pain just keeps getting worse... but you caught me on a good day. Max, I'm so grateful that I'm even able to hang out with you. See, I'm getting mushy. I'm already high."

"You're so adorable. Do you want anything else?"

Chloe hesitated for a second, conflicted over whether she should ask whatever it was she had in mind. "Um, stop me if I'm being too emo, but can you grab one of the photo albums over there? I'd like to check out some old pictures of us when we were kids."

"Please. My diary is like emo ground zero. Plus Max Caulfield does not pass up a photo op with Chloe Price. Ever," Max grabbed the photo album sitting on top of the chest of drawers and brought it back over to the bed. She shuffled closer on her chair and rested the album for both of them to look at. "Is that okay?"

"Perfect. Oh my god, look how little we are there! We look like toys!" Chloe exclaimed as she examined the old photos.

"I remember that day by the lighthouse," Max announced, reliving the experience as she looked at the particular photo in question.

Chloe lit up with the memories. "My dad was pissed at us. He actually tried to give us a time-out!"

"And you laughed at him. My dad would have banished me." Max reached out to turn the page.
Not wasting any time, Chloe drew attention to another photo. "Whoa, awesome picture. We look so badass in our pirate gear."

"We should have taken over Arcadia Bay when we had the chance," the young time traveler added sadly.

"There's still time for you..." Chloe muttered just loud enough for Max to hear. With that depressing comment, she frowned and turned page again. "Oh man, there we are making pancakes. I love that shot of us. It's hard to believe my dad took that picture only five years ago."

"Literally seems like yesterday..." For Max, it pretty much had been.

"I wish it was."

"Me too." Realization gradually began to show on Max's face as she stared forlornly at the photo. This photo... Maybe I could...

After some time, Chloe finally spoke again. She sounded very uncertain of herself, like she didn't really know how to approach the conversation she had in mind... or if she even should bring it up. "Listen, Max, my respiratory system is failing and... and it's only getting worse. I've heard the doctors talking about it when they thought I was zonked out. So I know I'm just putting off the inevitable, while my parents suffer along... and I will, too. This isn't how I want things to end."

Those last few words caught Max's attention in the worst way possible. "What? What are you saying?"

Too late to take on back now, Chloe pressed on. "I'm saying that being with you again has been so special. I just wanted to feel like when we were kids running around Arcadia Bay... and everything was possible. And you made me feel that way today. I want this time with you to be my last memory... Do you understand?"

Max nodded solemnly. "Yes, I do."

"All you have to do is crank up the IV to eleven..." Chloe instructed with eerie calmness.

As Max sat there, tears began running from her eyes, down her cheeks. "Chloe... I really don't know if I can do this. I had another friend who wanted to... end it all and I did everything I could to try and save her life. How can I be responsible for ending yours? I mean, there's got to be another way." Her desperation for an alternate solution was painfully clear, mind whirring to find something... anything.

Not willing to back down, Chloe pressed her point. "Max, you were there for your friend no matter what. Now I'm asking you to help me the same way."

"I want to help you, Chloe, but I think my help is hurting."

"At least you have a choice. When you want to make a decision, you can just do it. Look at me, I'm at the mercy of... everybody," for the first time since coming to this timeline, Chloe sounded a bit angry. "For once, I want to make my own choice... the most important one of
my life. Please… help me, Max."

Everyone's heart dropped when the decision screen came up this time… ACCEPT or REFUSE. Their options were either to kill Chloe and put her out of her pain or let her suffer until she died anyway. Nobody said anything for the longest time, all staring at the words and trying to process them.

"What the actual fuck?" Chloe finally managed to choke out. She looked to Max, wanting answers, an explanation or… something. This had been a choice her friend had been forced to make.

Max hung her head, refusing to look at Chloe. She didn't trust herself right now. Tears were already brimming in her eyes, rolling down her cheeks and onto her lap. Reliving this was horrible, soul destroying. She felt as if her heart had been ripped out and stomped into a million pieces. It was a choice she had never wanted to make. What the hell was she 'supposed' to do in that situation? Chloe had been hurting, dying. She needed help… just not in a way Max had ever anticipated. Why had this happened to her? She had only wanted to help Chloe… that was all. So, why had she been fucked over so hard? It wasn't fair.

"Max… please, look at me…" Chloe pleaded, needing her to make some kind of sense out of this.

After a few moments of silence, Max reluctantly lifted her head to look at Chloe. She didn't say anything… she couldn't. All she could do was meet her friend's gaze, trying to convey how sorry she felt for putting her through with her eyes alone.

Without saying a word, Chloe pulled Max into an awkwardly positioned hug. She hated seeing the hopelessness and guilt in her eyes. Especially not after everything Max had done for her. She felt her best friend cling onto her for dear life, sobbing silently into her shoulder. In that moment, the after effects of her rewind powers became painfully clear if they weren't already. Not just physically, but emotionally too. This horrible experience had destroyed her. What would Chloe do in that situation? If Max was… she swallowed hard, not wanting to think about the possibility. It was too much.

Some of the people at Kate's church would consider it a sin to commit suicide, even more so to assist someone in it. Her mother included. Not for selfless reasons, either. They would be worried for their reputation more than anything. Even thinking about it was considered criminal. If only people spent as much time trying to help as condemning, maybe most wouldn't have to resort to it. Now knowing that she had tried, she only believed that more. Without Max, she would be dead. End of. Support went a long way. This was a different case entirely. Chloe had no chance of recovery. Kate might believe in miracles, but it would be foolish to follow blind optimism.

Warren found this very cruel, as he was sure they all did. Max had tried to help Chloe, make her life better, but only ended up hurting her. It was the classic case of time travel in films, books and games. Messing around with time never worked out how people wanted it to. For every action, there was an equal consequence to balance it out. Often, it was a price the time traveler wasn't willing or able to pay.

The Vortex Club members among the group felt just as badly as the others. Seeing a friend like this and knowing that you had inadvertently caused it would be impossible, yet unavoidable, to accept. If one of them was in Max's position, how would they handle it? Poorly was the most likely answer. Nobody would find this decision easy, that much was for certain. It was only natural to want to find another way, even if there was no viable alternative…

Rachel glanced away from the screen, not sure how to feel. Chloe had always been a fighter, kicking and screaming until the very end. To see her so resigned was… tough to watch. There was
no way out of this for her. All she could do was choose how and when it happened, or leave it to fate to decide. If Chloe asked her, what would she choose? Could she honor her wishes or would she just run away from it all? Abandon her...

Joyce was completely stunned, like someone had sucker punched her in the face. Hearing Chloe say these things, want to make a decision like that… how was she supposed to react? She would do anything to keep her daughter alive, but… she had to want to keep going herself. Chloe wouldn't have taken this choice lightly. She must have given it a lot of thought and consideration. Regardless, she was dying, the medical notes had made that clear enough. It was just a matter of when. Still, that didn't make it any easier to endorse… ending everything. As for David, he couldn't even think straight. Neither could Max's parents. Was there even a right answer here? Chloe was an adult, able to make her own choices, but… it wasn't that easy to just sentence someone to death, even out of mercy. Especially considering the effect it would have on the people around her. Joyce, William, Max… but, at the end of the day, it was her life and so her decision what to do with it. You couldn't force people to keep going… no matter how much you might want to.

"I don't think any of us have the right to decide this… other than Chloe," Joyce struggled to say, her voice thick with emotion. As much as she didn't want to see her daughter die, whatever timeline it was in, it wasn't her decision to make.

Eventually, Chloe pulled back from the hug to look her friend in the eyes. Her heart dropped as she noticed the tears. Not even caring who saw, she hesitantly reached out, placed her hand on Max's cheek and wiped away the tears with her thumb. She could feel Max lean into her touch, finding comfort in it.

"What did you choose, Max?" she asked softly.

Max swallowed hard, steeling herself for this answer. Her words came out juddery, interrupted by sniffles and stifled sobs. "I… I did it. I couldn't… let you suffer like that. If I could, I would have solved it some other way, but… I didn't want to let you down and abandon you again. I put you in that situation and… it would be cruel to leave you like that if you were asking to…"

Chloe offered her a comforting, yet sad smile. Right now, Max needed reassurance. That was something she could give. "You did the right thing."

"That doesn't mean I've given up on keeping you alive. Not even for a second. That time was different," Max immediately stated. There had been no way to save Chloe in that timeline, even she could see that with painful clarity. However, she wouldn't rest until she found some way of keeping her friend alive and safe. Whatever the cost. She needed Chloe to understand that.

"I know. You wouldn't be here now if you didn't believe that. Or working so hard," anyone could see how much effort Max was spending into keeping her alive, the sacrifices she was making and danger she was putting herself in. Nobody could doubt her on that. "I trust your judgement."

Max nodded solemnly, letting the choice play out in the background… choosing again to kill her best friend. She did her best to ignore it, instead focusing on the Chloe in her timeline. The one she was fighting for now.

"Chloe…"

"I'll just drift asleep… dreaming of us here together… forever," Chloe reassured, trying her best to convince. Reluctantly, Max got up from the chair and fulfilled her wish. Chloe seemed surprised at first, then grateful. "Thank you so much. I'm so proud of you for following your dreams. Don't forget about me."
"Never," Max managed, barely keeping it together.

Chloe's eyes fluttered, slowly closing as her head lolled. Her voice was little more than a whisper now. "I love you, Max. See you around."

Those first three words cut deep for Max, renewed the stream of tears. If there was some higher power out there, they must despise her to put her through something like this. She had wanted things to be different for Chloe and they had been… just not in a way she had ever wanted.

"Sooner than you think…" Doing her best to ignore what had just happened, Max focused on the familiar photo. "I'm sorry, William."

Before long, she was back where this all started. The scene played out just the same as last time… well, almost. Instead of stopping William, Max burned the photo in the fireplace and let him leave. Once he had disappeared, she leaned against the wall and buried her face in her hands.

The weird behavior confused Chloe as she stepped out into the hallway. "Max, you are being so fucking strange, like you're never going to see us again."

Trying hard to keep it together, Max let the apology tumble from her lips. She owed Chloe that much. "Chloe, I'm so sorry… I tried to make things different for you… I... I did try… I'm sorry."

"I don't know exactly what you're talking about, but come on," she grabbed onto Max's arms momentarily. "You have made things different, like my whole life. You're my best friend. I've got you and a great family. What's to be sorry for? We'll be best friends forever. And when we grow up we're taking over the world."

"Listen, whatever happens, I want you to be strong. Even if you feel like I wasn't there for you…" Max took her by the hands, trying her best to say what needed to be said without losing to her tears, "because I will never abandon you, Chloe. I'll always have your back. Always."

Those words echoed around the room as the screen faded to white.

Chapter End Notes

So, that's part one of Dark Room down, another three to go. On a slightly different note, Tyler and I have started an RWBY fic and I'm writing a few solo pieces for the fandom too, in case you didn't know and like RWBY. Have a great day and see you next time.
Chapter Notes

Hey guys, welcome back. Oh, it's going to be fun from here on out…

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Fourteen: Dark Room, Part 2

There were no words to describe what the group had just decided and subsequently witnessed. Max hung her head, feeling terrible for putting them all through this, Chloe most of all. Joyce was a close second. As expected, she was in tears. All of them were. Even David, who was normally so composed, seemed to be just holding on, eyes watery. It would be nearly impossible not to be moved by such a messed up situation.

Joyce and Chloe had seen William brought back, only to be cruelly taken away again. Not only that, but they had to watch Chloe die under such horrible circumstances. To some in the room, she was a daughter, either through blood or otherwise, a friend, maybe once a lover, and… for Max, something much more complicated. Even she didn't know how she would define what Chloe was to her now. An outsider would have an even harder time. Either way, Chloe was important to her. That word really didn't do the feeling justice. None would.

That was why she was doing all this. To keep her and the others safe. To warn them. To give them a better chance this time around.

On screen, the still images of memories made a return, undoing themselves… undoing five years that should never have been. Some new ones were added this time. Instead of a crashed car, there was a picture of Chloe with Rachel. Where there once was an image of Chloe sat in her wheelchair staring at the place where she’d moved her and Max’s old drawing, now was of her exiting the bathroom the day Nathan almost shot her. The final one changed from Max sitting by Chloe's bedside to them carrying the sheet of cardboard covered in drawings upstairs.

That old drawing was the first thing they saw when the screen shifted. Now, it was covered in pieces of paper and photos they had collected over the past few days. The sound was muffled, gradually becoming clearer as Max returned back to her own timeline. The second she could, she turned around and saw Chloe at her desk, busy at her laptop.

"Chloe… you're alive. Yes!" Not wasting any time, Max all but ran over and aggressively hugged her from behind.

Surprised by the sudden hug, Chloe turned to her, looking confused and a little tired.
"Whoa! Down, Max! You get one kiss and now you're all over me…"

Toning down her excitement, or trying to at least, Max smiled with relief. "I'm just… I'm just-I'm so glad you're here!"
That sentence carried much more weight now they knew what Max had gone through to get there. Out of everything she had been put through so far, the alternate timeline had by far been the worst the group had witnessed. A dying friend with no hope of recovery, leading to a mercy killing, the final blow dealt by her own hand… that had to really mess Max up. Despite best intentions, she had been the one. Finishing the job she had inadvertently started when entering that timeline. None of them would ever be able to really understand. They could try, and this experience had certainly given them an insight, but they hadn't actually *lived* it. Felt the pain and heartache as raw or drowned in uncertainty as deeply as Max had.

Max knew that this was only the beginning of the shitstorm. Arguably, the alternate timeline decision had been the worst she had to deal with… after, well, the choice of sacrifice. Arcadia or Chloe. This time around, *this time*, she would save them both.

Giving her a long, hard stare, Chloe shook her head. "You sound high, but thanks for the morning grope. Since we were up all night playing 'CSI: Arcadia Bay,' I was still spaced out here, trying to put all this info together." Max proceeded to sit down on the bed, looking happy to be back. "Max, did you forget we've gone over this? I hope you weren't messing around with time while I was sleeping..."

"Not anymore. I'm just spaced out, too." *Welcome back to the real world, Max… I don't think I can ever tell Chloe about what happened.* Max stood up and wandered over to the makeshift display board to get a better look at the info pinned to it. "So close, yet so far away. We have to do three main things."

"Right..." Chloe seemed uncertain of herself, "uh, what things?"

Counting them off on her fingers, Max began to explain the three-phase plan. "One, decipher Frank's logbook. Two, get Nathan's phone to find out where he's been during the Vortex Club parties with Kate and Rachel. And see whatever hidden shit he's got in his messages."

"Three, beat step-douche down until he tells us about Frank, Nathan, and the 'Dark Room'," Chloe interrupted. "Too bad I don't have a gun anymore..."

"Yes, that's the solution," Max added sarcastically. "We'll have to do this on our own."

"Quite the list," Joyce managed, trying to distract herself from what she had seen moments ago.


"Seems that way," Warren sighed, still feeling the aftermath of recent events.

Kate turned to Max with a sad smile. "I hope it goes smoothly for you."

Unable to comment on that for now, Max nodded again. She was thankful for the hope, even if it was redundant now. No amount of wishing or praying would change what had already happened.

"Dude, at least let me kick his ass, then rewind-" Chloe stopped when she noticed the disapproving stare her friend was giving her. Sighing she held her hands up in defeat. "Fine, whatevs, it's your power."

"Which I can't waste on shit like that. Or Blackwell would be in big trouble," Max noted sadly.
"You didn't even let me take that money to pay Frank off," Chloe muttered, sounding a little resentful at that particular decision.

"And I'm glad. We have to be better than that." Max was doing her best to convince Chloe of that.

"I know," the bluenette conceded reluctantly. "You should get busy in the garage to see what dirt you can dig up. I'm going to cyberstalk some names and see where that leads... or to who. And be careful of step-crack. He's not going to be a happy camper after you reamed him yesterday, and Mom is giving the boot..."

"I'm on it, partner." I can't abuse this level of my rewind power... It's way too dangerous, and I need to navigate the present without messing up the past. Max left the room and headed downstairs. Unfortunately, she bumped straight into David, who was looking at the pictures of Chloe on the corkboard in the hallway. He had a small suitcase in hand, ready to leave.

"This should be good..." Chloe muttered to herself. David was hostile at the best of times. No doubt he would lay on the guilt trip, at the very least. He never took responsibility for his actions… a bit like her, she now realized.

When he noticed her, he didn't seem as hostile as before. Just... sad and defeated. "You won this battle, Max. You broke up my family. I salute you."

"David, I didn't try to hurt you. Ever," Max protested, determined to get him to understand. "But I won't let anybody hurt Chloe."

"Too late, isn't it?" He shook his head, swallowing his pride. "You just better be damn careful with her. Don't you wander off into the dark..." Without another word, he left.

That sounded extremely ominous like David knew something nobody else did. With the amount of investigating he did, and how suspicious he was, he must have come across his fair share of disturbing secrets. This was something else entirely.

David's jaw tightened, noticing the resignation in his own tone and expression. Something really bad was going on, that much he was certain of. If what Max had uncovered so far had been relevant, that included Rachel and Kate.

As for Joyce, she had never seen David so defeated and... scared. That was the word she was looking for. Fear over what the future would hold, based on something he had uncovered. Something dark.

Just what was going on in Arcadia Bay? That was a question they all had on their minds.

Now that David had gone, Max went into the kitchen and sat on one of the stools, reflecting on recent events. Somehow I existed in this whole other reality, but I don't know what happened... The more I use my power, the more I see how little control I have over what happens. Now Max Caulfield exists in two or maybe three different realities... How can I have a destiny? If these alternate lives exist, I hate the thought of William and Joyce finding Chloe like that. Thinking about all these lifelines almost makes my head hurt worse than the rewind.

"Who knows how many timelines there are now?" Warren mused thoughtfully. If each time Max used her powers caused a divergence... they would be looking at double figures at least.
Presumably, the timelines continued after she was gone, each with their own Max. Some would experience small changes from the 'original', others much heavier consequences as they had seen.

It was too mind blowing to even consider properly, especially for those not as well-verse in the science side. So, most of the group. They tried to wrap their heads around it, taking in the brain busting information as best they could. If other Maxes did exist, how different were they from one another?

After that thought, she stood up and continued on to David’s workshop to find some information that would help their investigation. With him out of the way, it would be much easier to search. Some time later, she managed to obtain a file containing a lot of useful information from a locker that had once been hidden behind David's car project. The blue folder had maps, notes, coordinates and photos, all useful. Max stashed the folder in her bag, keeping the evidence safe then headed back out to the hallway and called up to Chloe to share her findings.

"Yo, Chloe, are you ready yet? I have to get back to my dorm!" she called up the stairs.

"Are we happy?" Chloe asked as she came down the stairs.

Max nodded, satisfied with her findings. "Very happy. I hit the secret file jackpot. Kate, Nathan… and Rachel. Plus some location coordinates. David is, like a one-man surveillance army. Now let's get the hell out of here, before we get busted. But I absolutely have to go see Kate in the hospital right now. I want to find out how she's doing."

Kate smiled. Even though Max was going through so much, she still wanted to set aside some time in her busy schedule to come and visit her. It was a shame that she had forgotten all this, everything that Max had done for her and their friendship. Maybe after all this was over, they could work on it. She hoped…

This would serve as a breather for the group, Max knew that much. Seeing Kate had been a profoundly positive thing for her. Living proof that she could easily change things for the better… or so she thought at the time. It wasn't that simple.

The pair left the house and drove to the hospital. Again, the screen transitioned, settling on Max pushing through double doors leading into a hospital hallway. "This is definitely Kate's floor."

"Hospitals always freak me out," Chloe mumbled anxiously.

"I hear you. But imagine how Kate feels…" Max paused for a moment before continuing her train of thought. "I'm so glad I get to see her again. I hope it's not too weird for her."

Chloe shook her head reassuringly. "No, she'll be stoked to see you. Who wouldn't be?"

"This be it. I'm a little nervous…" Max admitted, her expression and body language mirroring that statement.

"Just go in there and be her friend. I'll wait out here, so you can chill by yourselves." Chloe sat down on a chair outside the room, pushed against the wall. Clearly, something was on her mind. It didn't take long to find out what. "I was being a total dick for blowing a fuse when you answered Kate's call the other day. Good thing you ignored me. I had no idea what shit
she was going through. And you saved her… like me. I'm sorry."

The admission of mistake startled a few in the group, mostly Joyce and David. Chloe would do or say anything to shift the blame from herself, refusing to admit she had ever done wrong. Now, here she was, apologizing for her immature behavior. Maybe Max had been a good influence on her. Joyce knew that already. And, in some ways, Chloe had been a good influence on Max, bringing her out of her shell. Others, not so much. Still, they needed one another. That much was clear from this experience.

"Thanks, Chloe, but don't be sorry. We're all on the same team."

That made her smile ever so slightly. "Team Max. Let Kate know we're going to string Nathan up by his balls then."

"Great mental image right there," Rachel added cautiously. She had stayed quiet until now, not wanting to draw attention to herself for fear of starting something again. Problem was, she couldn't avoid it forever. She just hoped that Chloe didn't lash out at her again, regardless of how much she deserved it.

Chloe looked at her, conflicted. After a second or two, she sighed and nodded. "...yeah."

That was the best she could manage for now. She still felt betrayed, hurt and angry, but she had more pressing matters to think about now. Arguing was tiring and she just didn't have the energy for it.

"I'd agree with you there," Warren hesitantly agreed, trying to diffuse the tension.

Victoria frowned at him, not all that happy with the phrase, but not really able to disagree. Nathan had done many questionable things since this began, no doubt he would continue that pattern as time passed.

"Oh yes, I'm on it." Max entered the room, seeing Kate sat there on the chair beside the bed drawing.

When she heard the door open, Kate looked up and smiled at Max. She got up and gave her a huge hug. "Max!"

"Oh, Kate!"

The heartwarming reunion was a welcomed change from the usual death and destruction the group had seen so far. They all found themselves smiling, some broader than others. Even people like David and Victoria managed it. Anything to take their minds off the horrific ordeal by fire they had seen and no doubt would continue to see. For now, they would enjoy this moment of respite while it lasted.

Max glanced over at Kate, catching her eyes. She couldn't even begin to describe how relieved, and nervous, she had been to visit her. The thought that Kate nearly didn't make it… made her stomach churn. Such a kind, cheerful soul shouldn't have been tortured like Kate had. The very least Max could do was keep pushing forward, work to keep her safe and happy and avoid this awful fate in at least one timeline.

Pulling away slightly, Kate looked her straight in the eyes. "I thought I'd never see you again. I feel so ridiculous... I'm so sorry."
"Kate, listen to me… you have nothing to be sorry about. Other people do," Max reassured, looking relieved and relaxed now that she had seen Kate again. "You don't know how happy I am to see you. You look awesome. Is it a stupid question if I ask how you're doing?"

"Now that you're here, I'm doing even better. I'm so grateful to you for coming up to the roof to talk me down…" Her expression faltered, clearing remembering the horrible ordeal. "Max, I felt so lost and alone… but when I saw how much you cared, how hard you were trying… it made me realize I wasn't alone. Thank you."

Not wanting to take all the credit, Max added, "Kate, there are so many people who love you and want to help you."

"I know. You should see all the letters and postcards," Kate motioned towards the small collection. "I gave most of the flowers to the other patients here because they need the more than me. I'm keeping the balloons, though. One of the nurses gave me some pen and paper so I could do some drawings."

Max took a look at them, smiling. "I love your illustrations."

The drawings were definitely much more cheerful and bright than the ones they'd all seen in her room. They had been… worrying, to say the least. An expression of her mind at the time, dark and depressed. Thankfully, the worse of it had seemed to have passed. There would still be a long way to go to recovery, but it was comforting to see Kate so cheerful and alive.

Kate's expression turned a little sad then. "They got kind of dark for a while, but I have an idea for a new children's book about bullying…" She looked at Max hopefully. "I was thinking of having some photographs in there too."

Rachel allowed herself a smile, finding all this too cute for words. The way Kate and Max spoke with one another was so positive and encouraging. It was relaxing to see them so absorbed in their conversation. A true friendship if there ever was one. She wasn't the only one to think this. Everyone could see just how well the two girls got on and were calmed by that fact.

"I hope that's a subtle hint that you'll let me take the photographs for the book…" Max mentioned, sounding just as hopeful as her friend had, a little uncertain too.

"Was that subtle? You better take the pictures, Max." Kate chuckled softly, sounding genuinely happy. A vastly different change from before. After briefly talking about her family and the 'get well soon' notes she had received, one surprisingly from Victoria, Max left Kate to her drawing and began snooping.

There were quite a few balloons and cards, wishing her well - including the note from Victoria. Kate was right, she did seem genuinely sorry for all the pain she had caused. After looking around, Max sat down on the vacant chair in the corner, getting lost in her thoughts. *I don't think I'll ever know how much destiny I'm changing… But who ever said we only have a single fate? Time travel is such a mindfuck…* With that thought safely deposited, she stood up and approached Kate again. "Kate, it is so good to hang out with you again."

"Max, I owe you so much. And I can tell you want to talk to me about something," she observed, waiting patiently for Max to say her piece.
"I always want to talk to you…"

That made Kate smile again. "We missed our tea session this week."

"That was so not cool." Max's eyes lit up, an amazing idea clearly crossing her mind. "We need to plan, like, a tea shop tour of Portland."

"Oh yes! And you could bring Warren along too…" she mentioned excitedly.

"No boys allowed," Max stated matter-of-factly.

"Guess we know why that is," Rachel mentioned teasingly as she shot Max a sideways glance.

"I guess you do." It wasn't like she could deny it. Everyone had seen. She and Chloe still had a lot of things to work out, a long conversation to talk things over. That would have to wait until after, though.

"You are funny, Max. And right," Kate chuckled lightly.

Max's eyes wandered over to the collection of letters and cards. "I saw Victoria's letter… How does that make you feel?"

"Max, I know Victoria can be a… a…" Kate caught herself before she said something she regretted, "not nice. But I do believe in forgiveness and redemption. I might be naive, but I feel her struggle."

Victoria couldn't really argue with that. From what she had seen, her behavior left a lot to be desired. She couldn't change the past, not like Max, but she could use the experience to better herself in the future. She had to. Otherwise, it'd be Kate all over again. She might act like a total bitch sometimes, or a lot of the time, but she didn't want… that. None of the Vortex Club members did. Before it was too late, it already had been once, she would do her best to change. It wouldn't happen overnight, she knew that much. So, best to start as soon as possible.

Nodding, Max recounted her own experience with Victoria. "Me too. I could have taken a picture of her covered in paint, but I didn't and we had a genuine moment."

"We all have our moments. Why do you think she acts so mean?" Kate asked curious, to see how her friend would respond.

Thinking it over for a few seconds, Max finally replied. "She's insecure. If you're comfortable with yourself, you don't need to act superior."

"Victoria doesn't look like she has much to be insecure about…" Kate muttered to herself.

Max allowed herself a slight smile. "If anyone could make Victoria see the light, it would be Kate Marsh."

"No, I think it will take more than that, Max." Something about her tone was ominously reflective.

Moving on to the main topic she wanted to discuss, Max continued. "I want you to know that I am this close to getting all the info I need about Nathan…"
Kate's normally relaxed expression turned determined. "Nathan Prescott has to pay for what he did. And we have to stop him from hurting anybody else."

"Well, I did get his ass suspended, so that might be a start…" Max added, feeling both proud and scared of what she had done.

Hearing this, Kate's face lit up. "You did? Oh, right on, Max! I love how fearless you are. So what is going on with him now?"

"I assume he'll show up at the Vortex Club party tonight like nothing happened." That realization was a bitter pill to swallow.

"I just… how? How can he keep getting away with it? Money or not, he…" Ryan couldn't finish his sentence, lost to anger.

"That's a question we all want answered," Vanessa added sympathetically, shaking her head. Arcadia Bay really was a mess.

Joyce nodded slowly. "We do, yes."

"Don't worry. Nathan will pay," Max reassured, clenching her fist. He may not have been the mastermind, but he had his part to play. A big part. His gunshot had started all of this.

"And nobody can do anything to him after what he did," Kate agreed, resignation clear in her voice.

"We're going to stop him," Max announced, determination clear in her eyes. "I just have to find Nathan's room number, get inside and get the clues I need."

"Max, please let me help! I can get the number and I'll text it to you, okay?" Kate offered enthusiastically.

Hesitating for just a second, Max consented to the help. "Of course, Kate! I can't do this without you!"

"Now it's time for Nathan to watch out for us…" This was a surprisingly strong comment coming from someone like Kate.

Smiling at her enthusiasm, Max glanced back at the door. "I have to get back to our mission. You don't know how much it means to see you again."

"I do. That's why I love you, Max. And thanks for taking care of my bunny. Tell Alice I'll see her soon."

"Damn, how have you stayed single this long, Caulfield?" Rachel asked incredulously, making Kate blush at the insinuation. Everyone seemed to be jumping on the bandwagon. First Warren, then Chloe and now Kate. Well, Kate's love was probably more that of a friend in this context, but you never knew. It wasn't impossible. They would make a pretty cute couple.

"Beats me." Max shrugged. Now that she thought about it, she did have a fair few options at the time. Either, she had ignored them or thought they were just teasing, Chloe being the prime example there.
"Can't say I blame them," Rachel muttered to herself. She had to admit, Max had a certain appeal. Cute, shy, a total nerd… that ticked a lot of boxes for some people.

That made Chloe feel a little strange, maybe jealous was the right word. She didn't really like thinking about other people getting with Max. Over the years they had been apart, she had considered it a few times, wondering if Max had hooked up with anyone. It'd made her annoyed and frustrated to think about. Maybe… maybe there was a good reason behind that.

Giving her one last smile, Max left the room and joined Chloe back in the hallway. The bluenette looked up questioningly when she heard the door open. "Well, how is she?"

"She's still Kate Marsh. Thank God," the young time traveler sighed in relief.

A slight flicker of guilt crossed Chloe's face, one she suppressed quickly. "I'm glad we came to see her."

If Max noticed it, she didn't point it out. "Thanks for coming with me."

"Now let's go pay a visit to Nathan Prescott. That little prick is not going to be glad when he sees us..." Chloe muttered angrily under her breath as she stood.

The atmosphere turned tense once more, all of them expecting some pretty messed up things to turn up. Nathan was at the heart of this, whatever it was. That much was for certain. If they were going to find anything at Blackwell, it would be in Nathan's dorm room. Who knew what kind of sketchy shit Max and Chloe would discover next. The group collectively held their breath, waiting.

The screen faded to black as the scene changed, showing Max and Chloe walking towards the dorm building when the image returned. After bumping into Mr. Jefferson, having a brief discussion about the Vortex Club party later, Max and Chloe temporarily parted way to get info on Nathan's whereabouts. If they were going to break into his room, they didn't want him to be there. After some back and forth, talking to Brooke, Daniel, Ms. Grant, and a particularly interesting conversation about the spiritual side of Arcadia Bay with Samuel, Max deduced that Nathan wasn't here. With this new information, she made her way over to Chloe to report back. Saying her goodbyes to Justin, Chloe met her halfway and they entered the dorm building.

"So lame they don't have co-ed dorms here," Chloe mentioned as they reached the boys' dorm.

"Yes, because I want Nathan Prescott in the room next door," Max stated sarcastically. Nobody wanted that.

Opening her mouth to protest, Chloe soon realized she wasn't wrong. "Good point."

Rachel leaned back in her chair, nodding in agreement with Max's conclusion. "I don't think anyone wants that."

"Feel sorry for me, then. Reckon I must be sharing a space with him," Warren observed with a sigh. It was bad enough for people like Max and Kate knowing he was close by, let alone being next door.

"Poor you," Kate mentioned sympathetically. She, for one, was eternally grateful for the separate
dorms.

Joyce shook her head, face scrunching up with disapproval. "I wouldn't feel safe knowing any of you were within 300 miles of him."

"Wish we'd known that before," Ryan muttered under his breath. If they had known what they knew now, he would have made a fuss about it. He imagined all the parents would.

**Just as Chloe was about to go storming ahead, Max stopped her. "Wait here. Give me the signal if Nathan or anybody shows up."**

"I won't let you down, Bat-Max," Chloe promised as she took guard of the entrance.

"Now I just have to find Nathan's room..." As if on cue, Max's phone went off with a text. It was Kate, reporting back that his room number was 111.

After shooting off a quick thanks, Max snuck around the corner and stopped in front of the room. Of course, it was locked. Her eye caught the fire extinguisher on the wall next to the door. Without hesitation, she grabbed it and broke the lock. Once inside, she rewound so that he would be none the wiser. Nathan's room was dark, the blinds shut. A projector above the bed cast weirdly morbid images onto the opposite wall. The walls were covered with all kinds of disturbing images.

"Not creepy at all..." Chloe mumbled, taking in the chilling sight.

Rachel shuddered involuntarily, getting a very bad vibe from this. "A serial killer's den in the making."

"Don't..." Kate pleaded, not wanting that image in her head.

They had all thought it. From what they had seen of Nathan, it wasn't beyond the stretch of the imagination. He'd already killed Chloe once. Who knew what else he was capable of...

**Max opened a drawer of his dresser finding a note from Chloe, threatening to expose him. This must have been the note used in their bathroom meetup. That wasn't the only thing in there. Alongside the note was a photo of Chloe balled up on the floor, looking really out of it. Most likely from the incident she told Max about on the first day near the lighthouse.**

*Oh my god... Chloe... Oh, Chloe.*

This startling discovery made everyone feel sick to their stomachs and cold dread flooded their bodies. Sure, they had been expecting something fucked up, but this... this was on a completely different level of fucked up. None of them spoke or knew how to react. Horror, disgust, and anger were among the first wave of emotions. The desire for revenge being another.

David was beside himself, literally shaking with rage. When he got his hands on that entitled bastard... he would be sorry he ever even looked at Chloe. Joyce sat there, stunned into silence. She wanted to tear her eyes away from the horrifying image so desperately, but couldn't. Ryan Caulfield's eyes went wide, while Vanessa's jaw dropped. The Vortex Club members couldn't believe their eyes, Victoria most of all. She had trusted Nathan, been his friend. To find out he had done... this... Rachel couldn't even begin to sort out how she was feeling. Sure, she'd known Nathan was a bit of an asshole, but she had gotten on with him well enough. Knowing he had taken such a fucked up picture... she may not have been the most loyal to Chloe, but that didn't mean she
didn't care. Chloe herself couldn't even think straight. One thing she did know, Nathan was going to pay. Big time. If she got the chance, she would do it herself.

This was only the first disturbing image they would see… Max knew that. It would only get worse. Kate and… Rachel, not to mention herself. She clenched her fists, feeling tears burn in her eyes. Her emotions began to overwhelm her, fear, rage, hatred… and so much more, all merging into one huge negative ball. The air sparked with electricity, the image distorting beyond recognition. Again, it seeped out into the real world, distorted whispers and still images flashing briefly, most likely from other timelines, for the group to see. It was a terrifying situation, the energy making the hairs on their arms stand on end, sending a shiver down their spines. If they looked close enough, they could see small tears materialize, bleeding time.

Before it could get any worse, Chloe put her hand on Max's shoulder squeezing hard to get her attention. Her voice wavered, scared for her friend. "Max… come on, now. Take a deep breath. Stay with me. Please."

That was enough to bring her back, the room gradually returning to its normal state. It was taking more and more effort to calm her down now. Would there be a time when, no matter what Chloe or any of them did, Max would lose it? Lose herself… Chloe just had to hope that time would never come.

Max reached up, shakily taking her hand. "Sorry, I'm… okay now. Relatively speaking."

Chloe didn't push the issue, instead nodding. For now, this was all she could do. Focusing once again, Max resumed the screen, swiftly moving forward to bypass seeing that picture again. If she continued the way she was going, she might not be able to bring herself back under control. She had to stay calm and focused… even if it was hard.

Shutting the drawer quickly, looking ill from her discovery, Max continued more cautiously. Everything she found after that only added to her theory that Nathan needed help, badly. It was then she noticed the weird scratch marks on the floor near the couch. What the hell are all those marks on the floor? Let's find out what you're hiding. Max moved the couch, finding a plastic wallet taped to the back. Oh yes, little phone, you are mine now. Pocketing it, she made a swift exit. She didn't want to be in here for any longer than she had to be.

Looking relieved now she was back, Chloe approached her. "Damn, Max, you're finally back. I got worried. So what did you find?"

"His room was clean and creepy." She retrieved the wallet from her pocket, showing Chloe what she had found. "Check this out…"

Chloe examined the wallet, seeing the phone inside. "Boom, Nathan. We got you by the balls, fucker."

Before they could celebrate, the door to the boys' dorm opened and Nathan stepped into the hallway. When he saw the two girls, he scowled. "What are you doing in my dorm?" Chloe backed away as he approached, looking scared. "You're such a nosy bitch, Max!"

The group froze instantly. This was the last thing Max and Chloe needed now. Or ever. Nathan had acquired a whole new level of creepy and dangerous after the picture and hidden phone. About a third of the group wanted to smack him in the face, beat him to a pulp. Get some justice. The rest were scared for the two girls, wanting them to make a swift exit before the situation escalated.
"Stop right there, Nathan!" Max warned, not sounding too confident in herself.

"Make me, ho." Not letting him get any closer, Chloe held him back so he couldn't get to Max. Just then, someone else entered the fray, pushing Nathan back. It was Warren.

"Max, I got this," he reassured, taking up a battle stance.

"Get the fuck out of my face!" Sighing lightly, Warren headbutted him, groaning at the pain. Nathan fell to the floor, clutching his head. He reached towards the waistband of his pants, drawing out a gun. "You are so fucking dead…"

One step ahead of him, Warren kicked the gun out of his hand and descended on him, kicking as Nathan lashed back verbally.

As usual with decisions, the screen froze and two choices came up, **STAY OUT OF IT** or **STOP WARREN**

"No way are we helping that son of a bitch. He deserves this," Chloe hissed. There was no competition here.

Rachel nodded in agreement. "Couldn't agree more."

"Just wish I could do it myself," David growled, practically fuming.

Joyce glanced at him, sighing. "Normally, I don't advocate violence, but… he can't get away with this scot-free."

Vanessa took a moment to gather her thoughts before adding her opinion. "Agreed. That and he has a weapon. It's too dangerous to let him run around with that."

"No, he can't get away," Ryan mentioned with an eerie calmness. "He'd better prepare himself for more beatings when we get out of here…"

"Let's see how my fighting skills hold up," Warren muttered under his breath, hoping he didn't end up getting his ass handed to him. In the situation, he would definitely beat him black and blue.

"Not to say he doesn't deserve to be punished, but… should we really stoop to his level?" Kate asked hesitantly, realizing she was in the vast minority.

"I might not know Nathan as well as I thought I did, but this is bigger than him. I know it. Someone has to be manipulating him. Beating him up won't solve anything," Victoria stated. Yes, he needed to pay for what he had done, but this wasn't the way.

Taylor and Courtney remained silent, not knowing what to think. They had hung around Nathan long enough to know he had real issues.

With the votes cast, Max let the scene play out without intervention.

Max and Chloe watched as Warren went to town on Nathan. "You like to hurt people, huh? Like Max? Like Kate? Like me? Huh?" He knelt down and began punching his face. "Feel this, motherfucker!"

"Get… off me… Please… Please, stop!" Nathan sobbed, making Warren pause.
"He's down! Hey… come on…" Max hesitantly pulled him off the crying boy.

"Stop… sorry…" Nathan muttered as he cradled his head, curling up into a ball.

Chloe grabbed the gun before following. "Yes, we have to go!" As she was about to leave, she turned around to face him. "Who's the bitch now?"

"Chloe!" Max called out, desperate to leave. Damn, Warren went full alpha on Nathan… and it was good. But scary…

Something about seeing Nathan, balled up, crying and begging for the beatdown to stop, made some of the group feel a flicker of sympathy. Not much, but some. Clearly, he was totally messed up and needed serious help. That didn't mean he got a free pass, it just made the situation even sadder. Some of them felt no sympathy at all, David and Chloe included. He could rot in hell for all they cared.

Max felt conflicted. She knew the wider picture, that Nathan was being manipulated, but couldn't forgive him for his involvement. No way, no how. Still… after hearing that voicemail he left, apologizing and warning her, she couldn't bring herself to write him off completely. As much as she might want to. It was… complicated. Like everything in her life now.

The scene shifted, showing the three of them out near the front of Blackwell. After having a brief discussion about what happened with Nathan, Warren left them to it. Shortly after, Chloe arranged a meeting with Frank, she and Max making their next move.

Chapter End Notes

We're slowly getting to the really nitty gritty stuff. Have an awesome day and see you next time.
Chapter Fifteen: Dark Room, Part 3

In the aftermath of the fight, Rachel seemed mildly impressed. "Not bad, Warren, not bad at all."

"You really gave it to that bastard," Chloe added, thankful that the fight had ended as well as could be expected. Nobody died, so that was progress.

"Well, why do you think superheroes are nearly always the nerdy guys? We have secret ninja skills," Warren posed, glad that he didn't get his ass handed to him. That would have been… embarrassing to say the least.

The bluenette shook her head, smirking as she corrected him. "Wish fulfillment more like."

Instead of trying to argue, he simply shrugged. "Touche."

Max turned to him with a small, appreciative smile. "You really did save our asses there, Warren."

"I coulda taken him," Chloe announced cockily. Whenever Max praised Warren like that, it made her feel weird. Maybe jealous was the right term to use. She didn't like it, especially knowing how Warren felt or had felt at least. He didn't even know Max anymore, but still… knowing that he could made her anxious and frustrated. She always had been overprotective of Max. That much didn't seem to have changed despite the five years apart.

"She does have a pretty hard swing if you piss her off," Rachel agreed, having been on the receiving end a couple of times when their play fights overstepped the 'play' part.

"I'm sure you could. Best never to have to find out." The last thing Max wanted was to put Chloe in more danger. She had already been in more than her fair share.

The next image on screen was a disturbing one, several beached whales strewn across the shore. Chloe's truck pulled into the entrance of the parking lot, keeping its distance from Frank's RV. Chloe and Max sat in the truck, taking a breather.

"I don't know if this meeting with Frank is such a good idea…” Joyce sighed, certain that by the end of this, she would have at least a few more wrinkles and gray hairs. It was like witnessing a slow-motion train wreck, unable to prevent it, only watch.

"Me neither," Vanessa agreed. Both her daughter and Chloe had put themselves in too much danger, whether purposefully or not, over these few days. That danger only seemed to get worse the deeper they dug. It was hard to imagine how it could get any worse from this point, but she suspected it would given the trajectory it had already followed and how hard her daughter was
pushing herself to show them.

"Has any idea we've seen so far turned out good?" Warren asked, already knowing the answer was an irrevocable 'no'.

"That's what I've been saying. Or trying to," Victoria stated matter-of-factly. While she didn't like Rachel or Chloe, understatement of the year, and she had seemed to make an enemy of Max at some point for whatever reason, none of them deserve this. In fact, she was struggling to find even one person who would.

That earned her a slight smirk from Rachel. "I dunno, the Vortex Club comes up with some pretty stupid ideas sometimes."

The Queen Bee opened her mouth to protest, realizing it was pointless. "Guess I won't argue there."

Taylor seemed shocked by the admission. "Well, I think that's the first time I've seen you agree with Rachel."

"Yeah, are you feeling okay?" Courtney asked, trying her best to sound serious and not laugh.

Victoria shrugged, tired of fighting. She just wanted to get through this as quickly as possible. "No point in arguing with the truth."

"I'm sure you can guess how I feel about Frank." Ryan's jaw clenched as he spat out these next few words. Not only had he threatened Chloe with a knife, which was enough reason to hate him, but he had also pointed the blade at his daughter. While Nathan was still at the top of his hit list, Frank was a close second.

"Frank is a drug dealer and dangerous," David grumbled to himself, not happy with the outcome at all. Sure, he wasn't perfect… far from it, but he only wanted to keep Chloe out of trouble. Going to see someone like Frank was asking for trouble, whatever the reason. He could hardly be considered reasonable, especially where money was involved.

"No offense, David, but you think everyone's dangerous. And doing or dealing drugs," Chloe pointed out, leaning back in her chair and crossing her arms. "Not saying Frank's not, you're right this time, but you do accuse like everyone."

"Well, I think nine times out of ten I'm right to be suspicious. As we've seen." He glanced over at Kate apologetically. Suspecting everyone wasn't the best way forward, but it was the only one he had trusted. "I'm not right every time, though."

Kate offered him an understanding smile, not holding it against him. She truly believed he was trying to help, but finding it difficult. His methods were… heavy handed and intense. Still, that was just one side of him. That much she was certain of. People were not so simple, equal parts bad and good. They all had flaws and all made mistakes. Anyone who believed differently was delusional, lying to themselves. Nobody was perfect… as much as they might like to proclaim it. She was sure they would see David's redeeming qualities sooner or later. If he was really all that bad, Max wouldn't have invited him along to this. Presumably, that was why she hadn't brought Nathan or Frank. They would cause way too many issues among the group going forward and/or be dangerous, Nathan particularly.

While Rachel knew a different side of Frank, she also knew his aggressive, violent nature. She didn't scare easily, but his behavior did frighten her sometimes. It was why she had left him in the
Max frowned at the sight, looking distressed. "God… I hate seeing those poor whales like that."

"Not ominous at all… guess Doomsday really is upon us." Rachel shot a sideways glance at Kate, winking when their eyes met.

Kate shook her head, suppressing a smile. "I assume that was supposed to be a joke at my expense."

Eager to tease, Rachel put on her best expression of offense. "Perish the thought. You wound me with such accusations."

"Uh-huh." Kate wasn't fooled by the overacting. "Believe me, this is hardly what people at my church would be expecting. Not enough fire."

Happy to see her joining in the mockery, Rachel shifted back to her resting smirk. "I already know I've got a one-way ticket to the eternal barbecue party."

"I don't think I've ever heard it called that before," Kate chuckled, finding the whole concept oddly amusing despite the morbidity.

Despite the humor, everyone did have to wonder how serious this all was. Dead, beached whales were not normal under any circumstances. It was a sign, a very ominous one at that. Coupled with the freak weather and the visions of a huge storm, it was something that couldn't be ignored. Was it all down to Max's powers or was there something larger at play? Even Max herself didn't know the answer to that. She was sure her power usage had something to do with it at the very least. Why had she been given these powers? Surely, there had to be a reason of some sort. Given the resistance, saving Chloe wasn't on the agenda. Not that she cared. That particular goal was happening regardless. Still, she had to wonder. She knew next to nothing about her powers, using trial and error to figure it all out. Even if it didn't matter in the end, she found herself curious. That was just her nature. Not just her, anyone would be questioning.

Chloe's expression turned distant and her voice soft as she looked at them too. "Me too. I just think of their families in the ocean out there looking for them… Well, that asshole is going to help us find Rachel. You know what would be great? If I still had a gun."

"Yes, the chance for gunplay would only just about even the odds here," Max retorted sarcastically.

"Frank would scare better. He's a pussy." The bluenette turned to her, hopeful. "Besides, If I take him out, you can just rewind…"

"Chloe, do not count on my rewind… seriously," Max warned, having seen time and time again that she could trust on her power's consistency. "After Kate, I feel like every time I do it might be the last..."

"There was no way we could have guessed this is what would happen to us when we grew up," Chloe mumbled sadly.

Max nodded solemnly before a slight smile finally tugged at her lips. "I'm looking forward to the day when we can just go on a road trip to Portland."
That possibility seemed to excite her friend. "Fuck yeah. You, me…" she hesitated, expression reflecting her inner pain, "and Rachel."

Given the morbid, ominous nature of their experience so far, everyone had begun wondering whether they would actually find Rachel in the end… and if they did, well, the outlook was bleak. They remained hopeful for a happy ending, but it didn't seem to be one of those fairy tales where everyone lived happily ever after. Even Rachel herself had to wonder. She had made a lot of stupid, impulsive moves in her life that could have potentially led her to danger. Maybe her luck had finally run out.

Joyce knew Rachel and, despite recent events, believed she was still a good kid if a little misguided. Just like Chloe. She didn't know much about the girl's past, Rachel kept her personal life very quiet, but it was clear to see that she hadn't had it easy. It wasn't an excuse for her behavior, it never was. Again, same with her daughter. Still, she couldn't help but feel sorry for her, a little angry too because of what she had done, but mostly sorry. Before now, she had been the only person Chloe had properly connected with after Max left. Sure, they had done some very questionable things together, but at least it had kept Chloe going.

As for David, he knew Rachel was a trouble maker. He hadn't liked her from the second she came into Chloe's life, saw her as a bad influence. While that might have been true to some degree, he wanted her to be found safe and sound. In all likelihood, they would either never find Rachel or, well... find her dead. That was how these situations usually played out. Considering that Max had traveled back to before Rachel went missing did not bode well.

While Chloe was still angry at Rachel, she still cared. She couldn't help it. Rachel had been there for her when nobody else had. It was… complicated. She couldn't just forget how she felt like that. Equally, she couldn't just forgive her. These were thoughts for later. However she felt about Rachel now, she didn't want to find her… know that she had… that something really bad had happened to her. Whatever timeline it was in.

"Absolutely. So let's play this cool, okay? Just talk to Frank so we can get that code for the book from him. That's all," Max outlined, wanting to keep them on track. They didn't need more trouble.

"Got it. No dicking around," Chloe reaffirmed with her usual degree of eloquence. None.

"Let's roll."

They both got out of the truck and approached the RV. When they got there, Max motioned her head towards the door and Chloe knocked. Frank came out, not looking all that happy to see them both, even less so when he realized they didn't have the promised money. Whatever happened, they needed Frank’s client list to help them find Rachel. Their conversation with him went… badly at first. Tiptoeing around information turned out to be a lot harder than Max first thought. With Frank and Chloe both just waiting for a fight, keeping the peace was difficult, her initial attempts ending in injury. After numerous rewinds, she got it right. Frank handed over his client list, not to mention giving back David's gun, and seemed to actually be on their side.

That was cool Frank gave up the code to help us. Rachel must have seen something good in him.

"Well, that went about as well as was to be expected," Warren admitted as he let out a sigh of relief. "Maybe a little better by the end."
"You sure have a way with people, don't you, Chloe?" Rachel asked, deciding to push her luck a bit. She suspected Chloe was still pissed off, and rightly so, but leaving her to her own thoughts wasn't generally the best thing to do.

Taylor glanced over at her. "That's one way of putting it."

"Sure is," Courtney agreed, glad to see it ended relatively peacefully.

"Ah, shut up…" Chloe muttered, too exhausted to argue properly. She was more focused on battling her conflicting feelings about the whole 'Frank and Rachel' situation. There was a lot to work out still, but she had to keep herself on track. Right now, Max and this weird rewind experience should be her main concern.

Rachel looked over at the young time traveler, smiling. "Good thing Max here had her rewind on hand."

"Yeah…" Max knew her rewind had saved her ass more time than she could count, but the fix had only been temporary, leading to a much worse outcome in the end. Hopefully, that particular trend would stop this time around.

"Sure isn't something I would like to watch again," Joyce mumbled to herself, feeling very tense.

Vanessa nodded in agreement, feeling herself age by the minute from all the stress and worry. "You and me both."

"Make that three," Ryan added with a drawn out sigh.

Even though the group didn't trust Frank, they had seen a slightly different side of him in the last rewind. He did care about Rachel, that much was obvious, so much that he was willing to risk his income. Giving away his client's identity was no small gesture. He was putting a lot of faith in two teenagers he knew very little about and clearly didn't trust. Sure, he was a drug dealer and had an explosive temper, but he could be reasoned with when treated like a human being instead of a criminal. Despite the bad first impressions, he wasn't as bad as all that. Most of it was just posturing for intimidation purposes. In his line of work, he needed to be like that. Didn't make it right, but he didn't go out of his way to hurt people. Only if they actually hurt him or someone he cared about, like Pompidou. Kind of like Max. Normally, she wouldn't hurt a fly, but when pushed she would unleash all hell on whoever threatened her or her friends.

The screen transitioned to its usual black, showing the drawing board in Chloe's room filled with tidbits of information when the picture returned. Things she had acquired from David, Nathan, and Frank. After some time and thought, Max managed to pinpoint a possible location of interest. An old barn.

Max moved over to the desk with the picture they had printed out earlier from David's coordinates. "Chloe, this is definitely the place."

"Let me dig up some more clues here." After typing away for a few seconds, Chloe leaned back and sighed tiredly. "Nope… Nothing, Max. There's nothing here. Just some shitty old barn…"

"Let's keep searching and find out who owns this haunted barn," the young time traveler insisted.
"I'm on this, hold on." Some time later, she came up with a name. "Somebody named 'Harry Aaron Prescott'."

(something about Prescott link/the barn as a location in general. Shady as hell. There is no way this can be good under any circumstances)

Rachel wasn't even surprised when she heard the name. "Didn't see that one coming."

"Shocking," Warren mumbled under his breath.

Kate stared at the picture, feeling a shiver run down her spine. "This probably isn't going to end well, is it?"

"A shady ass barn way out from town... sounds delightful." Chloe shook her head. Prescotts plus a creepy old barn equaled trouble. You didn't have to be a genius to work that one out.

Ryan frowned at the name and picture. "The Prescotts were part of the reason we left Arcadia. Figures they have something to do with... whatever the hell's going on."

"They certainly have a lot of connections to this," Joyce mentioned sadly. Over the years, the Prescotts power and influence had increased ten fold. She wouldn't be surprised if they were up to something dodgy. Unfortunately, Max and Chloe had gotten caught up right in the middle of it.

Vanessa looked over at her daughter, worried by how quiet and stiff she was being, like she was frozen by fear. "People like them often do."

Victoria was confused by the discovery. She wasn't even aware Nathan's family owned a barn. Hell, if she had it'd probably have been turned into a Vortex Club party setting. Maybe Nathan didn't know... or maybe he did and was heavily connected to all of than he already seemed to be. That was the more worrying scenario. Taylor and Courtney exchanged worried glances, not looking forward to what they were about to see. No doubt it would be messed up, just as everything else they had seen was. Question was, could it get any worse? The barn looked like something out of a horror film, so the answer was probably yes.

Max swallowed hard. This was it. She didn't want to ever see the fucked up bunker ever again... but she didn't have a choice. She took a moment to steady her breathing, doing her best to prevent any emotional interference on screen. Best to get this over with as quickly as possible.

**The Prescott link clearly didn't surprise Max. "I'm shocked. Should we call the police?"**

Chloe shook her head adamantly. "Fuck that. You know the police here are like Nathan's private security, right?"

"That's so messed up..." Max muttered to herself.

"As you've noticed, this whole town is messed up," Chloe pointed out. "We can't trust anybody... Except each other. So we have to go out to that farmhouse by ourselves."

"I was afraid you would say that. We could call Warren, since he kicked Nathan's ass..." Max suggested, obviously worried about going in on their own.

Again, Chloe immediately shot her down. "It's just the two of us. Nobody else. And I'm not scared at all. You have the power. I feel like we're this close to finding Rachel... We have to find her, Max."
"We will. But remember, my power isn't infinite. We still have to be careful. Do you hear, Chloe?" Max cautioned, very aware of her limits by now.

"Yes, sir."

Warren scratched his head. "You guys sure don't trust the ABPD. Guess I can't blame you, but…"

"Would they really ignore something like this?" Kate finished his sentence, seriously wondering. Admittedly, the Prescotts had gotten away with a lot, Nathan in particular, but these were more minor misdemeanors… besides the gun incident at the beginning. That resistance had come from Blackwell more than the police. Whatever was going on here, it was clearly serious, most probably linked to Rachel's disappearance. Could they really just push this aside?

Rachel shrugged, knowing that Nathan had gotten away with a lot before now. This would probably turn out to be a more serious charge against than Nathan acting out in class, but she wasn't optimistic about the local police's willingness to press more serious charges made against his family. "Probably, especially if the Prescotts are involved."

"They're too busy arresting drunk teens for vandalism and following up on unpaid parking tickets to care about the important shit," Chloe added bitterly, drawing on her own experiences.

Joyce sighed deeply, noticing the parallel. "Sounds painfully familiar."

"If something really bad is going on, they can't ignore it," Ryan stated, unwilling to believe that all this wouldn't be taken seriously. He needed to believe in something now. "They just… can't. No matter how powerful the Prescotts are. Somewhere along the chain of power, higher than the local police."

"You'd hope so," Vanessa added softly, not so convinced.

"There are other places to turn, even if they aren't obvious or preferable." However much prejudice David had against Max or Chloe by this point, he would have taken their plea for help seriously. It was probably safe to assume that he knew something was going on given his excessive behavior during the week.

Looking back, Max realized that they should have told someone. It would have been difficult of course. They couldn't prove much, and whatever they could prove was related to her powers. Again, difficult verging on impossible to prove. Still, as she had seen for herself, David was more than ready to move on Jefferson and took her warning seriously when she had the chance to go back after the Dark Room. Most of his hostile behavior could be linked to his investigations into Rachel's disappearance and everything related to the incident. If only she had listened to her gut instinct…

When the screen transition ended, it showed Chloe's truck pulling up outside the creepy, dilapidated barn. They stepped out and approached the front doors.

"Holy shit, this is scary," Max all but whispered.

"I know," Chloe agreed just as quietly, "but we're here. Let's go find the best way in."

Max crouched down, inspecting the ground outside the door, running her hand along the indentations. "Whoa, check this out. Fresh tire tracks.

Chloe joined her, getting a closer look. "Dude, somebody was just here."
"Then we need to get in that barn..." Max affirmed as she took a step back.

Rattling the lock a few times, Chloe frowned and began investigating the front of the barn. *Chloe is so damn fearless... Where does that come from?* Leaving her to it, Max walked around to the side of the barn and found a loose panel. Chloe came up behind her to investigate the noise, following her inside. "Oh yes! Maximus rules!"

"God this is way too Blair Witch... I have goosebumps all over," Max mumbled as she examined the barn's interior. The creaky wooden floor was covered in straw and an abandoned tractor sat to their right. Light seeped through a broken window at the top of the barn, not doing much to illuminate up the otherwise dim area.

Warren inspected the barn carefully, the creepy setting all too familiar. "I can think of at least ten other horror/thriller films this vibe reminds me of easily, but I'll spare you the details. Bottom line, they never end well. Basic plot line of every horror movie ever."

Rachel smirked at him, a hint of sarcasm in her response. "Thanks for the insight."

He returned the grin, taking no offense. "Knew my extensive movie knowledge would come in handy sometime."

Kate didn't like horror at the best of times, especially in real life. Everything about this place screamed bad news. She wasn't the only one to think that.

"Didn't even know this barn was here," Ryan muttered to himself. It looked extremely old, so would have been around when he and his family still lived in Arcadia. As for how long it had been abandoned, he had no idea. It could have easily been left for five years, maybe even longer. If it actually *had* been abandoned, that was.

Joyce too had never even heard of the barn. "You're not the only one. Guess that's the point."

"Arcadia has always had its fair share of abandoned buildings. More so now than ever," Vanessa commented thoughtfully, wondering just how many places in Arcadia remained in a state of ruin. Given the Prescotts effort to buy and renovate land, she would guess enough to make a sizable profit.

Max felt her heart rate increase significantly, panic threatening to cloud her mind. Somehow, she managed to keep it under control, for the most part, the screen flickering and distorting just a small amount. It took a lot of effort to keep herself relatively calm. For now, she focused on her breathing. In and out, slowly and deeply.

While Chloe began searching through an old, rusted chest filled with tons of references to the Prescotts various 'achievements', Max began searching the rest of the barn. As she walked over to one of the farthest corners, she heard the wooden floorboard creak underneath her foot. She stared at the spot curiously, moving the straw away. Something seemed to be buried underneath. Once the straw has been removed, a padlocked trapdoor came into view. *Whoa, what is this? It's totally brand new. Why?*

She looked to her left and saw a hook hanging on a piece of rope. Her eyes followed the rope up to the rafters. Quickly attaching one end to the lock, she moved over towards some wooden platforms. "Chloe, can you give me a hand?"

"Sidekick at your service!" Chloe made a basket with her hands for Max's foot, boosting her
"Up, up and away, Super Max."

Max clambered up onto the platform, turning around to look down at her friend. "I dig having minions."

Noticing an old motor, Max pulled it down and used it to get to the top, using her rewind powers to get it back up. She attached the end of the rope to the motor, then gave it a good hard shove off the rafters. A loud clang indicated that the lock had been broken. Sure enough, it now hung suspended in the air on the other end of the rope. Satisfied, Max made her way back down to the floor.

She approached the hatch, grabbing it with her fingertips. "Damn, this is heavy…"

Chloe crouched down beside her, helping to lift the heavy hatch up. What the hatch revealed was a set of stairs leading down to a huge safe-style door.

Taylor shivered at the sight of the door. "First a creepy barn, then a trap door and now a safe door? Doesn't look good."

"I second that observation," Courtney agreed, feeling just as creeped out by the weird setup. Things just kept getting stranger and stranger. She wasn't sure how much weirder it could get. They were about to find out.

"Definitely shouldn't be there. That's for sure." Warren really hoped this wouldn't turn into a horror show. Anything could be behind that door, all manner of messed up things. He had seen enough in films and had quite an active imagination.

"I don't even want to think about what's behind that door…" Kate mentioned softly, feeling genuinely scared and worried. This place felt evil. Even though she wasn't actually there, it gave off a bone-chilling aura. More of a serial killer's den than Nathan's room.

Joyce could feel the tense anxiety in the room rising by the second. "Nothing good, surely."

Victoria stared at the door, not ready to see what was hidden inside. "I doubt it."

"I would bet on it, but I don't think anyone here is stupid enough to take me up on it. Well..." In an attempt to lighten the mood, she glanced over at Victoria. They could all do with a distraction right now and light teasing would do the trick.

"Don't even think about looking at me," Victoria warned, not as viciously as she might have before.

Rachel held up her hand. "I wasn't. Promise."

"Arcadia's full of secrets. So are the people," David mumbled to himself.

Chloe glanced over at Max, who had been suspiciously silent for a while. There was something off about her behavior now, like she was expecting something awful. The slight glitches on screen were proof enough of that. She was clearly struggling to keep going, battling against her emotions. Sensing the worst was about to hit, Chloe gently placed her hand over Max's clenched fist, trying to get her to relax a little, to comfort her. Max's blue eyes darted over to her, filled with fear. She couldn't hide it. No matter how hard she tried. Having Chloe there, knowing that she was actually safe helped a little, but she was still terrified. It wasn't just facing the Dark Room again… it was more than that. So much more...
"What… is this?" The bluenette asked as she took a step back.

"Jackpot. Do I even need to say how weird this is?"

Moving to the top of the stairs, Chloe looked down. "You just did. Who built this kind of place?"

"A Prescott, of course," Max answered, cautiously following her down.

When they got to the door, they realized there was a keypad beside the door, some of the numbers worn down. Remembering a scrap of paper covered in numbers she had gotten from Nathan's room and hadn't used, Max took it out of her bag and punched in the numbers. The light at the bottom turned green and the door unlocked. Max turned the wheels and pulled on the huge metal handle. Cautiously, the pair took the last step inside the bunker.

Max winced, pushing back the awful memories related to this messed up bunker, trying to stay in her role as a passive observer than a horrified participant. What she and Chloe found there had changed… everything.

Chapter End Notes

What, you thought we'd be covering the actual Dark Room stuff this chapter? Cliffhangers are the way to go. Have a great day and see you next time for the Dark Room episode's finale.
Hey guys, welcome back. Got this one done way quicker than expected so here ya go. Kinda overestimated how long the rest would take. This one's fairly reaction heavy, so it's HUGE.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Sixteen: Dark Room, Part 4

The group collectively held their breath without even realizing it as Max and Chloe entered the bunker below the barn. If it wasn’t already creepy enough… As a rule, underground bunkers hidden in the underbelly of an abandoned building far away from people spelled danger, and lots of it. It didn’t take Warren, who had seen pretty much every movie under the sun, to tell them that. If this was a horror film, which it seemed to be turning out to be at this rate, Max and Chloe’s chance were pretty slim, both at finding good news and living to tell the tale. Whatever they found here, they all had a feeling it was going to be a big discovery. Whether it would be good or bad… that had yet to be seen. In all likelihood, it wasn’t going to be something to celebrate. Not with the way this had been going.

Kate shuddered involuntarily, getting a very bad vibe. She didn’t know why, maybe it was just a gut feeling. Admittedly, just the bunker’s existence was enough to get anyone suspicious. It was more than that, though. Like she knew something terrible would be uncovered. Could this, whatever it was, be related to her attempted suicide? If that was the case… she wasn’t very optimistic. If it wasn’t related, why would Max show them? She wasn’t the only one. Victoria too felt particularly freaked out by the bunker. Again, she didn’t have much reason to yet beyond speculation, but she was almost certain they would see something truly terrifying down here. Taylor and Courtney could feel it too, although not as strongly. They had never seen Victoria look so rattled before. Normally, she could keep her composure in the face of fear. Now was different.

Joyce didn’t say a word, watching them descend into the unknown. If it had been her in either of their shoes, she wasn’t sure if she could venture down… and maybe that would be for the best. David’s jaw clenched, hands balling up into fists and shoulders tensing. Everything about this was suspicious as hell. He didn’t like it at all. Just thinking that both Max and Chloe had gone down there on their own… Ryan was just as tense, both not wanting to watch and being unable to tear his eyes away from the screen. God only knew what was down there. As for Vanessa, she just felt helpless. She wanted to climb into the screen and drag them both out of there, get them to safety. Unfortunately, that was impossible. To think that Max had put herself in such great danger, and Chloe too, was a bitter pill to swallow. More so when she remembered that her daughter could remember it as clear as day.

Just like Kate and Victoria, Rachel felt extremely uneasy about seeing the bunker. Surely, this would have something to do with her disappearance. The way Max was avoiding eye contact with everyone now and trying hard to keep herself from hyperventilating seemed to prove that. While she had no real clue of how long this all would last, they must be getting to the end fairly soon. This all felt so… final. Chloe too wanted to just get up out of her seat and leave, the hairs on the back of her neck standing on end. The bunker reeked of evil intentions. Was this Nathan’s hiding
place? Where he did all the really fucked up shit… Had he done something to Rachel here? The unanswered questions were driving her crazy.

The only person knowing what was really going on was Max and she was barely keeping it together. A few more step, just a few more, and she would have to face… the Dark Room all over again, relive the horrors kept within. Could she actually do this? No, it wasn't a matter of whether she could or not, she had to do this. Everything had been leading up to this moment. From here on out, the group would see the truth and nothing but. The cold, hard, bitter reality that she had saved them from… well, for the time being at least.

"Stocked and ready for the apocalypse. This must have cost a fortune. Come on." Chloe headed into the other part of the room, one separated by an open curtain.

To the right lined against the wall were shelves stocked up with cans, water, and other food. Straight ahead was a sink, on the edge a note about Nathan's deteriorating state of mind. Max followed Chloe into the larger section of the bunker. Creepy pictures lined the walls, a white photo backdrop and various photography equipment positioned on the far left wall. A couch was placed near the middle of the room, a familiar red jacket belonging to Nathan on the end. Directly opposite the curtains was a desk with a computer, behind that on the opposite wall a cupboard. On a smaller desk in the far right corner was a receipt for the bunker, signed by Sean Prescott.

This really didn't surprise anyone by this point. It was obvious that the Prescotts were involved in some way, whether just Nathan, just his father or the both of them. What were they trying to achieve? Were they behind all this? Kidnapping Rachel, drugging Kate… and god knew what else. Why? Maybe there wasn't a reason. Definitely not one that justified whatever was happening down here. Were others involved? It wasn't beyond the realms of possibility. There could be a whole group of people doing… extremely creepy things down here. As history had shown, people could be cruel, merciless, and unsympathetic, only worried about themselves and their own gratification. Trying to rationalize any of this was next to impossible. You just couldn't apply logic to some situations, this being one of them.

Max knew what they all must be thinking now. This seemed to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that the Prescotts were the mastermind behind all the awful events. Sure, they were involved, very heavily in Nathan's case, but they weren't the only ones. The identity of the real villain behind all of this would become apparent soon… but not soon enough. Her hands shaking, Max clenched them in an attempt to keep herself steady. Now was probably the worst time to lose it. This was important, no crucial. They needed to see this to understand, to feel what she felt and know the real danger lurking just under the surface. She could remember exactly how she felt by now, her stomach doing somersaults and heart beating so rapidly. This next part would be… had been one of the worst discoveries she had ever made, if not the worst given what it had led to. The thread that tied everything together. Rachel, Kate, Chloe and herself most of all.

Only, she was the only one who could remember it...

The cupboard behind the computer desk caught Max's attention. She approached it, opening the door to find a bunch of red binders. There must be at least twenty, all with different names scrawled down the side. Three, in particular, stood out on the second shelf. Victoria, Kate, and Rachel. Taking them out, Max placed them on the desk behind her.

"Come on, let's see what this shit is all about." Chloe came over to see what her friend had found.
Swallowing heard, Max examined the first binder. "We are. Okay, a binder marked 'Victoria,' but it's empty..."

"What the...?" Victoria's question was swallowed by the silence, words failing her.

It seemed her gut feeling was justified. What was supposed to be in that empty binder? She almost didn't want to know, especially considering how Rachel and Kate also had a file dedicated to them. Although, she found it difficult to really connect them all together aside from just being in Jefferson's class at one time or another. Their personalities were all vastly different, especially where Kate was concerned. Rachel was the 'perfect student' but had her secrets, Kate was pretty much the polar opposite as far as bad girl behavior went, while Victoria herself was more of a Queen Bee. Looks wise, there were some minor similarities. All had blonde hair of varying lengths, Rachel and Kate shared an eye color and they were all different heights, Victoria in particular. In short, there was very little connecting them together apart from Blackwell.

Taylor's eyes widened when she saw the photo with Victoria's name on it while Courtney's jaw dropped slightly. This was beyond weird and creepy. Why would Victoria be here? As far as they had seen, she had little to no connection to the other two girls. Even Rachel and Kate had literally nothing in common, having never met or even attended Blackwell at the same time. Victoria and Rachel had more of a connection, be it a hostile one. Just how did they all fit into this? Was Blackwell the key? If so, how?

The binder with her name on it didn't do anything to ease Kate's worries... or Rachel's for that matter. One of them had been drugged and the other had gone missing entirely. Add in a creepy underground bunker and an unstable, entitled rich kid into the mix... Chloe's eyes focused on Rachel's binder, dread flooding her body. As much as she might be angry at the blonde now, she didn't want anything bad to happen to her. Far from it. None of them did. She tried to catch Max's eye, figure out if she should be expecting the worst. The young time traveler didn't look away from the screen even one, frozen with fear and completely unresponsive. She knew... she knew what was coming. It made her feel sick to her stomach, more than it had before, now that she had the whole picture. The binders alone had been enough, knowing who was behind them... made it so much worse. Trying not to think about that, Max instead focused on keeping herself calm. She didn't need her emotions interfering now... easier said than done.

"Look, the next one says 'Kate'," the bluenette pointed out.

Max brought her hand to her mouth, eyes wide with shock and fear. "Oh no, Kate... No..." The open binder contained all kinds of creepy, sick and twisted photos of Kate looking totally out of it, positioned for the shots.

Nobody knew how to react to this, let alone how to think. They had expected something messed up, but this was... beyond comprehension. All they could do was look on in horror at the photos. Poor Kate couldn't have prepared herself for what she saw, her fear that this would be related to the Vortex Club party coming to life before her eyes. She just sat there, unable to look away. Her own personalized horror show. One small mercy, she looked totally out of it and had no idea what was happening at the time or after as they had seen, although that was very little consolation. Even though she hadn't personally experienced this, it hit her hard.

Victoria's stomach dropped as she took in the photos. Not only did it seem like she would be next on the list, it made her merciless tormenting Kate even worse when it had been bad enough to begin with. If she had known... but she hadn't. That shouldn't be the qualifier for whether or not she bullied someone. Taylor swallowed hard, trying not to break down right then and there. She didn't even know Kate all that well, but it would take a heartless person not to feel sympathy for
her and disgust at it ever having happened. Courtney had looked away a long time ago, not wanting to see the terrifying images any longer. She couldn't.

The adults of the group were just as shocked, both David and Ryan being on the angrier side of the spectrum. For something like this to go on in Arcadia Bay, right under everyone's noses, was appalling. There was no excuse. How many binders were there? Way more than there should be. Before Kate, before Rachel… This had been going on for a while now. How long… they had no real clue. Subjecting one person to this treatment was already too much, and the files were easily in double digits. Joyce had lived in Arcadia for so long now, considered it home. This had been happening without anyone stopping it. Surely, someone must have known about it besides the Prescotts somewhere down the line. Max had found the dark room, given she had her power to rely on, but even so… it hadn't been that hard to track it down. Kate hadn't been the first, so what about all these other poor girls? Did the ABPD know? If they did… well, that meant the Prescotts had paid to keep them quiet. Vanessa was also thinking along similar lines, hoping it wasn't true. She could maybe understand them being bribed for minor crimes, keeping Nathan's record clean, but this wasn't minor.

Warren's mind ran at a million miles an hour, trying to understand what he was seeing. He looked around the room, everyone looking as shocked as he felt. Well, everyone except Max. Of course, she had known this would happen. She had seen it all before. Even though she had experienced this already, it didn't lessen the impact of seeing Kate, someone she had and still did consider a friend, like this… She managed to steel her resolve and glance over at Kate, her heart dropping when she saw the other girl's expression. Guilt flooded her mind. She would never be able to apologize enough. Ever.

Rachel shifted uncomfortably in her seat, trying to prepare herself for a similar show. She had to wonder whether Nathan would actually do this. If her own folder was the same as Kate's, she just couldn't believe it. She got on well enough with Nathan like she did with everyone. He seemed to like her, one way or another, so why would he do something like this? Was someone forcing him, his father maybe? Given his emotional and mental state, he would most likely be susceptible to manipulation. Someone else had to be involved. That much she was sure of. As for Chloe, she felt fear and anger in equal measure. They had seen what Nathan was capable of, not above killing. If she ever saw him again… when she saw him, he would be sorry.

"God, I should have killed that bastard back there," Chloe growled, anger clouding every other emotion.

"Kate wasn't the first…" Max concluded solemnly, looking back at the countless red folders in the cupboard. "All those binders are filled with other victims. Victoria has to be next. Nathan must plan on drugging her at the party."

Chloe took the binder with Rachel's name on it, staring at it in fear as she opened it with trembling fingers. "Rachel…" She shook her head and backed away as she examined the photos. "This… this can't be real…" Turning to Max with desperation in her blue eyes as tears threaten to fall, she managed a shaking, "These are all… these are posed shots, right? Right?"

If Kate's photos had been bad, Rachel's were worse. She even seemed to be conscious for some of them, eyes full of rage and hatred for her kidnapper. Like a caged animal with nothing to lose. That last one was particularly harrowing, depicting her and Nathan laying on the ground in a misshapen T. Her limbs were positioned at awkward angles, head resting on his stomach. The dragon tattoo on her right calf was exposed. It was more than enough to make the group feel ill. This was beyond
sick. Nothing could ever justify it.

Rachel just stared at the photos, confused. None of this seemed real and she was sure Kate felt the same way. These shots really didn't look posed, even she wasn't that good an actress to convey such hatred and fear. That was all genuine. What the hell had she gotten herself into? What was worse, she recognized the setting of the last photo and she was sure Chloe did too… the junkyard. Somewhere they had both considered a sanctuary. She glanced over at the bluenette, seeing her expression shift from shock to confusion and finally… despair as the realization hit her. Chloe couldn't even think straight. Her onscreen counterpart was more desperate than she had ever seen herself be. It was painful to watch, especially knowing how this was probably all going to end...

As for Max… she was struggling to keep her cool. Seeing all this again was horrible. It had been bad enough before when she had been discovering it for the first time. These images had haunted her from that day forward, hounding her sleep. Now was worse because she was also subjecting the others to this… but they had to see it. Words wouldn't be enough. For this to work, they had to see what she saw, feel how she felt… as much as she would like to spare them.

As much as Max might want to agree, the confliction on her face was clear as day. "Chloe. Look at her face. She's… out of it."

She glanced back down at the pictures, then shook her head again and turned to Max, her voice wavering. "Maybe… maybe Nathan paid her a shitload of cash to do this. She probably would have." Chloe's eyes begged her, plead her to confirm her theory.

"I don't think so. Why is he putting her in the ground like that? Where…?" Max didn't get the chance to finish her sentence.

"The junkyard!" Chloe stated, her face dropped as the realization suddenly hit her. "Max, we have to find that spot, now! Then we can see what he did… There's no way she's dead. No way! She posed for those pictures, Max. I know, please… let's go."

Oh my God… Rachel… Kate… all these files…

The atmosphere had darkened considerably since the group had seen the photos… understandably so. Anyone would be disturbed by the images, and the implications they brought with them. Now, there was very little chance they would be seeing Rachel alive and well. They could cling to the thin shred of hope, but it would do them no good. No good whatsoever.

Max could sense it, sense their gradually fading optimism. She knew the sinking feeling all too well by now. Time and time again she had experienced it, each one more crushing than the last. This living nightmare was far from over for her.

Max ran out of the Dark Room, getting in Chloe's truck to go to the junkyard. When they got there, her friend all but jumped out and darted towards the main part of the junkyard.

"Chloe, slow down! Wait for me!" Max called after her, only just having gotten out of the truck.

"I know exactly where I'm going!" They sprinted to the other side of the junkyard near a rusted yellow school bus. "Look, this is it! This is it!" Chloe got down on her knees and beginning to shovel dirt with her hands. "Are you going to help me, Max?"

Without hesitation, Max joined in to help her move the dirt, slowing down after a few
moments when they uncovered something black. "Chloe, stop! Look!"

Chloe stared down at the hole they had begun to make, frozen to the spot. "Please, no…"

After digging a little longer, Max turned away in disgust. "That smell…"

Crawling closer to the hole on her hands and knees, Chloe on in horror. "Rachel…" Finally, she broke down completely. "Oh, Rachel, no, no! Please, not her!" She turned away, throwing up from both the smell and reality of the situation.

Max was at her side in an instant, taking hold of her so she was steady. "Chloe…"

"Rachel… why…?" The question remained unfinished and unanswered as Chloe shifted into a sitting position, knees up and head buried in her hand.

"I'm sorry, Chloe. I'm so sorry…" Not knowing what else to do, Max put her hands on her grieving friend's shoulders, trying to comfort her as best she could.

"I loved her so much… How can she be dead? What kind of world does this? Who does this?" Chloe's inconsolable sobs echoed around the junkyard.

The shot panned out, Chloe and Max in the distance. Gradually, the ghost doe from the other day came into view, watching over the scene.

There were no words. Nobody spoke or even dared to move, frozen to the spot. In such a short space of time, they had seen things no person should ever see… and Max had to watch them twice. She had given up trying to control herself, her best friend's sobs warped from emotional influence, the image discolored and disjointed by the end. Tears ran down her cheeks, flowing freely like waterfalls. She felt numb. Why had this happened to them? Hadn't they suffered enough by this point?

The Vortex Club trio was just as shocked and horrified as the rest of the group. Rachel had always managed to land on her feet, get her own way through clever manipulation and a well-timed smile. She had perfected the art, way surpassing even Victoria who prided herself on being able to get what she wanted, one way or another. These skills hadn't helped save her. Maybe they had only quickened her demise. Clearly, there was something sinister going on in Arcadia Bay and it didn't take drawing attention to yourself to get involved.

Ryan and Vanessa Caulfield watched on as the despair filled sobs echoed around the auditorium. This was… beyond sick. Taking pictures of drugged up victims, that was one thing, killing them and burying them in a junkyard of all places, that was something else entirely. How had this been allowed to happen? It should never have and yet, here they were watching the gruesome exhumation. Did the Prescotts really have that much power and influence, not to mention money, to cover all of this up? Were there really people willing to turn a blind eye to such a blatant crime, not just evading taxes or selling drugs, but murder? Which was worse, knowing that someone was messed up enough to do the crime… or that there might be someone in a position of trust and duty willing to give them a free pass? Both were grim prospects. It was made all the worse for them knowing that it had a direct effect on Chloe and by extension Max.

As for Kate, she couldn't even begin to comprehend what was going on right now. This experience was really testing her faith, more than anything ever had before. Life could be beautiful, she had seen that many time before. It could also be cruel, now she had experienced that darker side. Nature, people… they all had their light and dark. A peaceful ocean hit by the Golden Hour light
one moment, the next a raging sea of crashing waves as a tornado ripped through the waters. One person willing to risk life and limb to protect the person they care for versus one who leaves nothing but destruction in their wake… and that didn't necessarily have to be two different people. A single person could embody both. While Warren was as disturbed as the rest, he couldn't help but wonder about the ghost doe. They had seen it before, in the exact place Rachel had been buried if he remembered correctly. It had to mean something. A spirit guiding Max and Chloe to answers, to Rachel Amber.

Joyce hated all this, hated seeing her daughter cry so much, hated that she had to go through more emotional trauma than she already had. Same went for Max. The poor girl had suffered more than her fair share, still was. And Kate, Rachel… they had suffered too, paid the ultimate price in the latter girl's case, although Kate had come alarmingly close. David stiffened, watching his step-daughter break down. He had never seen her so distraught. She often hid her emotions, refusing to cry even when it was more than justifiable. That made this scene ten times more heartbreaking to watch. Did this timeline's version of him know what was going on? He seemed to be looking in all the right places, Kate, Rachel, Max, the Prescotts. David knew that when he got going, he was like a dog with a bone, refusing to let go.

It took a lot to leave Chloe Price speechless. She usually had some smart comment to make. Not now. This whole experience had completely reversed that tendency. It didn't even seem real, but it had been… or was for one version of herself. If Max hadn't intervened, this could have been her, this timeline's her anyway. She couldn't even think about that properly now, not with what was happening on screen. Rachel, the girl who had given her a reason to continue when things had turned to complete shit, had… died. No, been murdered. That was when she realized the tears rolling down her own cheeks, nowhere near as many as her on-screen counterpart, but more than had fallen in a long time. She didn't even bother wiping them away. Things with Rachel were complicated now to say the least, but Chloe still cared way too much.

Even though Rachel had been expecting something like this, it didn't help her deal with it. Of course, she did her best to hide the distress, it was a habit, second nature. Internally, she was freaking out. Anybody would in her position. Chloe must have felt like this too earlier on one of the many times she had seen herself so close to death. How had it come to this? Would they find out? Judging by Max's expression, she knew. She knew exactly how this had come about. Whatever the answer was, it seemed to make the reality of the situation much worse. Just what did she know?

After a couple of seconds, the spectral animal completely faded from existence along with the rest of the scene. When the picture came back on the screen, it showed Blackwell's parking lot. There were a few students dotted around, all drunk. Music blared from the pool building, the bassline easily heard in the night. Max and Chloe sat in the truck, tension high.

"I hope Nathan enjoys his last party," Chloe all but growled, vengeance on her mind.

"Chloe, we can go right to the cops. We have proof," Max suggested hesitantly.

"Fuck the police. Rachel wanted us to find her. So we could get real justice… and revenge. The Prescotts have had this coming for a hundred years, and nobody is going to get in my way." Chloe turned to her, pleading. "Especially with your help… right?"

Max reached over and put her hand on Chloe's shoulder. "I'm with you to the end, Chloe. You know that."

Grabbing David's gun, the bluenette got out of the truck and headed towards the pool
building with unwavering purpose.

Now that they had definitive proof, it would have been wiser to contact someone about this. If not the ABPD or Blackwell's staff, then higher. This wasn't just some play investigation now. It was serious. There had been at least one provable murder, countless kidnappings, and druggings, not to mention all the things the two girls had been through that Max had rewound on or couldn't be proven beyond a shadow of a doubt. A creepy underground bunker, messed up files containing pictures of a girl who could remember something had happened to her but not what and one who had disappeared off the face of the earth, almost definitely dead… nobody in their right mind could ignore that. All the evidence was there. Irrefutable. This investigation had already been too much for Max and Chloe to handle on their own, now they were in way over their heads. Chloe wanting revenge, that was understandable, but it also meant she wasn't thinking straight. As she was now, she was only putting herself in more danger. If Nathan had done all this, no all that hard to imagine by this point since they had watched him kill Chloe the first day and saw how unstable he was, confronting him like this was borderline suicidal. The universe seemed intent on bumping her off as it was, no need to tempt fate.

Looking up at the sky, Max did a double take when she saw not one, but two moons. "What is that? Jesus, Chloe, look up at the sky!"

Glancing up at the sky for a brief moment, Chloe paced purposefully towards the Vortex Club party. "Beautiful, I don't give a shit. The world is ending, cool."

Max grabbed onto her arm, stopping her from racing off ahead. "You're not listening. Something major is going down!"

"That's right. Nathan Prescott is going down," Chloe stated, brushing the hand off as she continued on her war path. On their way towards the Vortex Club party, Warren intersected them. His words were slurred like he had been drinking. Turned out he had been.

"Oh, man… this is embarrassing," Warren muttered to himself. He already knew he was a lightweight when it came to alcohol, but half a beer… that was plain humiliating. His pride was pretty insignificant now, he knew that, but it didn't stop him from feeling a little embarrassed.

Once he got over himself, he focused on the strange double moons. As did everyone else. This wasn't right. Just like the weird snowfall, the solar eclipse, and the foretold storm. What did it all mean? Were Max's powers messing up all the timelines? Or was this bigger than her? Either way was worrying. Time was breaking down around them.

When it came to light that he didn't know where Nathan was, Max went to leave only to be held back by Warren, wanting a photo. Frowning, Chloe stormed off towards the pool building. Giving him some reassurance and asking him to keep an eye out for Nathan, Max made it down the path to the party location. Stella was at the inside entrance, taking inventory. After asking her if she had seen Chloe, the answer being yes, Max finally entered the main section by the pool. Flashing lights, a thumping bassline, and people dancing. Checking in on a few people to ask if they had seen Nathan on the way, including saving Alyssa once again, she managed to get into the VIP section courtesy of Courtney.

It was strange to think that someone like Max might wrangle her way into the Vortex Club VIP section. Courtney wouldn't have even given her a second glance under normal circumstances. Max's power had given her the confidence and means to do what needed to be done. Made her more daring. It had started off slowly, but the rewind was gradually changing her. She was hardly
the shy hipster they had seen at the beginning of the week. The Max now in the room with them all was drastically different and they had seen her transformation, or some of it at least. Only the young time traveler knew the full story, how many times she had tried and failed to get it right. Would this be the last? She really hoped so. There wasn't much chance for another run the way things were going. Her body was already at breaking point and they hadn't even finished this. She saw this as a last ditch attempt to prevent the course of events that turn her world upside down, changed… everything she thought she knew. To be honest, her powers still were challenging her most core of beliefs even now. She had already lost so much of herself. How much more could she change?

Getting next to nothing from Hayden, who was off his head high, Max spotted Taylor again who didn't seem to know where the self-entitled bully was. Running out of options, she noticed Victoria standing near the makeshift bar. Swallowing her nerves, she approached her 'rival'.

Victoria scowled when she saw her, crossing her arms. "Sorry, Max. Vortex Club members only."

"Sorry, I'm on the guest list," the shy hipster shot back, standing her ground.

"I'm taking you off," the Queen Bee simply responded, flaunting her influence.

Sick of high school drama, Max laid into her. "Go fuck yourselfie, Victoria. I don't have time for this bullshit."

This was going about as well as they had expected, aka not well at all. Victoria always seemed to make the situation so much more difficult and Max didn't have the patience to entertain her. Not after what she had seen. If Victoria had known what was really going on at the time, there was no way she would have acted like this. Max was trying so hard to make things right for everyone and, while that was impossible, at least she was giving it a shot. She didn't have to talk to Victoria now, she could have just walked on. Some people might have, even knowing that the blonde might have been the next target. Max didn't owe her anything and Victoria had nearly killed her friend through bullying. The young time traveler had a lot more to worry about than the fate of a Blackwell bully and she had already figured out Nathan wasn't here, the main reason for coming to the party in the first place. She could just leave now and yet… here she was, still trying to save everyone she could.

Knowing what her warning had done, Max felt the guilt gnaw away at her. If she had just kept her mouth shut, Victoria might not even have been involved in all this. Sure, there had been the binder with her name on it, but Jefferson clearly had little interest in her. Her conversation with him in the dark room had proven that much. She shivered at the thought, remembering the twisted words with unnerving clarity… As you can see, Sleeping Beauty here is too harsh for my gentle lens… The screen flickered, catching Max's attention and bringing her back. If she couldn't even deal with the snippet of memory, how would she be able to show them the entire ordeal without breaking down? She just… needed to focus. Detach herself. Breathe.

Victoria frowned at the unexpected hostility. "Real cute, Max. And after I apologized to you the other day…"

Max responded in kind, angry at the situation. "Do you even have a clue what's going on at Blackwell? Kate Marsh tried to kill herself in front of you and me… everybody here!"
"That's not my fault, Max. Don't you even try to blame me!" Victoria warned, her voice threatening as she struggled to be heard over the blaring music.

Blame… where did it lie? In this case, they were all a little guilty and responsible. Passive or active, direct or indirect, it didn't matter. Did it really matter if one person had done more than another? It was all the same when it came down to it. All contributing to an attempt on someone's life. And now… everyone was partying like nothing had happened. It was outrageous. At least some of the people Max had talked to could understand that. Still, it wasn't enough. It never was. People didn't listen, didn't act until it was way too late. Max included. If they saw it, saw what would happen if they repeated their mistakes, maybe that would open their eyes, even temporarily. No, this was the kind of experience that would stay with the group forever. That was why Max's decision to do this had been so difficult to make. It had to be done. Nothing else she had tried had worked. They had to make the changes themselves. She could only do this much, warn them… and try to fix the things she had fucked up, the storm being a major concern.

"I blame Nathan for dosing Kate, but nobody at that party even cared she was so wasted," Max pointed out.

That wasn't the answer Victoria had wanted. "It's a fucking party, everybody is wasted. What do you want from me?"

"Some humanity, Victoria." Max's words were somewhat resigned.

"Well, you got Nathan busted out of Blackwell, so you should be happy," Victoria spat out, annoyed. "And I'm the only person here who cares what Nathan is going through."

"This is bigger than a problem child," Max snapped back just as frustrated.

"I'm not perfect, okay?" The blonde responded. "I'm a teenager at an art school. I'm only here to become a photographer and get famous."

Not wanting to piss her off, Max took a deep breath and continued more calmly. "You have talent, Victoria. You don't have to push people out of your way."

"You don't understand. My parents own a gallery. I know how this art game has to be played... it's brutal."

Max shook her head, quick to correct her. "No, it's art. You don't have to play their way. Mr. Jefferson doesn't talk that way and he's famous."

"On point, Max…" Her expression softening a fraction, Victoria pushed ahead. "Thanks for admitting again that I have some talent. Not that I think I always do."

"I don't either, but that's the choice you make."

Choices… how many had Max made? How many had later fucked her over? No matter what she chose, all roads seemed to lead to death and destruction. Surely one time, she would get it right. She had to. Otherwise… that was it. Jefferson would have won. She couldn't let that happen under any circumstances. If she… if her number was up, he'd be coming with her. If nothing else, she was certain of that. She refused to leave this world unless that bastard was dealt with.

"Hard to believe, but I don't always make the best choices," Victoria admitted sheepishly.
"Do you think it's, like, fate we're not supposed to be friends?"

Max saw an opportunity to build a bridge between her and Victoria, or at least to start. "Why the hell not? We're both into art and photography, both kind of weird and pretentious. If we hung out without attitude, we'd get along fine."

"I almost asked you to hang out. You said my photos were 'Avedon-esque'. Then I remembered who I was..." She almost sounded regretful when she said this, laying her cards out on the table.

"You should have asked me. It would have been cool to compare photo notes," Max replied, sounding genuine.

"Maybe we're too much alike..."

"You might be right," the brunette agreed.

Considering her option, Victoria crossed her arms. "Well, Max Caulfield, there's still time for you to get in the Vortex Club..."

"I actually hope so, Victoria."

Victoria seemed confused by what Max had said, more with how she delivered the sentence. "Why do you say it like that?"

Another decision screen appeared on screen, DARK ROOM or DON'T WARN HER. It had felt like a lifetime ago since they had to make a choice like this. So much had happened between this and the last. It really was a no-brainer for all of them. How could they choose anything other than to warn her after what they had seen? It would take a heartless person to do so. Even if Victoria didn't believe Max, a distinct possibility, they had to try.

Warren was the first to break the silence. "One of the easier choices, I think."

Kate nodded, not wanting anybody else to go to that awful place. "Definitely."

"Yeah..." was all Chloe could manage right now.

"A step up from the first paint filled choice, for sure," Rachel added, trying to lighten the mood a little.

"Just a bit," Victoria agreed, a shudder running down her spine at the thought of the empty binder with her name on it.

The adults in the room didn't need to say a word. Nobody did, really. Max already knew what they would pick. What anybody would. As much as she wanted to scream at them until she was red in the face, throat and lung raw, tell them that this would only hurt, she couldn't. They had to choose, they had to make the same mistakes... they had to feel everything she had, as much as they possibly could. They were unwittingly signing Victoria's death warrant and there was little Max could do to stop it. She had to follow the plan, regardless. There was no point intervening now, not when it really counted.

Still, it was difficult allowing the choice to pass, to let it happen all over again. If she hesitated for too long, they would all know something was up, making this whole thing redundant. Swallowing
her guilt, she let the choice run.

Swallowing hard, Max began her warning. "Victoria, listen to me… your life is in serious danger. I know Nathan is your friend, but he is truly unstable and dangerous. He did drug Kate at that party so he could take her some place… dark."

"What? Nice try, Max. But I don't believe you. And why would he do that?" Victoria asked angrily, obviously running out of patience.

That question stumped Max for just a moment. "That I don't know yet. But it was enough to make Kate want to die… And I think you're next."

Shaking her head, Victoria began shooting down the suggestion. "Max, that is crazy. Nathan is like one of my best friends. Yes, he takes serious meds, but that's not his fault. His family treats him like a total freak, just because he has little meltdowns."

In one last ditch attempt to convince her, Max pushed forward. "They're not little anymore. They're deadly. I don't care if you hate me or not, but you have to believe me."

"You could have been a major bitch to me when I got hit with that paint… and I deserved it. Max, I don't hate you…" Victoria admitted hesitantly, obviously finding this hard to say given her expression. "I actually think you're one of the coolest people at Blackwell… Weird, but cool. You just don't know it yet. Maybe I'm jealous because you don't give a shit what anybody thinks. And I do. To be honest, Nathan has been freaking me out lately… He's not here and I haven't seen him."

Noticing that she was slowly getting through, Max decided to hammer the message home. "Just make sure you stay away from him and stick close to your friends tonight, okay?"

"I'll let you boss me around this one time. And I have other people I can go to for protection. Thanks for telling me this, Max." Victoria paused momentarily, conflicted and maybe a little worried. "If what you said is true… then you be careful, too."

"I've got my own protection," Max reassured.

Sighing, the blonde finally replied. "Um, text me if you need anything…"

Max actually managed a smile. "I will. Thanks, Victoria."

"Au revoir."

Max being in the Vortex Club… now, that was an interesting concept, one Rachel took some time to develop. Anything to distract herself from the recent horror slideshow. The alternate timeline had shown it was possible. As messed up as that timeline had been, it would have been fun to see more of this alternate Max. From the brief glance, she would've been more on Rachel's wavelength. Taylor and Courtney were surprised to see her acting so agreeable. Even with them, she could be a little… snappy sometimes. Nowhere near as bad as with other people, of course. Maybe she was changing slowly, and Max was the catalyst. Strange to think how someone like that, a shy hipster, would eventually influence someone like Victoria Chase of all people. As they had already mentioned, maybe the two girls weren't so different after all, deep down.

The whole affair was surprisingly civil for Victoria from what they had seen. Had they chosen to
make fun of the scowling blonde at the beginning, it may not have gone so well. That was the power of their choice. And Max knew they would be thinking that now, that they had made a 'difference'. Well, they had. Just not the difference they wanted...

*Maybe there's hope yet for Victoria and me… I'm glad I warned her. I hope she's okay. Out of the corner of her eye, Max noticed Chloe and headed over towards her. "Chloe, Nathan isn't here. Nobody has seen him tonight."

The bluenette didn't seem overly pleased to learn that. "He's definitely not upstairs or in the lockers."

"Damn, maybe he's hiding in his dorm," the young time traveler thought aloud.

Not wanting to waste any more time, Chloe turned to the exit. "Then let's bail. Nathan can't hide anymore."

As they were about to leave, Mr. Jefferson appeared out of nowhere in front of them. "So you made it, Max."

Thrown off by the unexpected encounter, Max struggled to find a response. "Oh, hey, Mr. Jefferson…"

Confused by the way they were acting, he gave them a questioning look. "Um… are you both okay? You look like you're on a mission…"

"Oh, I was just looking for Nathan."

He seemed surprised by the answer. "Aha. I didn't know you were pals with him. I haven't seen him since this afternoon… He seemed pretty upset. I think he's still quite upset over the whole Kate situation."

Not wanting to go into details, Max agreed. "Yeah, that makes sense."

Mr. Jefferson glanced over at the stage. "Let's talk later, Max. I have to announce the winner of the contest. I do wish you would have entered. You have to build up that resume and portfolio, but I know you will."

"Thanks, I hope so."

"Okay, excuse me. I'm almost on…" With that, he left them to it.

"Let's get the hell out of here, Max," Chloe encouraged, clearly desperate to get to the junkyard as soon as possible.

As Mr. Jefferson took the stand to announce the winner of the Everyday Heroes contest, who turned out to be Victoria, Max hung back to hear despite Chloe's attempts to hurry her along. She wasn't overly impressed by the result, to say the least.

As much as Max might not have wanted Victoria to win, she couldn't really complain or be angry at the result. She hadn't entered, after all. If she had and lost, that might have been different, but you couldn't have it both ways. Doing nothing, abstaining, removed the choice from her hands, gave her no control over the outcome. And, while Victoria may have used some underhanded tactics,
she did have talent. It wasn't completely undeserved.

Anger bubbled up in Max's body when she saw the man who had taken everything from her. When had he decided to take her, use her as another sick subject? Maybe from the beginning. Maybe when she started becoming a nuisance, it sealed the deal. She had no way of knowing. He must have planned it a little, otherwise he would've just killed her when he could, not drugged and kidnapped her. How long did it take him to decide? They had only been at Blackwell a month before Kate had been chosen. When had he taken the leap from classing her as a student to a victim? Actually, she didn't want to know. The thought made her feel ill.

On the way back to the dorm building, Chloe's phone went off with a text from Nathan, claiming that nobody would ever find Rachel again once he had done. The two girls raced to Chloe's truck, returning to the junkyard as quickly as they could. As they ran to the truck, one of the two moons in the sky faded. They finally made it to the junkyard, Chloe leading the way.

"Stop stomping around, Chloe!" Max whispered loud enough for her friend to hear.

"Right. Just get ready to use your rewind fast if Nathan tried to jump us." Max followed after Chloe, an owl swooping in front of them as they approached the spot where Rachel's remains were buried. "Rachel, I will get your revenge... I swear... You're gonna suffer, Nathan." As they got closer, Chloe's mutterings became more desperate. "Rachel... Oh, Rachel..." Suddenly breaking out into a run, Chloe dashed towards the spot. "Max, please hurry!"

This whole thing seemed suspicious. Luring them out into the open, in the middle of the night... the whole thing screamed trap. Where was the mastermind behind this all hiding? The group was convinced this was Nathan's doing, there was little reason for them not to. What was his plan? Probably to just take them out then and there. Get rid of two thorns in his side in one go.

Kate swallowed the fear, her heart beating faster with each footstep and the apprehension mounting. Whatever was about to come next... it wouldn't be good. Beside her, Warren focused on the screen, finding the whole thing more terrifying than any movie he had ever watched. This was real life, real people, people who were sat in this very room with him. Joyce wanted them both to turn right around and hightail it out of there. Nothing good could come of this. David too did not seem happy with the direction this was going. The junkyard was secluded, dark and full of hiding spots. Never a good combination. Ryan couldn't bear the tension, practically shaking in his chair, while Vanessa remained eerily still. Victoria watched the two girls get closer to the shallow grave, almost giving in to the overwhelming urge to look away. This seemed important, so she had to watch. Taylor glanced over to see Courtney's hand shaking with fear. She reached over to place her hand over the top to stop her friend from shaking so much, only to find her own hand jumping around all over the place.

Rachel kept herself composed, externally one of the calmest of the group but internally... that was a different story. Max would probably be okay, otherwise she wouldn't be here now, but Chloe... given her track record, she would be the one getting hurt here. Someone really had it in for her. Chloe had a horrible feeling that something really terrible was about to happen. Not just because of the way things had gone up until this point, but because deep down she knew. She pushed her fringe out of her eyes, fingertips brushing over her forehead and feeling an icy shiver run down her spine. What the hell had that been for? Was she just jittery from the tension? Maybe...

As for Max... by this point, she was beyond scared, beyond grief-stricken... beyond heartbroken. She had let this all happen. Let Chloe die... and she was doing it all again. How many times would
she have to watch her die? Wasn't one enough? Someone obviously didn't think so. This was all too cruel. Just when she didn't think she had any more tears to cry, they started falling again, her mind whirring with panic. If she had just took charge, grown a fucking backbone and insisted they went to the David or… whoever, this would never have happened. She didn't want to see it again, didn't want… The air around her tingled with energy, making the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end. Faint ghostly shadows were starting to become visible, voices muffled and merging. People from the past, from other timelines… She had to get this under control before… before it was too late. Easier said than done.

Chloe was here, still here. She needed to remember that she wasn't dead. Not this time. All of this was to make sure of that. To have one timeline where everyone could live. She didn't want to sacrifice anyone, the bluenette least of all. So long as she remained calm, she wouldn't have to. She had to believe that. Managing to get a grip, both of her emotions and the memories she was trying to show her group of friends, family and… whatever people like Victoria and David were to her, she took a deep breath and let all the negative emotions go on the exhalation. As much as she could. Just a little longer...

Chloe got down on her hands and knees again, moving dirt with her hands at an alarming pace, Max getting down to help her. "Oh God, Max, look… she's still there."

Max got to her feet, backing away slightly. "Don't look, Chloe…"

Seemingly out of nowhere, a needle was injected into Max's neck, making her grab at the spot that had been punctured. "Oh, no…" She held out her hand, trying to rewind but failing. Falling to the ground, she reached out trying to warn Chloe before it was too late. "Chloe! Look out!"

Chloe turned, frowning at the figure who approached, drawing her gun as she saw. "What the fuck?"

A gunshot rang out in the junkyard, the gun flying out of Chloe's hand as the bullet hit her square in the forehead. She fell back onto Rachel's grave, Max only able to watch as the harrowing event unfolded. Footsteps as Max tried desperately to rewind, looking up at her attacker with fear. By the flashlight, it was clear to see the face of the person who had carried out the terrible deed…

Mark Jefferson.

Despite her best efforts to remain calm, Max couldn't. Not any longer. Suddenly, something in her mind snapped, like a bear trap, clamping as razor metal teeth sank into her. She broke down, crying and screaming at the top of her lungs like an abused caged animal. Why had she thought she could do this? Why had she been so naive and stupid to think that? She had known it from the start… this wasn't something she could cope with. The physical pain, nosebleeds, blackouts, oh she could manage those. Sure, it hurt. It was excruciating sometimes, but no matter how broken her mind or body were, she knew she would recover and push forward. Why had she even tried?

There were some wounds that just wouldn't heal, cut open anew every single time. Things she couldn't deal with as hard as she might try. Not the reminder of betrayal. Not seeing her… whatever Chloe was to her now, dying over and over and over. Not having every sliver of hope crushed, each time more painful than the last. Not… not… she curled up defensively, hugging her knees tight and burying her head in her arms. Her fingers dug into her legs, but she didn't care. She had gone way past the point of caring a while back.
This was her waking nightmare, one she would never be able to escape. This was her reality now...

Chapter End Notes

Just as a small side note, I (Olivia) will be entering the dreaded exam/essay period very soon (dun, dun, dun), so updates for all stories, this one included, may have to be put on hold until June at least. I'll do my best to make some time where possible. Might manage a couple updates between the middle and end of May for various stories, but no promises. Just to keep you guys updated on the situation. So, if that is the case then have an awesome time and see you next chapter for Polarised. Now, bed is calling to me.
Hey guys, welcome back. Managed to get a chapter written out way earlier than expected, ain't you lucky?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Seventeen: Polarized, Part 1

All Max could see in her mind was that moment stuck on a loop of death. Even when she shut her eyes, it persisted. The prick in her neck, collapsing to the floor, reaching out for Chloe in warning, her look of surprise, gunshot, blood red trail and that bastard looming over her. What came after had been nothing compared to that moment. She clamped her eyes shut tight, body as compact as it could get. What was worse it seemed amplified, a million times worse than just watching things play out on a screen. So, so real... Nothing drowned out the horrifying memory, not even digging her fingers into her arms so hard they nearly drew blood. Physical pain wasn't enough to bring her back, to remind her that this wasn't happening now. It *had* been real, but she had escaped. No matter how many times she repeated that in her head, it didn't help. Truth was, she had never really left the Dark Room, that feeling of despair and desperation... and she probably never would. That mindset, those experiences, they defined her now. This was her reality.

Max wasn't the only one reliving this moment over and over again. Something strange was happening in the auditorium, time going out of sync. Her emotional turmoil had disrupted everything, her fears manifesting in a much more vivid way than screen projection. Each and every one of them was almost seeing events through her eyes, feeling everything she had felt. Nobody could have been prepared for the overwhelming onslaught of cycling confusion, fear, and hopelessness. It rocked them to their very core. If they didn't get it before, they did now, understood just how much this had fucked Max up. As tough and composed as she had tried to play, in reality she was broken, maybe beyond repair. She had pushed, and pushed, kept pushing herself to the limit and crossing that line. It was way, *way* too much for one person to handle. Even a single part would be. To have lived through the whole thing, there was no hope for her to come out sane after that.

Her surroundings reflected the major mental breakdown, time fluctuating worse than it ever had before, warping and twisting as she shook. How could things ever be okay again? The answer to that question was complicated. They wouldn't but she hadn't done this to be okay. She had done this because... all her reasons were getting muddled up. To fix her mistakes? To prove to herself that she could make a difference? To get revenge? To save everyone, make their lives better? To... she didn't even know anymore. There wasn't even a guarantee that this *would* make any difference whatsoever. Maybe there were all living on borrowed time and she was prolonging the inevitable, making the suffering worse... no, she couldn't think like that. If she started, that would be it. She would completely lose herself... more than she had already. Being optimistic, letting herself hope for something again, that was tough after what she had seen.

That was when, for the first time since getting trapped in her own head, she felt something. Faint, hard to miss, but definitely there. She could hear something too, someone trying to reach out to her maybe? The words were muffled, like she was underwater, deep under. What were they trying to
say? She tried to focus, focus on something other than the emotional limbo she had found herself in. It was really difficult, but she persisted. Bit by bit, the voice became clearer, contact firmer. Gradually…

The living nightmare flared up again, overwhelming whatever or whoever had been trying to reach her. This time, it wasn't just a repeat. It was so, so much worse. This time as she relived the gunshot, Jefferson crouched down beside her. She wanted to lash out, make him suffer as much as she had, but she couldn't. Helpless, at his mercy, all she could do was try and stay awake. That was getting harder by the second. Despite the drug-induced daze, she could see and hear Mark Jefferson as clear as day. The one person she really didn't want to focus on.

He took a deep breath, staring down at her questioningly. "How many times are we going to meet here, huh? Wasn't once enough for you? I guess not. I wonder, do you just really like me or really hate Chloe? I can't think of any other reason to keep coming back, watching her die a thousand times, then another thousand."

Jefferson was playing with her, mocking her. She wanted so desperately to hurt him, call him every single insulting thing she could think about as she watched him suffer. It would only ever be a fraction of what she had been through.

From his expression and tone, he seemed to almost pity her. "Why don't you just give up? That'd be easier, right? So very, very simple. There's no need to keep torturing yourself. Wouldn't it be nice to just… sleep? No more pain, no more suffering, just… peace. I mean, I can do this for as long as you want. Trust me. It won't get easier."

He leaned in closer and, despite her best efforts to get the hell away from him, all she could do was lay there conveying all her hate in one glazed over glare. "Your mind is a much scarier place than reality. I'm sure you know that by now."

She refused to listen, to be won over by such bullshit. Still… rest would be nice right about now. Being able to just slip away, no hurt. Could she let herself believe a lie? Believe that it didn't matter to her anymore? That she was better off letting it all go. Everything was fucked and it was her fault… and she wasn't so sure if she could fix it. If she couldn't before, could she really now? If anything, she was less capable of solving the long list of mistakes.

Clearly able to read her thoughts, he gave her a twisted smile. "That's what I thought. You can see the truth, see how foolish it would be to continue being so unnecessarily stubborn in the face of the inevitable. If only you'd seen it sooner. Some people might have had a chance. Now, they're all going to die. Every. Single. Last…" he leaned in much closer, right up next to her ear as he whispered, "One. Your fault."

"...ax… Max…" The voice calling out her name wasn't Jefferson. Her eyes moved lazily, confirming she was alone with him and… Chloe's body. No, she… she had gone. What…? That was when she saw something that shocked her beyond belief. Footsteps approached her, boots now in her line of sight. Struggling, she cast her eyes up to see a very familiar face look down at her. Chloe's face almost didn't seem her own now, no friendly emotion in her eyes. The bullet wound was still there in the middle of her forehead, blood trailing from the hole.

"Ch…" Max somehow managed, willing her arm to reach out.

Chloe looked at Max like a stranger, no… worse than that. Like she despised her more than anything in this world. Those eyes were ones of bitter judgment. "Bit late for that now, don't you think? It's always been too late, Max. Right from the beginning."

Wanting to shout, scream at the top of her lungs that she was wrong, Max tried so hard. In the end, all she managed was a weak groan and slight, groggy shake of her head. The dirt was cold and wet
under her cheek, Chloe's eyes boring into her. Jefferson was still there, hanging back for the time being.

"You think you can fix thing but you fucking can't," Chloe continued, not moving even an inch. "The damage has been done. Why can't you just accept it, huh? I'm supposed to be dead. You're not supposed to save me over and over again. What can't you see that? Are you fucking stupid or something?"

Hearing those words from Chloe stung. As much as max might want to seem selfless in her motivations, she was far from that. She could say she was doing this for everyone else's sake, but she'd be lying. Sure, she wanted the others to survive... but her actions up 'til this point had proven to be almost the polar opposite of that goal. If she had cared about the 'greater good' she would have made a simple decision when it came down to the wire. One life vs. a whole town and god knew how much subsequent damage.

"I even told you to let me go, but you just couldn't. Why? No, no need to tell me. I guess I know why. Still, you couldn't commit one way or the other. You wanted both." She let out a short, sharp and mocking laugh, blood now oozing from a wound on her stomach just where she had been shot the first time. "Well, life doesn't work like that. Surprised you haven't figured that out for yourself yet. I feel sorry for you... almost."

Max didn't want to hear this anymore but she couldn't do anything else. There was no way to shut this off, she had tried several times. All she could do was wait for the torment to end, if it ever would. Was she stuck here forever? Left with her own thoughts for eternity? She wouldn't last.

"Snap out of it!" An echoey voice called out to her, so distant. "I... I fucking need you, Max. Don't..." Muffled sobs her imaginary tormentors didn't even acknowledge. Nobody needed her. "Please..."

"Do you get it now?" Jefferson finally spoke up again, stepping into view.

Chloe stood next to him, eyes zeroing in on hers. "Finally understand the situation?"

Another choice... give up or keep fighting. It could be her last. If she gave up, she would finally have peace but condemn the others to their fates. If she kept fighting, she might just make it all worse but... well, could it actually get any worse? Being stuck here forever might be worse. Mustering all her remaining strength, she managed to move her arm, shakily push herself up from the ground. Only an inch or two, but enough to show her choice.

"F-fuck off," she spat weakly. She really couldn't sound any more pathetic if she tried.

Chloe and Jefferson exchanged glances, the bluenette letting out a heavy sigh. "Have it your way, then. Don't think this is the last time you'll be seeing us, though. We're always here." She crouched down and tapped Max's forehead with her finger right where she herself had been shot. "Not going anywhere."

The image swirled into darkness, Jefferson and Chloe fading along with it. Then she was alone. She started feeling and hearing again, slowly returning to the here and now outside her head. Inside felt numb. When she was conscious enough, she realized that someone was hugging her tightly, almost squeezing the air from her lungs. There was something warm and wet on her skin. She looked over at the source, finding Chloe there holding on for dear life.

"Fuck, Max. Come on, stay with us. You have to... you can't leave, not after all this," her pleas gradually filtered through the haziness, making sense, the fog in her mind temporarily lifted. The
rest of the group had huddled around, looking concerned as tears ran down their cheeks. There were people who needed her, or at least thought they did. Maybe that was enough.

When she found her strength and words again, Max slowly wrapped her arms around Chloe too. "I'm here."

"Don't you ever fucking do that again. You hear me? I…” Her voice failed her, instead responding by holding on tighter. Max had never seen her like this before and it hurt.

After some time, the two broke apart and Max got to her feet. Her legs felt like jelly as Chloe helped her up. All eyes were on her, waiting for an explanation or… something. Before she could say a word, her parents stepped forward and gave her a huge hug too. Within a few seconds, the others had all joined in too. Even people like Victoria and David. If anyone had walked on now, the scene would've looked so damn strange. This was what they all needed right now, though. Eventually, they separated swiping at their eyes and passing tissues around.

"I'm… sorry," Max managed, her voice strained from the screaming earlier.

Chloe was still holding onto her, supporting her. "Don't be. Not anymore."

"There's… still more." It would be so good to just stop now, but that wasn't possible. They needed to see the whole thing. Explaining wouldn't do it justice. She had come this far, now was the home stretch.

"Max, we don't have to see any more of that," Ryan mentioned softly, desperate to persuade his daughter to stop this.

Vanessa nodded in agreement, just as worried as him. "This is clearly too much for you."

"We get it now, Max. Seen and felt it ourselves," Joyce added, voice a little shaky and emotional.

Max shook her head. They might understand some things she went through, but not all of it. Even with this experience, they would never truly get it. "Some of it, yeah. Not all. Not the important part."

"You could just tell us the rest," Warren suggested as a compromise.

"It's hurting you now, Max. That might be for the best," Kate agreed, concern clear in her expression.

"Agreed. This is… insane," Taylor muttered, still trying to get her head around all this.

Courtney swallowed, looking very pale all of a sudden. "I've seen enough, personally."

Victoria glanced over at her, nodding. "More than enough."

"Hate to agree with Victoria here but, we all have," Rachel finally said. Last thing they needed was for Max to have another one of these episodes. They would only get worse, maybe to the point that not even Chloe would be able to bring her out of the nightmare. Chloe herself didn't say anything. She just continued to support Max's weight, feeling it lessen as time passed.

"I… I didn't go through all of this to quit now. There are things I cannot explain left to see. Telling won't do shit. I'm going to keep at it regardless of whether all of you are here to see it to the end."

Max looked at each and every one of them in turn, trying to convey just how important this was to her. "It's your choice."
Letting out a deep sigh, Chloe helped her back into her seat. If Max really had to do this… how could she tell her no? She didn't want to see her suffer anymore, but what else could she do? Try and drag her out of here kicking and screaming? She could just rewind and pre-empt their moves, run herself into the ground for nothing. Nobody spoke or even moved as this went on, a standoff. One by one, the group's resolve faltered and they returned to their seats. It seemed they would be seeing this to the bitter conclusion, whether the liked it or not.

The previous in room breakdown had overshadowed the on-screen events for obvious reasons. None of them had the time to process what they had seen, Chloe dying at the hands of Mark Jefferson. They had all been too focused on Nathan to see the bigger picture. That narrow sight had cost them, cost Max. They weren't in the right frame of mind yet to really comprehend what had just happened. Joyce was shaken at seeing her daughter die yet again at the hands of a Blackwell teacher no less. In what world was that even possible? A cruel one. For David, he was beyond fuming. Jefferson had always been strange verging on creepy, but this… and it had been all happening under his nose. Ryan felt a new hatred for the man who had put his daughter and Chloe through hell and back, while Vanessa seethed in silence. Warren shook his head solemnly and Kate shook with fear as everything began to fall into place. Victoria's jaw tightened, not saying a word. Taylor and Courtney kept giving each other uncertain glances, trying to reassure one another. Rachel looked over at both Chloe and Max, wondering what they were thinking right now. Out of all the people it could have been, Mark Jefferson had been low on the list of suspects. Now she thought about it, maybe it made sense. He had always been a bit on the intense, creepy side. Guess this proved it beyond a doubt. Chloe just wanted to leave and find Jefferson right now, get them all some cold, hard justice, a word that seemed to be irrelevant in Arcadia as they had seen. As for Max, she did her best to prepare herself for what was to come. If she was going to get through this, she needed to be as ready as possible. Aside from the very end of this messed up journey, the worst part was over. She just had to keep reminding herself that she was going to fix it all, one way or another. Everyone was here with her, Chloe was here.

When Max awoke, she slowly came to the realization that she was sat in a chair with her arms and legs bound to it. To her left, someone else lay there also bound up… Victoria Chase. It seemed like Max didn't notice her straight away, though. She was too groggy and disoriented.

"Chloe? What… Where… The Dark Room… "Is anybody out there? Please, help!" Max's pleas went unanswered as she tugged at the bindings, finally noticing Victoria. Oh shit, Jefferson kidnapped Victoria, too? This is so bad. "Victoria… Wake up! Wake up!" Getting no response, she gave up trying to wake her for the timed being. Instead, she got to work trying to free herself.

The whole group was shocked and horrified by Victoria Chase's presence, none more so that Victoria herself. Max, they could unfortunately understand, but Blackwell's self-proclaimed Queen Bee? It didn't make any sense. They had chosen to warn her, so… why was she here? Had she ignored Max's advice? No, maybe not. She had only warned the blonde about Nathan, not Jefferson. A fatal mistake. Still, if she did take the warning seriously, which it seemed she had at the time, she should have been sticking close to her friends, out of harm's way. What the hell had happened? How had this situation come about? That wasn't even taking Max into account. Strapped to a chair, just conscious enough to function and scared out of her mind. It was a harrowing image, one nobody here would forget.

As for Max, she could almost feel the restraints on her wrists and ankles. To detach herself from the experience, she had to move her arms and legs slightly, confirming she was actually free to move. It helped a little, although her limbs felt heavier than usual, the constraints holding mental
power over her.

After a few moments tugging, she managed to get her right leg free. "Finally! I'm free! Almost..." A wheeled cart sat just to her right and, with her newly freed leg, she managed to hook foot around the nearest wheel to pull it closer. In the nearest right-hand corner was a picture of herself, drugged up. Pushing past the nausea, she focused on the photo and traveled back to that time.

This mechanic had only served to screw Max over before, but now it could be used as a way to escape if she could just find the right photo. That hope was very limited for the time being, the only photos she had access to being the ones Jefferson had taken of her down here. Presumably, in these pictures she would either be unconscious, drug addled or constrained, maybe a mixture of the three. If she could just survive long enough to find an opening, she could get out of here and find another photo to jump into from before the event. It would take a lot of manipulation and rewinding, that was a definite.

When she came to, Jefferson was standing over her with a camera snapping shots and mumbling all kinds of creepy shit to himself about purity or whatever. The second she could, she tried to move.

"Oh, Max! You fucked up my shot!" he shouted angrily, pacing before coming to a stop and continuing with an eerie calmness. "But please don't worry, we have all the time in the world. For now, I knew you were special the second I saw your first 'selfie'." He returned to taking his twisted photos. "Yes, I still hate that word." Crouching down near her head, he lined up the next shot. "But I love the purity of your own image. Not like Rachel, who was always looking in the wrong places. Poor Rachel. Wait..." Pausing, he shuffled slightly before moving down to her feet. "Let me try this angle."

Stomach churning, Kate took a few deep breaths to combat sudden nausea. "I think I'm going to be sick."

"You and me both." Warren began having a mini freak out in response to what he was seeing. "This is... fucked up. Beyond fucked up. Shit, just what the hell is all this?"

Ryan shook with rage, the familiar sting of tears in his eyes and rage pulsing through his veins. "I'm going to kill that bastard."

"Not if I get there first," Vanessa corrected with an eerie calmness, she was well past being angry now.

"Oh, Max..." Joyce whispered, her tears renewing.

David sat there, fists clenching until his knuckles turned white. Had his on-screen counterpart known about this? Given the paranoia and extent surveillance, surely he must have known something. That might help to explain his behavior a little during that week. Sure, the shift from him now to the him on screen wasn't huge, but it was enough to suggest that he did in fact know something. He seemed to have been investigating Rachel, Kate, and Max, so surely he must have uncovered a connection to Jefferson somewhere down the line. He was meticulous and merciless in his investigation, leaving no stone unturned. If he did know something, it was a shame he hadn't acted upon his suspicions, prevented this. While he might not have been able to save Rachel, her disappearance possible sparking this whole search of his, maybe Kate and Max could have been spared this horrifying ordeal, Victoria, too. He had failed them.
"Guess he really is going for the deranged serial killer angle," Rachel muttered to herself, not even wanting to think about her own stay down here, well another Rachel's experience in this hellhole. The unpleasant thought of it made her shiver.

Victoria didn't say a single word. She had been so stupid, hanging over a man who had done… god only knew what he had done besides what they had seen. He had killed Chloe without a second thought, suggesting that he had done it before. Same with the drugging and kidnapping. Shit, he had a whole bunker dedicated to this sick photography thing he had going, files upon files of victims. Both Taylor and Courtney were thinking along the same lines, horrified that Victoria had been trying to get close, even if it was simply for the purpose of winning the Everyday Heroes contest. Her attempts would have been bad enough under normal circumstances. This gruesome revelation only made it worse, about as bad as it could get actually.

Chloe didn't want to believe any of this. First Rachel, now Max? People she cared about, suffering so much. And for what? The insane delusions of a monster. While no reason would ever justify this, something more sound and logical might help her process all this, like when someone killed for revenge or in self-defence, that she could understand, but there was no method to this madness. All this bullshit about purity… and whatever the fuck other gross, perverted desire inspiring him, it made her sick to her stomach. She didn't even care why he was doing this anymore, he had to suffer for what he'd done.

The words resounded in Max's mind, chilling her to the bone. This had been one lecture she'd never wanted to hear.

When Max tried moving again, he grabbed her shoulder to steady her. "Don't move!" Once satisfied, he took more shots and moved back up towards her head, crouching again. "Oh, much… better. Thanks, Max. If only Nathan could see this setup. He tried so hard, but you can't just throw a few subjects around and expect a cohesive style or theme." Finished with this lot of pictures, he stood. "But he had an eye for shadows. And an eye for a whole lot more, as his elite family will find out…" He went around the back, moving Max's head. "...along with Arcadia Bay. Nice… Good… Oh, those eyes..."

Those last few words sent a collective shiver of disgust down each and every one of their spines. His voice now… so blood-curdling. That accompanied with the disturbing smile that came and went made it almost impossible to watch.

"Does he ever shut the fuck up?" Chloe asked angrily, hating each word he spoke more than the last.

"Not his style. Rambling monologs, that's his specialty," Rachel clarified, wishing that this was over too. Normal lectures were bad enough, this was on a whole different level.

"It's just too bad you're so goddamn nosy, Max!" He moved around to the front again. "But this room is under 24/7 surveillance so all I had to do was text you from Nathan's phone and you fell right into my hands. You really should have focused on school work, not 'private detecting' with your little friend."

"Chloe..." Max managed, her voice little more than a whisper.

Stopping his 'work' for a moment, he looked at her with his eyes, not through a camera lens. "Chloe, right." Moving closer to reposition her again, he crouched down. "Yeah, I'm sorry the I killed-that Nathan killed her in self-defense. But she had a troubled history like most
Arcadia Bay drop-outs." Checking over his angle, he continued to talk. "Nobody will be surprised, or care."

"Oh, if this wasn't personal before, which it _so_ was, it definitely is now. Fuck you too, dick. People will give even less of a shit when you finally get what you deserve," Chloe all but shouted at the screen. She couldn't hold it in. "And you _will_ get everything you deserve… mark my words." All she wanted to do was go to wherever the hell that fucked up psychopath was right now and fulfill that promise.

"Don't worry, Chloe. He won't get away with any of this," Max reassured, her voice almost a hate-filled growl now. She had gone past being scared, now she was just angry. It took a lot to make her snap. Reliving this experience was more than enough. "Not while I'm still around. That fucker will burn."

The aggressive outburst inspired shock among the group, particularly those who knew Max on a more personal level. She was about the least violent person to have ever existed, Kate excluded. Max's parents had never seen their daughter so furious before and they could completely understand why. Still, it hurt to see her like this. Joyce was just as astonished. She was used to it from Chloe, even then this was more intense than any temper tantrum she had ever witnessed. While not quite as angry as Max, Chloe could rival her fury. Seeing Max like this only made that anger rise, hatred overriding almost every other emotion. The room almost seemed to spark with electricity, static once again rising from the speakers positioned beside the screen, glitches all over the place. They reflected Max's unadulterated rage, her need for revenge. Picking up on the disturbances, the young time traveler tried to calm herself down. Much more excitement and she might pass out again. Who knew if she'd ever wake up the next time? The others in the group were just as startled by Max's transformation. Their vision of her aligned with that of the people who had known her prior to Blackwell. While they had a different first experience, even that didn't prepare them.

Taking a few deep breaths, Max took herself to a happier time and place. She was running out of those kinds of memories, but some still remained untainted. If she gave into the rage, lost herself, Jefferson would win, break her completely. She was far from fixed but she couldn't let herself descend any further into this than she already was. The point of no return was so close now. Silently, she allowed the memories to continue. Nobody pressed her.

"Though I promise people will care when you die tonight, Max. I wasn't lying when I said you have a gift." Crouching on one knee again, he looked for potential shots leaning in closer. "Okay. Now this looks good." Shifting so he was laying flat on his stomach, he lined up his next shot. "Maybe a few more close-ups…"

Trying desperately to do something, anything, Max struggled to move. Jefferson clearly didn't appreciate that, standing up again. "Max, please do not move so much. I need you posed and framed my way!" Glancing over to the left, he thought aloud. "Maybe a new dose will calm you down…"

"No, no… no…" Max mumbled, moving as much as she possibly could, which wasn't much at all.

Her feeble words coupled with being constrained made this heartbreaking to watch. She was trying so desperate to free herself, still drugged up and full of fear. How anyone could do this was way beyond them. Had he been so desensitized to all this that it just didn't affect him at all now? It seemed that way. Just how many times had he done this? How many victims had he left behind?
How many had he killed? None of them really wanted to know the answers to those questions.

Pulling the metal cart closer, he grabbed a needle and prepared a new dose. "Now don't move, or this will… hurt… much."

She managed to kick out, sending the cart backward. Not that it did much for her. A bottle tipped over, leaking out onto the cart's contents. "Stupid bitch! You just don't listen, do you? In fact, you never did hear much in my class…" Looking angry now, he stood over her. "If you had, you might have seen all this coming." He bent down, seeming almost impressed. "Goddamn, you are a fighter, though. I've had my eyes on you, and I've noticed that you've been more… fearless this week than maybe your whole life. Remember my number one rule." Reaching out to hold her steady, he moved closer. "Always take the shot."

Max struggled right up until the end, her legs kicking out as much as possible… finally going limp as the drug took effect. The screen faded to white, images showing what had been changed thanks to Max's lashing out and knocking over the bottle.

When she finally returned to her later body, she was understandably disgusted. Oh Jesus… I can't believe that happened. So sick.

A sound to her left caught her attention. Victoria was gradually waking up. Max turned her head to see the blonde. "Victoria? Hey, Victoria… it's Max. Can you hear me?"

Slowly coming to, Victoria looked extremely confused. "Max… Oh God, where… where are we? What's happening?"

If all this had been bad enough before, seeing Victoria like this tipped it over the edge. She looked awful, dazed and shaken. A completely different image from the one she portrayed on a day to day basis. Victoria didn't want to believe any of this had ever happened to her, or Max or Rachel, Kate, Chloe… none of them. They were all tied to this cursed place, a common thread. It was a terrifying realization.

"You've been drugged like Kate… and me," Max began to explain. "Do you remember how you got here?"

"No… I don't know…" She hesitated, trying to remember what had happened. "Wait… You warned me. You warned me about Nathan. Then I went to Jefferson for help, and he was acting so weird… That's the last thing I remember. And I can't move my hands! Help me, Max! Please, I'm sorry for everything." Victoria was clearly panicking and nobody could really blame her.

That was the bombshell the group had been waiting for. By warning Victoria, they had signed her death warrant. Max knew how they were all feeling right now, just like she had when the truth came to light. Even though there had been a binder with her name on in the Dark Room, she had been a low priority target. Jefferson didn't seem all that bothered about photographing her when he finally got his hands on her. Maybe he simply saw an opportunity when she was trying to get close to him, an easy victim. A backup if Max herself hadn't entered a photo in the Everyday Heroes Contest. Maybe he was just so crazy that it didn't matter who he kidnapped. Whatever the reason, Victoria was there because of a decision Max had made, they all had made. That, that was what Max really wanted to convey to them right now. Something no amount of explanation would ever truly be able to capture. The sense that, no matter what she tried to do, it never seemed to be the
Wanting to calm her down, Max explained the situation so she would at least know what she was up against. "Listen carefully. Mark Jefferson kidnapped us. He's using Nathan, as well. Jefferson is very dangerous, so we have to get out of here before he comes back."

The explanation did little to calm her. "Max… I just can't believe this is real. I don't want to die like this! I'm only 18!"

"Victoria… please listen… I have a plan," Max reassured, sounding as confident as she possibly could whether she actually had a plan or not.

Those words seemed to help a little. "Really? How? Max… I'm so scared."

Now she had Victoria's attention, she just needed to keep calm herself. "So am I. But we don't have time to be scared. We have to fight back… now."

"Max… I can't even move my arms… How are we supposed to fight?" Victoria asked, not seeing any way of escaping this.

"I'm not going to let that asshole get away with this," the young time traveler stated confidently, a hint of hatred in her tone. "I just… I need you to be strong. I can't do this alone. We need to act while we are clear-headed. If he doses us again, we'll forget everything."

"I'm not strong Max. Look at me… look what I did to Kate Marsh. Now she's in the hospital, and I'm here." Victoria seemed so resigned now, helpless and vulnerable.

Needing her to be ready to fight for her life, Max tried her best to motivate Victoria. "Kate wants us to get the hell out of here… and then we can both go see her again, okay?"

Groggily, Victoria replied. "I'd do anything to see Kate once more… Just to tell her I'm sorry."

Hoping that this would be enough to keep her fighting, Max began looking for a way to get out of this. "Victoria, we will find a way to escape. I promise."

"Max… I believe you."

"Shit…" Seeing Max going through this was the hardest thing Chloe had ever had to do, more difficult than seeing her father buried in the ground. She had dragged Max into this, all because she wanted to find out what had happened to Rachel. Her friend wasn't even directly involved in this and she had suffered the most.

"I…" Words failed Victoria, probably for the first time in her life. She sounded so vulnerable and broken, nothing like herself at all. She liked to think of herself as strong, but in reality, she wasn't. Why else would she relentlessly bully people like Kate Marsh? She was weak, insecure… if she had gone through even a fraction of the shit Max had, she would have broken down long ago.

Taylor's eyes began tearing up again with this exchange. Victoria could be a real bitch sometimes, but both she and Courtney knew it was an act. They had seen her better side, genuinely had fun and shared moments. She was scared of looking weak, scared of the judgment. People could say
whatever they liked about the image she presented herself to be at Blackwell because that wasn'teally her. She would rather be feared and hated as a bully than hated and ostracized for being
herself. Both girls reached over to comfort Victoria, giving her hand or arm a light squeeze to show
she wasn't alone. It wasn't much, but enough.

Kate had suspected this was closer to the real Victoria Chase than what they had seen before. She
might seem to be irredeemable, but that was far from the truth. She was simply scared. That didn't
mean she got a free pass to take that insecurity out on others, but it did explain a few things. Shame
it took something like this to make Victoria herself admit that. Now, thanks to Max, she would
have a second chance. It wasn't too late for her.

Noticing another photo on the metal cart, Max saw an opening. Whoa… I am definitely more
awake in this photo… I could try this one. Focusing on it, she traveled back. When she shifted
to the image, she saw Jefferson standing in front of her, setting up a camera on a tripod.

"I'm getting some spectacular images here, Max. Yes, Victoria would kill to be in your place,
but… she doesn't understand our… connection," the crazed madman began ranting.
"You're… the winner, Max. I choose you… your portrait."

Actually able to respond this time, Max could voice her anger. "Fuck you."

He didn't seem offended by the swearing in the slightest. "You're trying too hard. I know
you're scared… You all have that same doe-eyed look when you wake up here… replaced by
fear as you realize what's about to happen."

He clearly had extensive experience to make that kind of comment. More than Rachel, Kate, and
Max. So many red binders crammed in that cupboard proved that. How many weeks, months, years
had he been doing this for? How many cities and towns had he prowled, searching for victims?
How many girls? Had they all survived? Kate's fate seemed to suggest he did let at least some of
them go, not that it meant they were guaranteed to make it out the other side unscathed. Chloe
proved that he was quite happy to kill if necessary. He was no stranger to death, to murder.

Trying to buy herself some time and genuinely wondering why the hell this was all
happening, Max asked, "Mr. Jefferson, why are you doing this?"

"Oh, Max… I'm so glad you asked that question." Loving the sound of his own voice, he
stopped what he was doing and approached her, bending down so he was at her eye level.
"Simply put, I'm obsessed with the idea of capturing that moment innocence evolves into
corruption. That shift from black to white to gray… and beyond. Most models are cynical.
They lose their naivete. However, some Blackwell students carry their hope and optimism
with them like… an aura. And those lucky few become my models… my subjects." Done
explaining, he stood once more.

"He's like some fucking Bond villain," Warren mumbled to himself. Clearly, Jefferson had been
waiting for the question, loved the sound of his own voice. Did he really think Max would
understand? The glazed over look in his eyes pointed to one thing, he had lost it. There was no
chance of rehabilitation, he was too far gone and showed no remorse for his actions. Some people,
they didn't deserve a second chance.

Literally shaking with anger again, Chloe gritted her teeth. Knowing Max had to listen to this
bullshit with death staring her right in the face… that was just adding insult to injury. "He's
something all-fucking-right..."
"A dead man," David finished, eyes filled with an unfathomable loathing. He had never truly wanted to kill anyone, not even in his service days. In fact, any soldiers he had killed deserved death so much less than Mark Jefferson. There were very few people even in history he could think of that deserved it more and they had killed thousands, millions, ruined the lives of even more. He would be doing the world a service by getting rid of a scumbag like Jefferson.

"Yes, you're a psychopath. And this is your last session," Max announced, voice low yet confident.

That actually made him smile. "Au contraire, Max. I'm so sane, that nobody knows what's happening to you right now. As you can see, Sleeping Beauty here is too harsh for my gentle lens..." He was referring to Victoria, who was currently sat slumped on the end of the couch behind him. "And don't get me started on your late partner... I had enough of those faux-punk sluts in my Seattle days."

Max frowned, the rage clear on her face and in her voice. "Go to hell. You will, for everybody you've hurt."

Jefferson crossed his arms, unimpressed and unfazed. "Unlike pure, sweet Kate Marsh, I don't believe in that bullshit. She could have been my masterpiece. The world is what an artist makes it... and my muse-"

Sick of this, Max interrupted. "Kate believed, and she survived. You failed to break her. She's stronger than ever. And she'll outlive you."

Again, he saw her words as nothing more than empty threats. "She'll certainly outlive you. Who knows? Maybe I'll pay Kate a visit soon and test her faith again..."

That made Kate shift uncomfortably in her seat. The thought of him posing her, taking pictures while she was out cold, it was sickening. She could feel hot tears roll down her cheeks, body shaking with fear. He was the embodiment of every single possible nightmare. The one small mercy is that she had no recollection of that time, unlike Max.

Getting visibly more frustrated, Max snapped back. "You will not get away with this. I want you to know that."

Seeming bored by her threats, he responded. "Too bad you already made a convincing argument against Nathan in the Principal's office. Thank you so much, for setting him up for me. I do know that the Prescotts are going to have a major scandal when the town finds out what their elite son has been doing for homework..."

He had set Nathan up so perfectly, not that he needed to try hard. The unstable teen had cast enough suspicion on himself without the need for fabrication. Max had unwittingly aided him by blaming Nathan. He had been the most obvious candidate and that had made the group blind, just as it had Max herself. She should have seen it coming right from the beginning, but she hadn't... and it had cost her and those she cared for.

"You used Nathan."

"I prefer the term 'manipulated','" he swiftly corrected. "Like with an image... Nathan's was easy to twist around. I became a sort of father figure for Nathan. It happens often in teacher/student relationships. It was kind of touching for a while."
Not seeing any other choice than keeping him talking, she encouraged him to keep going. Anything to buy her time and get answers. "Did you tell him everything about your plans at Blackwell?"

He clearly wasn't impressed by her question. "Don't be stupid, Max. I told him what he needed to hear. In return, I had access to the Prescott fortune. Who do you think paid for this glorious dark room and equipment? How else could I get all these hip new drugs for my subjects?"

Nathan really had been a puppet, taken advantage of so expertly. He was complicit in all this, nothing absolving him of his crimes, but it did make it a little more difficult to hate him enough to wish for his death. He clearly needed help, and lots of it. His father hadn't cared, that much was obvious.

"The Prescotts…" Ryan muttered to himself. In the five years he and his family had been away, they had only consolidated their power and influence. It had been bad enough before, much worse now.

Joyce shook her head. William had always hated the Prescott family. Seemed he was right to. They had let Jefferson do this, given him a space and the equipment, brought his twisted fantasy to life. She knew that if William was here now, he would rip Jefferson to pieces. Like Max, he was hardly a violent person. Under these circumstances… that was a different story.

"Rachel Amber was your victim, not your 'subject'," Max angrily corrected.

"Oh… Rachel Amber…" The way he said he name was chilling. "That's the real tragedy. Nathan thought he could be an artist like me… Instead, the dumbass gave her an overdose."

Sick and tired of his rantings, Max snapped. "Chloe and Rachel… you killed both of them!"

"They're fucking together in heaven right now. Is that what you want to hear?" He replied, expression darkening considerably.

"Why? Why?!!" Max asked, trying to make some kind of sense out of all this.

"Why? Why?!" Jefferson repeated in a mocking tone. "Start listening to me, you dumb cunt!!" His expression shifted from anger to something much calmer and creepier. "I'm sorry, Max. That was not cool. Anyway… Rachel is dead. But no tears, Los Angeles would have killed her anyway. So, look at this as a favor."

The way he said her name made Rachel feel dirty. At least she had her answers to how she had died, well if she believed Jefferson. She never thought Nathan would hurt her. He was many things, disturbed, entitled and cruel sometimes, but not a heartless murderer. Not on his own, anyway. Someone had molded him into this. That person being Mark Jefferson.

Max winced at the sudden rise in his voice. She had known it was coming and yet it still caught her off guard. There was still so much of this to go, but she had to remain strong. For her own sake, for all their sakes.

"You're evil," Max hissed, injecting every ounce of hatred she felt for the man, no heartless beast before her.

Not taking the insult to heart, he leveled her with an unimpressed stare. "Oh, I see. You and
your friends almost beat Nathan to death. See, we're not so different…"

"Yes… yes, we are," the young time traveler spat back. "I cared more about Nathan than you did."

That seemed to anger Jefferson. "No! You didn't. It's just too bad that he fell in lust with Rachel. He actually thought he could mimic what I do with a camera and a subject. Like father, but not like son…"

Looking around the bunker expectantly, Max asked one question. "Where is Nathan now?"

"Dead and buried," Jefferson answered with no emotion, matter-of-fact and monotone. "After what he did to Rachel, I knew I couldn't keep him as a protege for much longer. Now the police will never find his body… Do you finally get it now, Max? I can't compromise my vision with amateurs."

Once again, the group was surprised to hear of another body to add to the death toll. It really did seem like Nathan was nothing more than a tool, a useless one now. If they had any doubt before about his role in this, the new information cleared that right up. Jefferson truly was the real mastermind behind all this and Nathan, he was a complicated mix between victim and manipulated perpetrator. Nothing was ever black and white, as this experience had shown time and time again.

The horror in Max's expression shifted to slow building rage. "You are an amateur. Look at the trail of death you left behind. You can't blame all this on Nathan. I don't care what you do to me. You're going to die, motherfucker. For Chloe, and Rachel, and everybody else."

"I do love your spirit, Max, but you brought yourself here, by your own choice. Anyway, I like my models to be seen and not heard... so I have to make sure there's nothing left behind of you. Okay. Now, let's see how these shots came out." He walked away from the main setup towards a speaker, turning it on as he strolled to the back of the room. "I can see why your instant camera is so appealing. You don't need a computer to print your work out."

*Sorry. This is not art…* While he was busy, muttering to himself, Max looked around for some leverage. Off to her left, she spotted her journal. *I have all those photos in my diary… This could be a way out.* With her newly learned information, she rewound to when he was talking with her.

Before he could walk away, she stopped him. "Wait. Please, Mr. Jefferson…"

He stopped, turning back to her. "Max, I would love to talk shop, but I really need to go over these pictures. Especially while they're fresh in my mind… I think our session… was a career high for me."

The way he was talking made their skin crawl. He was stuck in a creepy, messed up trance now, so caught up in his twisted obsession.

"Good thing he loves the sound of his own fucking voice and has an ego the size of Alaska. Asshole," Chloe muttered to herself, anger flaring up again.

"Might be his undoing at this rate," Rachel noted. It had given Max just enough time to come up with a plan.
Warren leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms. "We can only hope. He made evil mastermind mistake number one, never underestimate your target."

He had definitely underestimated Max, more than he would ever know. Out of all the people he could have targeted, he chose the one person who could royally fuck him over. Big mistake on his part, a fortunate one for Max herself.

With no other options, Max tried her luck. "You... You still have my diary."

"Don't worry... nobody's going to read it. Thanks for reminding me. There's nothing more innocent than a teenager's diary." He walked over to where the journal sat, bringing it over. "Oh... Look at your selfies... What a waste of talent." Throwing the journal at her feet to one of the earlier pages with her Monday selfie stuck in it, he finished his self-absorbed rant before walking away. "Look at that shot, Max... You can do so much better."

"Fuck yeah, shot yourself in the foot, motherfucker," Chloe shouted, not caring by this point. Realistically, she knew this probably hadn't worked out, Max wouldn't be here otherwise, but she had to celebrate small victories.

"Oh, the poetic irony," Warren muttered to himself.

"Shame he won't even realize it. That reaction would make for a good picture," Rachel added bitterly.

"I think there have been more than enough pictures," Joyce mentioned solemnly, with the others nodding in agreement.

"He sure as well won't be taking anymore, not when I'm done with him," David all but growled. Max glanced over at him, knowing that had been true in one timeline at least.

With the photo now close enough, Max focused on it and traveled back to the beginning of the week. Before all this had happened. The screen turned white, returning to the classroom to a time that seemed so long ago now.

"I could frame any one of you in a dark corner, and capture you in a moment of desperation." Max lifted her head, dazed and disoriented. "Shh-shhh. I believe Max has taken what you kids call a 'selfie'." The rest of Jefferson's lecture was drowned out by her internal monolog. I'm back... right back where I started this insane week... And nobody is going to hurt Chloe every again... He repeated word for word his lecture from Monday, Max not paying a single slither of attention to what he was saying. She had revenge on her mind. By the time he got to his question, she was done.

"Who cares? This class is hella bullshit," Max finally answered, knowing the monster this man really was.

Under any other circumstance, Max's parents and Joyce would have been shocked, even appalled, by such behavior. Not now. Jefferson deserved every last inch of disrespect. The others would agree. Even Victoria, who had pretty much worshiped the ground he walked on at one time for whatever reason. The same went for Max on a much larger scale. She had never been a hate-filled person until that week. Now, that's almost all she could feel, that and fear for their futures or lack thereof if she messed up.

Jefferson was shocked by the talk back at first, then annoyed. "I'll pretend you didn't say..."
that, and let you try to answer one more…"

"Sorry, there's no time left. I mean, your class is almost over." Victoria looked back at her, a complicated mixture of confusion, contempt, and curiosity at her behavior.

Unsure how to deal with the rebellious behavior, he simply brushed it off and continued. The bell rang, cutting off the lesson for today. He started talking about the Everyday Heroes contest, but Max wasn't listening. Time to change time. First, let's make it real easy to capture Mark Jefferson. When Jefferson mentioned her name, she frowned at him. Bastard.

I have to warn David about Jefferson and the Dark Room. Max looked in her bag, finding a brochure from Blackwell Academy. In it was David's number. She dropped him a text, warning him. For once, David… I'm praying you'll overreact to this as much as everything else… and take Jefferson down fast.

[Mr. Madsen. You're after Rachel Amber. Mark Jefferson is guilty. His Dark Room is under the Prescots' farmhouse. You know the location. He's sick and dangerous. Stop him.]

"Guess if you're gonna contact one person, it'll be the paranoid surveillance guy," Rachel commented dryly.

It was true, if there was one person Max could really trust to go overboard and take a warning like that deadly seriously, it was David Madsen. The only person who would actually do something about it whether there was concrete proof or not. David knew he would pay attention to that kind of message. If he had been investigating Jefferson in any capacity, that alone would force him to act on his suspicions. Hell, they'd already seen how stubborn and meticulous he was.

After sending the message, then deleting the evidence from her text history, she got up. You wanted me to enter the contest, asshole. So, maybe I'll be going to San Francisco. And Jefferson… you'll be going to prison. Max reached up, feeling something run down from her nose, blood. The past within the past… Am I pushing myself too hard? It doesn't matter what happens to me… I have to save Chloe!

Noticing Kate looking super depressed, Max made a beeline for her. Poor Kate… "Hi, Kate…"

Clearly not expecting anyone to come see her, she lifted her head from her hand. "Oh… Hey, Max."

Taking a deep breath, Max softly began, "Kate, listen to me."

Kate looked up at her, confused and exhausted. "I am."

Keen to set things right, to make up for the pain and suffering she couldn't prevent, Max continued. "Always remember that you're not alone. I've got your back, no matter what happened. So do a lot of other people. We all care, we're all here for you. You need to know that."

Clearly, Kate hadn't been expecting this in the best way possible. "Max… That makes me feel so blessed for the first time this week… I… I don't know what to say…"

Swallowing hard, Max gave her a warm, relieved smile. At least this time around, Kate
wouldn't feel alone. "That's okay, neither do I. Maybe we could both use a hug."

Not hesitating for a moment, Kate got up and wrapped her arms around Max. The young time traveler returned it instantly. "Thanks. You always know the right thing to do." She smiled slightly, returning to her seat.

Kate shook her head. Even with everything that was going on, Max still tried to make her feel better. In all this chaos… she was still doing it now. Looking out for her, for all of them. It kind of made her want to cry. It was a moment of relief for them all, however brief. They needed something to focus on besides the death and destruction.

She made her way to the front of the class, stopping when she noticed the Rachel Amber 4 Ever etched into the desk Jefferson had been leaning against. Oh, Rachel… I'm sorry...

Striding across the room with purpose, Max came to a stop near the desk. "Mr. Jefferson. We need to talk."

"Uh…" He seemed even more confused than before by her assertiveness.

Victoria, on the other hand, was not afraid to meet the challenge. "Can you see I'm talking to Mr. Jefferson now?"

"Yes, I see. But maybe you shouldn't..." Max was obviously finding it nearly impossible not to just outright state the truth about Mark Jefferson.

"Uh, and why not?" she asked, not having any clue on what Max was getting at.

Jefferson cut in here, trying to reassert some sense to the situation. "Hold on, Victoria. Are you okay, Max?"

Using his interruption as a starting point, Max launched into what she hoped would be a monolog that saved Victoria from making her mistakes a second time around. "I will be when Victoria understands that hiding behind a screen, posting videos of people it incredibly cruel and unfair. You're smart enough to know how easy it is to hurt somebody, to destroy their life. I just want you to think about how much it would hurt if somebody did that to you. You can always make the right choice, Victoria. I know you've got a good heart. I've seen it."

"Listen… I… I didn't…" For the first time, Victoria was stumbling over her words, left almost speechless.

Max held her hand up, stopping her. "You don't have to explain. There's no reason for you to be so insecure that you can't be happy with your own talent. Wouldn't it be better to lift people up than to bring them down? You could inspire people..."

"Okay, I don't know what you're talking about now..." she turned to their photography teacher, soon to be prisoner, not knowing what else to do," do I, Mr. Jefferson?"

He looked between her and Max, chuckling lightly. "I think I should stay out of this one, Victoria."

From Victoria's expression, she was debating how to react to the uncharacteristic confrontation. In the end, she settled on a weak and questioning, "Then I guess I'm done
talking."

"And that's okay too." Max relaxed as Victoria turned around, heading for the door in a daze.

"Guess that's one way of dealing with Victoria." Rachel managed a weak grin, one she aimed straight at the girl in question.

"Shut up," Victoria replied, too overloaded to put any real malice behind those two words. Not many people talked to her the way Max had just now, hence why she had been caught off guard. Most were too scared of the consequences.

Once she had left, Jefferson turned his attention to the young time traveler in search of answers. "That was kind of random, Max. What did you mean?"

Not even bothering to provide him with an answer, Max handed over her photo. "Here's my photograph for the 'Everyday Heroes' contest."

"Oh..." He took the photo, not knowing what to do with it for the time being. "That was easy."

Max shook her head, knowing that her journey here couldn't have been further from easy. "No. It wasn't easy at all."

Voting to ignore that strange comment, Jefferson cleared his throat. "Well, I, uh... I can't pre-judge yet, but I'm happy you decided to enter. That means a lot to me... and Blackwell. The first step for any artist is to put themselves out there in the world without fear. To be... innocent." The smile on his face was extra creepy now that the truth had come to light.

That was the real Mark Jefferson and they all knew it now. If only they had seen it sooner. There were clues and hints scattered all over the place, they just hadn't linked the dots in time.

"Or guilty," Max added, trying so hard to keep what she knew a secret.

"Uh, well... Thanks for the photo, and maybe both of us will be jet-setting to San Francisco this Friday," Jefferson mentioned hopefully.

"Or maybe only one of us will be going," Max replied, hoping that this would be the case.

"Don't be so modest, Max. Anything can happen in a week," he reassured, not even beginning to understand the gravity and truth of his words.

"As you're going to find out, Mr. Jefferson." Her words carried a weight he would never truly understand.

Chapter End Notes

Have an awesome day and see you next time.
**Chapter Notes**

Hey guys, welcome back. Let's continue the update rampage. Been a while, huh? Anyways, here's the next chapter for y'all, enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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**Chapter Eighteen: Polarized, Part 2**

This should be the end of a long fought battle against a deranged killer, a neat, relatively happy conclusion. Of course, the group knew it wouldn't end like that. If it did, Max wouldn't have needed to come back here to relay her warning message. Something must have gone wrong somewhere down the line, forcing the young time traveler to reassess her plans and travel back even further than she had previously. She wouldn't be risking her life if it wasn't important. To find out what had happened, they would have to keep watching.

Max really wished this had been the end. At the time, she had been so relieved with Jefferson out of the way. She had stupidly assumed that would be the end of her problems… but it hadn't been. Not by a long shot.

The image disappeared, replaced with white. Another photo montage appeared on screen, the bathroom shooting from the beginning of the week remaining the same, with Chloe alive. The junkyard railway walk after Frank and the train incident too staying the same. A picture of a cop eating breakfast at the diner changing to him bursting into the dark room. Kate crying as she paced from Mr. Jefferson became him getting arrested alongside Nathan. The moment of Kate teetering on the edge of the dorm rooftop shifted to the uncovering of Rachel's body in the junkyard by the ABPD. Chloe crying over the discovery, being comforted by Max now showed the shy hipster winning the 'Everyday Heroes' contest. Chloe being shot by Jefferson disappeared, replaced by Max packing and the bluenette idly strumming her guitar as she sat on the couch. Finally, the young time traveler in the dark room fading away, now showing Max on her way to the airport.

She woke up suddenly, on the plane to San Francisco. Principal Wells was beside her, asleep. Be careful… I'm still between realities… and I can't focus on this one for too long… Max looked through her phone messages, most talking about the aftermath of the Dark Room incident and congratulating her on winning the Everyday Heroes contest. Principal Wells woke up at the sound of an announcement, adding his own take on recent events. As Max sat there, blood trailed down from her nose, which she wiped away. Christ! Another nosebleed? Max… you're not just screwing around with time...

It didn't take a genius to figure out that nosebleeds were a bad sign. The strain of time travel was clearly too much for a human body to cope with. Just what damage had Max already done to herself? How much more would she do before she had finished? Would she survive it? These questions were hanging over the heads of those present, making them very worried for her welfare. Of course, Max herself was worried too, but she had put it to the back of her mind in favor of getting through this. She couldn't hesitate. Not anymore… whatever the consequences.
The screen turned white again, still images showing what had changed. Max sitting in the dark room with her journal on the floor became her leaving for San Francisco with Principal Wells. When she came to again, she was standing in the Zeitgeist Gallery's foyer. After another quick chat with Wells, who told her to enjoy this, she wandered around. Finally, she got to her photo. *You did it, Max… You're a real artist. At least for today…* Again, her nose bled and she clutched at her head, visions of the lighthouse illuminating the gargantuan storm heading straight for Arcadia Bay. Once the images had faded, she heard people talking but didn't pay attention to their concern.

She went downstairs, checking her phone to find six missed calls from Chloe. "You left the ringer off, idiot!" Quickly, she rang back. "Come on… Please answer…"

When Chloe picked up, she was struggling to be heard over the wind. "Max! Holy shit, man! Your vision! It's… it's true! You saw the tornado, it's coming!"

Clearly not having expected this, Max tried to get some answers. "What? Oh no… Chloe, where are you?"

"I'm so fucking scared! I'm… I'm by the beach, I'm stuck in the…" Her voice was slowly drowned out by static and then cut out before she could finish.

"Guess that was too good to be true…" Chloe mentioned sadly, wincing at the fear in her own voice. She had never heard herself sound so terrified.

"Definitely not just a metaphorical storm," Warren muttered under his breath. He had to wonder what caused the storm, all the evidence pointing back to Max's power.

Rachel was also wondering where the storm had stemmed from. Sure, the obvious answer was the rewinding, but maybe there was more to it than that. Something like that surely didn't come from a week of messing with time; it would take months. So, while Max's time escapades might not have helped, she was certain something else must've acted as the catalyst. Maybe the reason Max got her power was to fix whatever that was, but she hadn't been told how so only ended up making it worse. That was just as possible.

"It seems not," Kate agreed softly. This was all so scary, and they hadn't even seen the true extent of the damage. Chloe didn't seem like the type to spook easily. Things must really be bad for her to sound so panicked.

Joyce could sense it, too. Her daughter always acted tough, never letting anyone know otherwise. David had experienced Chloe's bravado first hand, realizing she must be so scared right now for her mask to crumble. The same could be said of Victoria, who had butted heads with Chloe on multiple occasions, threatened her with things most people would pay attention to. This wasn't a petty argument; this was real danger.

"Chloe! Can you hear me? Hello? Hello?" Realizing that she wasn't going to get an answer, Max hung up. *Oh my God, the tornado was real… I didn't fix shit! Chloe will die… Arcadia Bay is gonna be destroyed… There has to be a way to stop this… for good. Without a second to lose, she made her way over to her Everyday Heroes contest entry. It was her only shot.*

She focused on the image and traveled back once more to her room. Before all this started. Blood ran from her nose, which she wiped away. "Oh, shit… Oh, my head…"
When she looked up, the room around her was distorted, red and white merging. *What is going on now? It feels like reality is… breaking apart. What am I doing to time? My previous timeline was so perfect… all except that I need to be in Arcadia Bay, not San Francisco…*

Behind her, a camera sat on a tripod with a photo coming from it. *I just have to make one simple change so I won't end up in San Francisco… Simple. She grabbed the photo and tore it. "Sorry, San Francisco… Chloe comes first."

An overwhelming collective sense of unease passed over the group then. Whatever was about to happen next, they all had a feeling they would not like it. There had to be a major consequence lined up because Max ripped up her photo entry for the 'Everyday Heroes' contest - in keeping with the rest of this experience. Something terrible… the more Max tried to fix things, the more fucked up the outcome seemed to get. Their suspicions were soon proven correct.

*Again, the image faded and snapshots of the timeline changed. Max winning the Everyday Heroes contest now showed her ripped up entry. Her standing outside a taxi became Jefferson burning her journal. She and Principal Wells getting to the airport shifted into her once again strapped to a chair in the dark room. Standing in the Zeitgeist Gallery was now Jefferson coming back to the bunker, wearing a raincoat."

*When she came to, she realized the mistakes she had made. "Oh, fuck!" God, no… I'm back here again? I thought I fixed everything!*

"No…" Kate gasped, realizing where Max had been transported to immediately… the Dark Room, hell on earth.

"Fuck!" Chloe shouted, her voice echoing around the auditorium. She had hoped they had seen the last of this cursed place… apparently not. "This is total bullshit!"

"Someone has a real twisted sense of humor, huh?" Rachel asked bitterly. While not many things rattled her, seeing where she and countless girls had once been kidnapped and killed yet again did the trick.

Victoria tensed up, also having been a victim of Jefferson and his messed up project. Noticing the shift, Taylor and Courtney shared a look, taking hold of their friend's hands to comfort her. The Queen Bee was surprised by the action, very grateful for it.

Warren's shoulders slumped, head shaking slightly. This was a never ending nightmare for Max. Even now, she was still stuck in limbo - unable to move forward, or backward enough to fix this.

Ryan said nothing, his fists clenched so tight his knuckles turned white. Vanessa's expression dropped, hating every second of this. Joyce stared at the screen, horrified to find Max back here. Once had been too much as it was. For her to escape then get thrown back into the lion's den… it was too cruel. David's eyes locked onto the man who had caused all this chaos, Mark Jefferson. When he got out of here, that bastard would pay for everything ten times over. He would make sure of that.

As for Max, her expression did not change. She had to be strong this time, for herself and for the others. Jefferson couldn't hurt her here. If she remembered that, she could get through this… she hoped.

"What did you say, Max?" Jefferson stood in front of her arms crossed. *What? Jefferson should be in jail, not here… "Jesus. It's like you're back in my class. You're still spacing out."*
He leaned in closer. "It might be cool if you took one of your patented selfies now… The transformation between the old Max and the new Max…" While he was talking, Max struggled noticing that her leg was still free. "Anyway, answer my question, please."

Max leaned forward, getting up in his face. "Eat shit and die."

"Good answer, good answer." Blood began dripping from her nose again, something Jefferson noticed. "Hey… Your nose is bleeding!" He began grabbing at her head, trying to get her to look at him. "Probably gave you too big a dose. Sorry about that, Max. But considering you're about to die, a nosebleed is a first-world problem." Looking over to her left, she noticed Victoria was gone. "Oh, I had to let Victoria Chase go."

"You let her…" Max began, confused by the way he had phrased it.

He frowned at her. "Don't be stupid, okay? She's exactly where she deserves to be."

The realization slowly dawned on her. "No…"

Victoria had started shaking, and she didn't even realize it. She had looked up to this man, trusted him, even flirted with him to get on his good side… and for what? He had killed her in cold blood. Worse, he didn't even seem to care, completely unfazed. Murder was second nature to him… all for some fucking photos?!

Taylor felt like crying. Sure, Victoria could be bossy and a little hot-tempered, but deep down she was a reliable friend. If you needed anything from her, she would go out of her way to help. She wasn't perfect, this experience had shown that much, but she really didn't deserve this. Courtney too was beside herself, not knowing how to react to this horrific bombshell. All they could do was keep watching, stuck in a horror-fueled trance.

"Oh, as if you care." The shocked disbelief on Max's face gradually shifted to unadulterated rage. Far from being threatened, Jefferson seemed creepily fascinated. "Your iris… That… dilation like a shutter… the pictures you're taking of my now. Too bad you pissed away your gift. You could have won the contest, but you destroyed your own beautiful photograph… What a waste. Sorry. I burned all your stuff. I got a little carried away."

He continued talking, but Max wasn't listening. She was too busy looking at the metal cart, seeing the remains of her diary… her only way out of here. *Fuck! He burned my diary! That's why I'm still here.*

"Especially since you've developed from nerd to hero within a week. There's something… weird going on with you." The lights flickered, wind picking up. "Whoa! Did you see how crazy it is outside? I like I said…" He crouched down, leaning in close his voice little more than a whisper. "…something weird. There's that fear… Oh, Max… It's an honor working with you on these final sessions. I hope these images will be appreciated for what they truly capture. The loss… of youth. At least… that’s the last lecture you’ll ever have to hear from me… And I promise you… no more nosebleeds."

"Mr. Jefferson… please… don't do this. You don't know what's happening," Max begged, pulling at her constraints.

"Shh-shhh… Quiet… Quiet, Max…" He turned and walked away from her.
In a last desperate attempt, she struggled to get free. It was all in vain. "Please! Don't do this!"

The gravity of the situation hit the group; Max had no way out. Well, she must have found something, otherwise she wouldn't be here, but… what? It seemed impossible right now, no photo to use that would put her in a strong enough position. Anyone who knew she was here was either dead or… about to kill her. It seemed like a total dead end. Even though they all knew Max would get out of it somehow, it didn't stop them from feeling tense.

Kate found herself instinctively praying, Warren focused on the screen willing for a solution to make itself known soon. Joyce held her breath, waiting. Ryan began panicking internally, not letting it show. Vanessa glanced over at her daughter, who was solely focused on the man who had hurt and killed so many of her loved ones. David scanned the room, looking for possible ways out, weapons to use… anything. Victoria was still in shock about her counterpart's demise, with Taylor and Courtney clinging onto her tight. Rachel swallowed hard, wanting nothing more than to punch that fucker in the face.

Chloe's insides felt like they were being run through a wringer. It seemed so hopeless; no escape, inevitable. The fact that Max had been through this, felt death's breath on her neck - burning and unrelenting - made her scared and angry. Nobody was allowed to threaten Max, not on her watch. Yet, it had happened countless time, and Chloe had put her in so much danger…

Max's eyes never left the screen, not even blinking much. She knew what was about to happen, yet still found herself shaking. If it hadn't been for David, she would have died right then and there. Not just her; Nathan, Rachel, Victoria, Chloe… so many others, no doubt in the storm. The numerous deaths hadn't stopped it from coming.

Her pleas were ignored as he approached her, needle in hand. "I promise. This final dose won't hurt."

Max desperately tried rewinding, but couldn't go back far enough. She was stuck in an endless loop of inevitable death. No hope of escape… until there was a noise from outside the bunker, sounding like a door opening.

"What?" Jefferson stopped just as the needle was about to pierce her skin, grabbing a tripod and sticking close to the wall.

Somebody turned the corner… someone familiar. David Madsen, gun in hand. He didn't even know Jefferson was around the corner, getting hit by the tripod and recoiling. After some rewinding to save him from dying, Max pulled one of the wires of the expensive looking photography equipment. That was enough to distract Jefferson and let David punch him flat out cold.

The tension in the room faded as they let out a collective sigh of relief. That needle had been inches away from Max's neck - her death averted at the last possible second. Kate shook as she realized the young time traveler was safe. Warren was still on the edge of his seat, not able to process the clutch escape. As for Joyce, she reached over and squeezed David's hand in full appreciation of his rescue. She wasn't the only one who was glad for his effort, Max's parents giving him a look filled with gratitude. The head of Blackwell security was unfathomably relieved, eternally thankful that his on-screen counterpart had continued to push until he found answers. Otherwise…
Rachel had a suspicion David might make an appearance here; a gut feeling. He was the only one who seemed to know the Dark Room existed aside from the victims and perpetrators of Jefferson's operation. He had really come through when it counted. She might not like him, but she did have a great amount of respect. If he had been pettier, he might have given up on helping Max, the person he had blamed for breaking up his family. He was a bigger man than that, though.

Chloe was… shocked? Maybe that wasn't the right word. Too weak. Of all the people to end up saving Max, David had been low on the list. She had always seen him as the 'bad guy' in her life, the antagonist. For saving Max, saving all of them, she could probably forgive him anything. They had a lot of problems, so much hostility… maybe it was time that changed. The fact that David had come here, most definitely to save whoever he could, redeemed him of a lot. It wouldn't change all the mistakes he had made, but it would change the future.

Despite knowing about her savior, Max still found her heart racing at an alarming pace. She had been so terrified at the time, convinced she was about to die. Without David, she would have, no doubt. She owed him… everything.

Confident he wasn't going to be getting up for the time being, David began helping her get loose. "Oh Lord, Max… are you okay? Are you all right? Can you move?"

Max moved her arms, thankful to be free. "Yes… Thank you, David… thank you…"

"Don't thank me… You brought me here." Seeing Jefferson twitching, David stood and made his way over to finish him off. "Let's wrap up this son of a bitch first." Grabbing the gun and returning it to the holster, Blackwell's head of security placed a solid punch to Jefferson's face, turning him over and tying his hands. "He won't be going anywhere when he wakes up. Except you are going to prison forever. Or worse."

"Mr. Jefferson? Now it's your turn to be captured in a moment… Save Chloe..." She turned to the burnt remnants of her journal. *He burned everything… including all of my photos… Warren! Yes! I can use that picture he took of us!* She grabbed her phone to get in touch with him. "Shit! No signal!" Noticing the car keys on the table, Max took them. "Thanks, Mr. Jefferson, but… you won't need this anymore." *I better go outside and call Warren… Please answer…*

Now the escape plan was coming together. Max had a way back, how she had managed to wriggle out of Jefferson's clutches. The group had a feeling this wouldn't be the last bump in the road, Max's current company suggesting that much. Still, at least she had come away with her life, more than could have been expected in that awful situation. It wasn't over yet, though.

Before leaving, Max gathered together Victoria's bracelet, which was on a metal cart to the right-hand side of the chair, and Chloe's bullet necklace left on the desk by the computer.

One last thing… talking to David.

Max approached him, concern lining her face. "David? Are you okay?"

He looked up from Jefferson's unconscious body, expression solemn and eyes flickering with fear. "Look at this place… it feels like Hell."

"Jefferson was… was going to kill me… like he did to Victoria Chase…” Max's voice broke at the end of that sentence.
David looked horrified and guilty. "Oh no... I always suspected that son of a bitch."

Max seemed to feel just as guilty as he did. "I never did... until too late."

"You shouldn't have to suspect your teacher."

Using the term 'teacher' to describe Mark Jefferson was almost laughable if it wasn't disturbing as hell. "He wasn't a real teacher. He just... wanted to lecture. It was part of his sick plans."

Pushing through the regret, David continued. "I wasn't surprised when you accused Nathan of drugging Kate Marsh. I thought so, too. And Max... I treated Kate like shit... I know she's a good person, but I'm not. I hope I get to tell her that soon."

"Me too. I think that would make her very happy," Max reassured, confident that would make Kate extremely happy.

His jaw tightened, fists clenching at his failures. "I knew Nathan Prescott was a threat. I just waited too long to neutralize him."

"Jefferson already did that," Max revealed. "They had some weird father-son thing going on. But... Nathan killed Rachel, and Jefferson had to use him as a scapegoat."

This was a lot for David to take in. "That pervert was pulling all this shit right under my nose, too... I could have stopped him and Nathan if only... I wasn't so stupid."

Not wanting him to feel overly responsible for this, Max shook her head. "No... I told Principal Wells Nathan had a gun and... almost used it. But he didn't believe me. I should have been more loud."

"We all make decisions we regret. But I have to admit I'm impressed by you... and Chloe, and your investigation. I had all the high-tech toys, while you had each other." He sounded genuinely proud of their work.

"We... we are a great team."

He didn't know yet... as far as he was aware, Chloe was safe and sound somewhere. Some members of the group had figured it out, their next major decision. The others were starting to slowly catch on.

David sighed deeply. "That's one of my problems... I'm not good at teamwork. Never was. Even in the service."

"I can't even imagine what you went through..." Max replied softly.

"I'm not going to make any excuses for my behavior. I tried to be a good soldier, but... I wasn't so great. I tried to be a good father, too." He hesitated, expression becoming even more depressed and voice wavering. "But... when Joyce kicked me out... I had nothing."

"I'm sorry about that... I didn't want that to happen..." Truly, Max hadn't wanted any of this and that was more than clear from the apologetic tone.
"I should never have set up those surveillance cams. Or kept all those files..." David admitted, not sounding pleased with his own actions.

"I'm going to tell Joyce I was wrong about you," Max promised. One more mistake she had to fix. "She does love you. It's pretty obvious."

"I try not to use my service as an excuse, but... It's hard to come home after war. Most people don't know or care what it's like..." David managed a very slight smile even despite the terrible situation, "except Joyce. She gave me hope. A new life."

While David had no legitimate excuses for the way he'd behaved, he'd had his reasons. He wasn't great at explaining those reasons, finding it easier to do whatever it took to uncover the truth than making people understand. He had done so much on his own, too paranoid to trust anyone else. What he had managed to find was impressive, especially since he didn't even have a power like Max. It was clear now; all he wanted was to protect those he cared about, in his own way. The way he'd gone about it might seem counterproductive - even the total opposite of his initial intention - but deep down he had his heart in the right place. They were all starting to understand that now.

"And you saved mine. Chloe, she..." faltering for just a second, Max pulled herself back together, "she would be proud of you."

"I just want to see her safe with her mother. I promised Joyce I would go see a family counselor... and I'll start by apologizing to Chloe. I don't expect her to call me dad, but maybe she'll stop calling me 'step-douche'." His eyes held a question, one he asked in his next breath. "So, where is Chloe?"

And then it came... the two options: TELL THE TRUTH or HIDE THE TRUTH.

Max let the screen freeze, having a good idea at what the group would choose already. While it might hurt, lying about something like this was too much. All eyes turned to David, wondering what the best option would be. Hiding the truth might save some pain in the short term, but... that was crueler in the long run. They all put themselves in his shoes, all coming to the same conclusion. If someone close to them had died, they would want to know, even if it would break them.

"Tell me. I... I would want to know, need to know," David finally managed. He wasn't sure how he would handle the news, probably not well, but trying to cover it up wasn't an option.

Looking around to see the rest of the group in silent agreement, Max nodded solemnly and resumed proceedings. She felt awful for doing this, but it had to be done.

Not able to lie to him about this, Max let out a deep, shaky breath before uttering words she never wanted to say. "David... Chloe is... is dead..."

David took a moment to process that statement, face cycling from shock to fear and finally... disbelief. "This isn't happening... It can't... No, God... Not Chloe... Max, are you sure? Are you..."

Max looked and sounded as if she would break down into tears any second now. "Yes, I... I saw her... I saw... Jefferson kill her in the junkyard... last night..."

"Last night? When I was feeling sorry for myself in my hotel room...? I promised Joyce that I
would protect her and Chloe... How can I face her and explain this... I never even told Chloe that I... I...
"He put a hand up to his face, clearly on the verge of breaking down.  "Goddammit!" That was when something snapped. His face turned into one of pure rage.  
"You killed my wife's child, you sick fucker? You took away my stepdaughter?!!" Pulling out his gun, he aimed it at Jefferson's head.

"David... wait!" Max's request came much too late.

Kate winced at the gunshot, the loud unexpected sound making her jump out of her skin. Warren's jaw dropped slightly, watching the blood pool. He wasn't squeamish, but... he'd be lying if he said it didn't have an effect. Ryan watched, unblinking. Joyce let the tears in her eyes go, hating seeing David so distraught. He cared so much for both her and Chloe. Vanessa's eyebrow twitched as the bullet ripped through flesh and bone, feeling a morbid sense of justice. It would never be enough, but this was something. Courtney had looked away, slightly burying her head into Victoria's shoulder. Taylor had looped her arm around, giving the poor girl a much needed soothing rub on the back.

Rachel stared at the now dead man, feeling no sympathy for him. Unlike the rest of them, he had deserved his fate. Actually, he had gotten off way too lightly. Presumably, Jefferson was still around in this timeline, unless Max had already dealt with him before doing this. She hoped he was still alive in a way, so she could get some small form of revenge herself. There were plenty of people here who would love to get a shot at him. Chloe watched David break down, only now understanding that he genuinely cared about her. It was surreal. She had never seen him so angry and desperate before, yet at the same time filled with despair.

Given half the chance, Max would do exactly what David had done... and more, now. After everything he had done, he deserved no mercy.

He holstered his gun, giving her an apologetic look. "Max. I'm sorry... I'm sorry you had to see that." Blood was splattered around his head, body limp. "What a mess... What have I done? All that time I wasted with surveillance... I..." David was beside himself now, the weight of reality heavy on his shoulders. "Chloe... I'm sorry... Joyce... I failed you... my family..."

Max placed a hand on his shoulder to try and comfort him. "You didn't fail... You did your best."

"Max... you better get outside. You've seen enough of this room," David finally said, sounding empty and devoid of any conceivable emotion beyond utter despair.

"David... thank you, for saving me." Slowly, she backed away watching David sit down on the floor beside Jefferson's unmoving body, hugging his knees and hanging his head.

Not waiting any longer, Chloe stood and approached David, dragging him to his feet and giving him the tightest hug she could. He seemed totally baffled by the sudden display of affection, not used to it. Not knowing what to do with his hands, he glanced over at Joyce, who was now on her feet as well. She gave him a watery smile, also hugging him. Once the shock had worn off, he wrapped his arms around his dysfunctional family, trying to hold them as close as possible.

Chloe buried her head in his shoulder, hiding the tears. David would never be her father, could never replace William, but that didn't mean she couldn't love him like a parent. It had taken this to understand the difference.
The rest of the group let them have this moment for themselves, glad to see them coming together when it really counted. Max actually managed a smile despite the circumstance. This was what she had been hoping from this experience, one of the many things, anyway…

To bring people together and unite them in the face of adversity.

Chapter End Notes

So, two chapters left for 'Polarized' and then we'll move on to the expo/clean up stuff (somewhere between 2-4 chapters of that, probably). Nearly done. Hopefully, all the questions will be answered in that time. Have a great day and see you next time.
Polarized, Part 3

Chapter Notes

Hey guys, welcome back. So, this is the penultimate part of 'Polarized'. We are nearing the end…

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Nineteen: Polarized, Part 3

The dysfunctional Price family finally stopped hugging, although remained close. They muttered something amongst themselves, no doubt apologies and promises to discuss all of this later, once Max had shown them all they needed to see. Even David was crying freely, not caring by this point about his tough guy image. They were broken, yes, but not beyond repair. Thanks to Max, there was time.

The Vortex Club crew also seemed to be having a mini-discussion, most likely about Victoria's fate in this timeline. Understandably they were rattled, especially the Queen Bee. In another time, she was dead - killed by a man she had once respected and seen as a role model. That was a bitter pill to swallow.

Kate and Rachel exchanged morbidly knowing glances, both girls having shared a similar fate. In almost every other way, they were different - joined by Mark Jefferson's sick and twisted photo fantasies. Their common ground...

"Max, where is that bastard now?" David finally inquired, a renewed wave of determination passing over him. He wanted revenge, and quickly.

"He's in a trap of his own making," Max replied simply. "I thought a little poetic justice would be a nice touch while I decide what to do with him. He won't be a bother to anyone right now… or ever again after…"

Right now, he was drugged up in the Dark Room, just like Rachel and Kate and Victoria… and her. He was strapped to a chair - much better restraints this time and a few other precautions to ensure his prolonged stay - and drugged up. It had been difficult getting the drug dosage right. He would still be out for the count now; very soon he would be waking up in his own personal nightmare...

"So, he's still alive?" Ryan asked, almost sounding hopeful that he might get a chance to beat his face to a pulp.

There was a flash of murderous intent in Max's normally soft blue eyes; where Jefferson was concerned, a new side of her was unlocked. "Yes… for now. That might not last, depending on a few variables… aka, how I feel when I see his asshole face again. Either way, he'll pay for what he did in every way I can imagine. Nothing will ever be good enough, unfortunately, but I can try."

Honestly, Max was scaring all of them a little. This girl was very different to the one they knew and had seen. This Max… she was fueled by very strong desires for revenge against a man who ruined everything for her, by an overwhelming need to protect and save at any cost… by her fear of permanence.
They all returned to their seats, waiting to resume the horror show.

Not wanting to waste any more time than necessary, Max left the underground bunker. She found Jefferson's car in the barn and opened the doors to the outside. "Freedom..." Her victory was short-lived, the storm well and truly here. Rain pelted down and a vicious wind whipped through the trees. "Holy shit! The storm is real. I need to find Warren..."

She pulled out her phone, noticing that she had some signal. Asserting that Warren had the photo from the other night and that he was at the Two Whales Diner with Joyce, Max wasted no time getting in the car and drove. She sped down the roads, desperate to get to that photo. The radio was on, spouting out news of the 'religious apocalypse'. After turning it off, Max's phone buzzed with a new message sent the other night.

A familiar yet unexpected voice came from the phone, struggling with tears... belonging to Nathan Prescott. "Max, it's... it's Nathan. I just wanted to say... I'm sorry. I didn't want to hurt Kate or Rachel, or... didn't want to hurt anybody. Everybody... used me." There was frustration in his tone, soon ceding to fear and resignation. "Mr. Jefferson... is coming for me now. All this shit will be over soon. Watch out, Max... He wants to hurt you next. Sorry."

However they felt about Nathan, hearing this was heartbreaking. He had needed serious help and instead, he was manipulated and abused. It would never clear him of his crimes, but it gave them new meaning.

Rachel shook her head. Once, she had known a Nathan who loved a party, who was hilarious when drunk or high... who had feelings and emotions. Sure, he was still a bit of an ass sometimes, but nobody was perfect. Without Jefferson, he would never have done any of this. Kate too found it hard to lay all the blame with Nathan. Yes, he had been the one to bring her to the Dark Room and yes, he'd led to her attempted suicide and caused Max so much pain, but... he was also a victim of Jefferson in his own way. Warren swallowed at the message, now understanding why Nathan had been so troubled. Could things have turned out different if someone offered a helping hand instead of a fist? Possibly...

The adults of the room - Joyce, David, Vanessa, and Ryan - listened to the warning in silence. All of them had understandably come to despise this boy; he had killed or hurt their daughters numerous times. And yet... they felt pity for him. Not much, but some. Like a caged and abused animal suddenly let loose, destroying everything and anything in its wake. Who was really to blame for that: the abused or the abuser? Nathan's actions had not only affected himself, and for that he must take responsibility, but Jefferson had been the catalyst.

Victoria listened to her friend's despair filled caution. She had never heard him like this, not once in all the time she had known him. He had been broken beyond repair and put back together with all the jagged pieces sticking out; a ticking time bomb. Taylor had always been wary of Nathan, and with good reason. This discovery was just so... depressing. Courtney shook her head slowly, wincing at the desperation.

Chloe's jaw tightened as she heard him begging for forgiveness. That was something she could never give. However much he apologized, it wouldn't be enough. He had ruined her life, whether by his own volition or because of Jefferson - who she hated the most; hate wasn't strong enough. She loathed, detested, despised, resented, abhorred... all those words combined and more.

And Max... she stared blankly, once again absorbing his words. Whether he meant to or not, he had hurt people... and so had she...
Max continued driving, her expression shifting to something much sadder than before. One fade into black screen later, the center of Arcadia Bay came into view, completely destroyed. Overturned vehicles, broken buildings, knocked down electrics, fire… people fleeing for their lives, a danger zone. Max stopped, getting out of the car and glancing up at the swirling tornado imminently approaching. Moving as quickly as she could, saving everyone she had the opportunity to along the way, including Alyssa, she made it to the Two Whales Diner only to catch it explode from leaked petrol. Rewinding, she dumped sand on the trial to end the line of fire. Entering in the side door, Max managed to get to the front inside of the diner.

So much chaos and destruction… death. Arcadia Bay had never been the height of construction - many buildings abandoned or rundown - a ghost town, but this… the rain lashing, fire raging, people screaming and crying… the storm bearing down… it was like the apocalypse, disturbing and unrelenting. Max knew she'd had her part to play in all this.

"This is…" Kate began, unable to find an appropriate word to finish that sentence.

"All those people…” Warren muttered to himself. He'd seen his fair share of disaster in film… but it didn't measure up to real life, real people.

Even Chloe, who had often declared how much she would love to see Arcadia burn, was rattled by this. She wished she could take those words back now...

"Max!" Warren exclaimed, turning at the sound of the door opening.

Joyce, who had been tending to Frank, stood up and rushed over to her beating Warren to the punch, pulling her into a hug. "Max! Oh, Jesus, I am so glad to see you, sweetie! Are you okay?"

Hugging her back just as tightly, Max was clearly relieved to find them unharmed. "Yes. What about you guys?"

After letting her go, Joyce's expression became conflicted. "The Two Whales is barely standing now… I don't know if it's going to make it through this tornado. Poor Officer Berry and all those people out there…"

That made Max look guilty all over again. "I know."

So many people had died in this timeline, many at Jefferson's hand and the rest by the storm. Rachel, Nathan, Victoria, Chloe, Jefferson himself at David's hand... all the people lying in the street, unmoving. Not to mention all the animals. More would follow; that particular timeline was doomed to destruction and they all knew it… Max most of all.

Giving her one last look, Joyce herded her inside. "Okay, get your ass inside… I have to get back to this gentleman on the ground… Warren has been gathering all the first aid…"

He shrugged, sounding tired. "It's not much, Joyce. But it's all we have."

Once Joyce returned behind the counter, Max turned her attention to Warren. "You okay, Warren?"

"How the hell did I ignore all those warnings, Max? The snow, the eclipse…” His sentence trailed off as he glanced out the window.
Trying to comfort him, Max put a hand on his arm. "There's nothing you could do about it, Warren."

"I'm so stupid… I should have seen it coming…" He walked around to the front of the counter.

So glad everybody is safe here, but I need that photo from Warren to help Chloe!

"Okay, Max, excuse me while I go help this other gentleman." Joyce turned away from Frank, making sure the other man behind the counter was okay.

Frank looked rough, a large dark mark on the left side of his forehead as well as on his cheeks that could either be dirt or bruises. From here, it was hard to tell which.

Frowning, Rachel took in his beaten and bruised appearance. She'd never seen him like that before, so defeated. Neither had Chloe, who couldn't help but feel sympathy for him. Frank wasn't a bad guy, not really. He wasn't a good guy either, but not bad.

"Guess I can't help but play the mom," Joyce mumbled with a sad smile.

"Frank… I'm so glad you're here..." Max sighed with relief.

He looked up at her, exhausted. "That makes two of us. Now if I only had Rachel back… Now Max, what about that info I gave you?"

Swallowing hard, Max prepared herself to be the bearer of very bad news. "Frank, I don't know how to say this, so… I just will. Rachel is dead."

For a second he said nothing, expression horrified. "God, no, please… Please, no… No, not Rachel… She can't fucking be! Are you… are you sure? I mean, how do you know?"

Barely holding it together herself, Max began to explain the gruesome situation. "We used the names you gave us to track down a farmhouse. My professor, Mark Jefferson, has this creepy photo torture room… and we found out that he was using Nathan Prescott to drug and photograph Blackwell students."

"Prescott? Fuck! Fuck, I knew it!" Frank exclaimed angrily. "I should never have hooked up with that sick punk! Pompidou hated him! You saw… you saw Rachel?"

From the look on Max's face, she only wished that she hadn't. "Yes… I wish I didn't. I'm so, so sorry, Frank. Nathan wanted to impress Jefferson, and he… he killed her."

"How? How did he kill her?" Frank pressed, desperation clear in his voice.

Conflicted, Max hesitantly answered the question. "He used some drug… and gave her an overdose…"

"An overdose? The only way Nathan could've done that is..." the morbid realization slowly hit him, "is if I sold it to him. I killed my lioness! No… What have I done? Where is that motherfucker Jefferson?"

"He won't be hurting anybody anymore..." the young time traveler replied.
In complete despair, Frank was on the verge of an emotional breakdown. "Rachel... Oh, God. She was the one good thing in my life, Max. I know she was too young, and... I expected her to leave me, just... just not how it happened. I would never have stopped her from going after her dreams."

"I know. She obviously cared about you, Frank..." Max comforted, trying to ease the pain.

"Rachel cared about a lot of people... especially Chloe... But, uh... now I see why Rachel dug her..." he confessed before clarifying, "and Chloe was man enough to ask me for help after all that shit we went through."

Knowing that she was already dead in this timeline, Max did her best to keep her composure. "Chloe would appreciate that..."

Sighing deeply, he looked up at her. "You know, the one time I met my dad, the bastard quoted the bible and said he wanted to 'enter his house justified'. In other words, to do the right thing... me too. And maybe you're helping me get there, Max. Don't get me wrong, kid. I still think you're weird... but you're cool."

To find out that he had inadvertently killed Rachel by selling Nathan drugs must have been a real shot through the heart. It was clear that he had cared for her.

"Think I'm learning more bible quotes than I have in my entire life through this..." Chloe added, trying to lighten the mood although her voice was flat. "Not many to begin with, honestly."

Kate nodded. "Even I'm getting a good reminder."

Joyce returned at that moment. "Come on, Max. Let's talk over here and give Frank some resting space."

"Joyce, how are you doing?"

"Just when I think I've already been through the ringer..." A flicker of confusion crossed her features as her eyes darted around the diner. "Where's Chloe?"

Not being able to tell her the truth, Max went with a vague response. "I... I'll find her."

Obviously, this was a lie to save Joyce the pain. They'd seen what it did to David, broken him. For Joyce... it would be a million times worse. She had already lost William; losing Chloe might be just too much to handle right now.

The older woman shook her head firmly, crossing her arms. "Not in this storm you won't. And you're not going out there, Max. I just have to pray that Chloe... and David... are holed up someplace safe."

Guilt spread across Max's face. "I'm sorry about all this, Joyce."

Joyce gave her a sad smile. "Don't be, honey. It's not like you whipped up this tornado on your own..."

Max winced, knowing that she at least had some part to play in the storm's creation. "Um... I mean, I'm also sorry about everything with David."
"You don't have control over any of that. David is an adult and he has a lot more age and experience under his belt. Even if he doesn't always show it..." Joyce sighed, clearly confused and conflicted about the whole David situation.

Again, feeling at least partly responsible, Max apologized, "I'm sorry I've caused so many problems with David and Chloe..."

"You did the right thing. David overstepped his bounds. I had a suspicion he was taking his private surveillance way too seriously..." she hesitated for a moment, "But he's sorry and I wish he was here right now."

Hating seeing her so sad, Max nodded. "I just want our lives to be normal again..."

"With all the shit going on this week, I think you're right. And look at me, trying to keep my family together... again. Max... did I make a mistake kicking David out?" she asked, uncertain of the answer to that question.

Having seen David in a new light, Max figured she owed him this much. "David saved my life... from the storm. I saw how much he cares about Chloe, even if he couldn't show it. David needs you more than ever, and I can see why you love him."

That actually made Joyce smile for a second. "I'm so happy David was there for you. He has a lot of weight on his back from the war, but he truly wants to help people. He even agreed to take a family counseling class."

"I'm sure that was a hard thing for him to do... It shows how much he truly cares about you and Chloe." Max had seen it firsthand today.

"Nothing would make me happier than for David and Chloe to make peace, not war. But I don't know what to do anymore... I just... I just want this storm to blow over forever. Maybe it's time we leave Arcadia Bay... if we can..." She didn't sound overly optimistic about that hope.

"David is a real hero, Joyce. I know that all he wants to do is make you happy. I know he would do anything for you... and Chloe." She frowned as she muttered the name of her now dead friend, finding it hard to say.

Joyce nodded, voice softer as she continued. "I know. And yes, he's not William, but that's okay. He's not supposed to be. You reminded me of when he came into my life... I was ready to give up. David's love gave me strength. He even told me I was his hero... And I can't give up loving him. I want him to come back home... I hope I get to tell him that soon."

For all David's flaws - of which there were many - he had just as many redeeming qualities. He loved Joyce and Chloe. William had been a tough act to follow, so soon after too. At least now, they all had the chance to see how much he cared. Joyce reached over and took his hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. She was still mad at him over the whole surveillance thing - something they would have to discuss later - but she still loved him. Max had given them a second chance in so many ways.

Wanting to take a moment to herself, Max sat down by the window. Pompidou placed his head on her lap under the table. Max, give yourself one moment to do nothing... This is where
I convinced Chloe I could rewind time. So what's the point of this power, what's the lesson... To keep fixing what I keep fucking up? No, because I didn't ask for this 'gift'... But I was able to stop Mark Jefferson... and now I can stop Chloe from dying... for the last time.

Right now, Max had achieved very little. She'd managed to go back and stop Rachel from dying, from all of them dying, but for how long? She needed to make this state permanent... somehow. With Jefferson detained, ready to receive his comeuppance, the tornado was her last obstacle. She had... an idea of how to get rid of it, a theory. It would be dangerous, no doubt, but... she had very few options left. There was only so many times she could rewind, fuck up and repeat. She was already beyond her limit as it was.

Chloe stared at Max, her childhood best friend. The lengths she had gone to keep her alive... it was crazy. She was destroying herself, practically putting herself through torture. If she could, she'd take that burden from Max. She would let things play out as they were supposed to... as scary as death was. Unfortunately, that wouldn't save Max either. Physically maybe, but mentally and emotionally? No, it would destroy her. She needed Chloe alive, end of. Without her... life just wasn't worth living. Anything was preferable to that outcome.

Warren approached her, seeming relieved that she was okay. "I hate to say I'm glad to see you, but I'm so glad to see you."

From the looks of it, Max was just as relieved to see him relatively unharmed. "That's okay. The important thing is that you're safe... and I know you can take care of yourself, after Nathan."

The black eye was still visible from his first punch up with Nathan. "Should have done that a long time ago. But damn, Max... I can't believe you actually drove down here in the middle of a fucking E6 tornado, just for one photograph... I mean, I know you didn't come for me."

Not wanting to get into this right now, or ever, Max went with a diplomatic response. "Warren, I came for all of you. Just tell me you do have the photograph."

"I just want..." he began, getting cut off.

"Now shut up and listen."

"Oh yeah, you're finally going to tell me what you never did in the parking lot..." he surmised, waiting for her to reveal the secret.

Now was as good a time as any to give him a quick rundown. "I wish I would have. So I'm just going to tell you without any explanation. Trust me, okay?"

"I always do." He glanced out of the window at the swirling tornado. "You should probably tell me quick..."

As quickly as she could, Max started retelling her story. She summarized it all: the initial tornado vision, Chloe getting shot by Nathan in the bathroom, Mark Jefferson's creepy Dark Room photo project... Chloe getting shot yet again.

"I have to go back in time. Jefferson already ki-" Max's composure faltered, her voice so low that even Warren would struggle to hear, "killed Chloe... I can't let that happen... I have to do something, Warren!"
He gave her a pitying look. "Max, going back in time is what caused the storm!"

None of them knew where the storm had come from, or Max's powers for that matter, not even the wielder of time herself. Would they ever know? Unlikely. Some things in this world were meant to remain a secret. Max could be the key to the storm, or perhaps Rachel or something else entirely. Her powers, were they from a god, bestowed by accident? Or on purpose? For what task? Was it genetic, the next evolutionary stage? So many questions and no answers...

"All because… because of me? How?"

"I'm not a real scientist, even though I play one at school, but this seems like pure cause and effect, maybe Chaos Theory…" His expression shifted to one of concern. "Uh, what happened with Jefferson? Did… Did he hurt you?"

"Nathan accidentally killed Rachel Amber trying to impress Jefferson… Nathan just needed mental help… Now he's dead… and Jefferson is done," Max managed, not wanting to relive these experiences.

Understandably, he was stunned. "Jesus, Max! I want the whole story, but… I guess we really are out of time."

"But I can still change things," Max reassured. She had to. "What do you think will happen?"

"For every action, there's… there's a reaction… Whenever you reversed or altered time, maybe you caused a chain reaction… even in the environment," Warren explained.

"All this destruction… is my fault?" Max asked, guilt once again taking over.

He scoffed at that. "Give me a break. You sure the hell didn't give yourself time travel powers…"

"I guess we'll never know if it's magic or science…" she mentioned wistfully.

Warren stared at her, thinking things over. "Even if it's from a wizard or a wormhole… You're part of something bigger. I don't believe in fate or destiny, but after this week, I realize I don't know shit."

"That makes both of us, Warren…" she agreed.

During that week and after, everything Max thought she knew had been shattered into a million pieces. Allies became enemies and vice versa, sometimes shifting between those two states more than once. Her powers had been and still were unstable and unpredictable. She had questioned her relationships, had her priorities and wants challenged… a process that was still happening.

The same went for everyone in the room with her right now. They were seeing different sides of each other, of themselves. Through their counterparts' mistakes, they were learning more about themselves than any amount of soul searching could.

David had learned he had to express himself better, not be so emotionally constipated. Joyce now realized what her daughter was facing and that she had not provided enough support. Ryan and Vanessa Caulfield learned that their daughter was so much stronger than they had ever even known and that she had suffered too much on her own. They would need to step up to provide any support
they could after this.

Kate knew there were people out there who cared, even if it didn't feel like it sometimes. Warren had seen the affect his own behaviors had on others - on Max, on Chloe, on Kate, on Nathan and others - and needed to seriously think about changing himself for the better. Taylor and Courtney had seen how simply following like sheep - not challenging just accepting - could bring pain and suffering to those who really didn't deserve it. Victoria understood what her actions could lead to, and that she should be so quick to judge those around her without taking a long hard look at herself.

Rachel too had come to a similar conclusion in regards to the consequences of her actions, albeit more about her relationships. Chloe could no longer escape her sometimes childish and manipulative behaviors, unable to ignore the root of her anger and bitter resentment. There were so many things she needed to address and consider - her family, her friends, her lovers - the most important being Max. They needed to sit down and talk about... everything.

What had Max learned from all this? That she was human - with emotions, flaws and questionable decision-making skills - and that life could be... strange sometimes; hers in particular. One last thing: Chloe meant everything to her.

"I know you're here for a reason... and I guess it's up to you to find out why." He ran his fingers through his hair, sighing. "Max... I'm sorry you got stuck in this... in this... I don't have a fucking clue what's going on. But I have total faith that you'll do the right thing when the time comes." He gave her a small, tired smile. "I'm so proud of you, Max. How could there be a more important moment in history? And I'm in the middle of it with you? So thank you for trusting me."

Max returned the smile. "Thanks for being here. Always."

Warren placed the photo on the counter and, after giving him a hug, Max focused on the photo jumping into it once more. The boundaries around her were a blur of red. When she looked ahead, she saw Chloe there just... standing in front of her, looking pissed as hell, but alive.

"We've got no time for this shit. Come on, Max," she announced impatiently.

Seeing Chloe alive again was clearly too much for Max. She ran over and gave her friend a tight hug, nearly knocking the bluenette over. "Chloe!"

The relief radiating from Max was as clear as day. Seeing Chloe again, alive, was all she had wanted by this point - her only goal. Everything else - Jefferson, the storm - had all been lost to her overwhelming desire to see the bluenette, to hold her and confirm she was living and breathing. She had witnessed her death too many times; she would never let it happen again. In the list of her priorities, Chloe was right at the top. No question. She would stay there until Max could confirm beyond a doubt that she was safe.

Everyone could see it, just how much Chloe meant to Max... and vice versa. This whole experience; while full of twists and turns, arguments and issues; had proven that. The second Max saved Chloe from getting shot in the bathroom by Nathan was the moment their lives reconnected, their fates intertwined. As much as this was about stopping the storm, it was equally about them reconnecting and facing their fears together. They were the main characters in this, the rest of the group secondary, and that was okay.

"Jesus, dude... what is up with you?" Chloe asked, understandably confused by the weird...
behavior.

All Max could really do was touch her to check that she was actually here. "I'm just glad we're here together."

"I guess you need to talk. No worries... It's all good." Sensing his role as a third wheel, Warren left them to it.

Not even giving him a second thought, Chloe frowned. "I'm glad you're with me, too. What's going on, Max? We have to find Nathan right now. He's going to fucking pay for what he did to Rachel... Let's go, now."

"Chloe, wait! Listen!" Max pleaded, hoping she would just wait a second.

"I can walk and listen, okay?" Chloe replied irritatedly, strolling towards the pool building.

Getting ever closer to the photographic boundary, Max grabbed onto Chloe's arm to stop her from wandering beyond her reach, firmly grabbing hold of her shoulders. "Stop and listen for once!"

The uncharacteristic loudness of her words made Kate jump a little. She hadn't been expecting that from Max - who was about as soft-spoken as they came. Desperation, that was the most obvious emotion behind her plea for Chloe to stop. Since Max was usually so quiet, her exclaimed words carried much more weight. They needed to. If Chloe went beyond the photographic bounds, she would die again, everyone would.

She looked like she was about to argue, her protests waning with a sigh. "Fine, Max. I'm listening."

Not knowing how to start this, Max just came out and said the truth without sugarcoating. "Chloe, you can't go into that party. You're gonna... you're gonna die if you do."

"You used your powers, right? And you fucked around with time, and I died," Chloe concluded, not looking overly happy.

Max shook her head. "Not like that..."

"You're supposed to back me up," Chloe reminded forcefully. "So there's no way that punk-ass bitch Nathan Prescott is taking me down."

"You're right, he won't. Mark Jefferson killed you... and others," the young time traveler revealed, knowing how ridiculous this would sound without experiencing what she had.

"Jefferson, the art teacher?" Chloe questioned, not wanting to believe it. "That's bullshit! Nathan is the fucking serial killer! We saw the proof! Now, excuse me, I'm going to that party to make sure he never hurts anybody again. Are you coming?"

Before she could leave, Max pressed ahead. "Nathan is dead... and you're in danger."

That reveal made Chloe falter. "That fucker is already dead? How do you know that?"

"Because... I was there."
Thoroughly perplexed, Chloe took the conversation back a step. "Will you please tell me exactly what happened? Please?"

The only way to stop Chloe from making a mistake was to describe what had happened to her, she knew that. Tears in her eyes, Max did just that. "Chloe... Jefferson drugged and kidnapped me. I was tied up in his bunker. You have no idea what hell I went through to get back here... but I couldn't let you die. You brought me back here, and I can't lose you again. I won't!"

Max had known the only way to get her to stop was to retell her horrific experience. She'd known Chloe cared enough about her to at least hesitate. Nothing else would work. What was Max to Chloe? The young time traveler still didn't really know the answer to that. Their story was complicated, full of heartache - some of which she had caused. Somehow, they had found their way back into each other's lives, rekindled their friendship and... brought back confusing feelings that never had the chance to develop into something more. What would have happened if Max had never moved to Seattle, or at least gotten in touch? Would they be... something other than friends now? From what she had seen, maybe. There was something there, that much was obvious. Would they have the chance to find out now? She had no clue.

The bluenette watched Max break down on screen, one of the only times she had really let her emotions go this whole time. It... hurt to see her like this. She wanted to hold Max, tell her everything would be fine and... so much else. There were so many words left unspoken between them, words that needed to be said. Hopefully, they would still have time.

As she listened to this, Chloe's face fell. "Oh... Max. I'm... I'm so sorry... I was the one who dragged you into all this shit... Nobody, especially you, should have to go through that..." A renewed flicker of rage entered her eyes. "Now we have to stop Jefferson... with one bullet."

Max shook her head aggressively, knowing that wouldn't work. She was losing her composure now. "No! Not this way! Chloe, I... I can't keep fixing everything, if all I'm gonna do is just break it, over and over again. I know how this is gonna turn out and... I'm afraid I'm fucking up all these alternate realities."

That last line stumped Chloe. "Wait... alternate realities? What do you mean, Max? What did you do?"

"I fucked up, Chloe. I wanted to make things right, but everything turned out wrong," Max muttered through tears.

"Max, what the hell are you talking about?"

Unable to keep quiet about the alternate reality any longer, Max explained, "I was able to go back in time... to the last day William was alive. I stopped him from leaving, but... But you ended up in a car crash instead."

"You saw my dad again?" the bluenette just about managed.

Exhaling shakily, Max went into more detail. "You... you were completely paralyzed. And you were in pain. You were slowly dying, and you... you asked me to... end your life. And I did... for you. I didn't want you to suffer in any other timeline or reality... I couldn't bear the thought of you in any more pain..." By this point, she was barely keeping it together.
It took Chloe a moment to process all this. "God, Max… That must have been… That must have been awful for you… I'm so sorry I had to ask you that…"

"It was worse for you," Max pointed out, sniffling. "But I had no idea what would happen, and… as usual, I messed everything up, and… I never want to hurt you, ever. You have to believe me."

They had all seen it, Max's confliction when making that decision. She had wanted to help but didn't know how. Two choices, neither she wanted to decide between. Could they have done it? Killed a friend, even if they were dying a slow and painful death? Being the one to physically deal the final blow after trying so damn hard to keep her alive… live with that for the rest of their lives. Add in everything she had experienced before then and it became even less likely.

Chloe already knew Max wasn't trying to hurt her, the total opposite. Everything she had done, it was to ensure the blue-haired punk's survival and happiness. She had tried to change things for the better. Chloe would do the same for Max in a heartbeat, especially now. She glanced over at her friend, gently putting her hand on top of the now clenched fist Max had made. The touch made her hand loosen, fingers intertwining. Max's hand was shaking as it unfurled, lessening slightly with Chloe's input.

Not giving her the chance to start blaming herself, Chloe took her by the shoulders. "Of course I do. Do you think I would even know how to handle that situation? Nobody would… The important thing is that we're together again."

Doing her best to calm herself down, Max agreed, "You're right. That's why you should come with me so we can stay together… and stay alive."

"I hear you, Max… but do you think we should let Jefferson get away with torture and murder?" Chloe asked, clearly not enthused about the possibility of him getting away with this unscathed.

That was the very last thing Max was about to suggest. "Of course not. If we tell David, he'll believe us and he can actually stop him… right?"

Confused and frustrated, Chloe frowned. "I don't get it… Why do you trust him, after you totally reamed him the other day? He's not even at our house anymore."

"Chloe, David saved me from Jefferson… If he didn't track down the Dark Room… I'd be dead right now," Max revealed, hoping this would be enough to get her friend on board.

"Max… I had no clue… I should have been the one to save you," a flicker of guilt crossed her featured then, "but… I'm so grateful David was there. So what's your plan?"

"We tell him everything, including that Victoria is in danger," the young time traveler stated.

Taking a deep breath, Chloe nodded. "Okay. You've been through so much… I believe you, Max. After all, I'm still your faithful companion."

"Yes, you are. So, listen…" She needed to explain this properly so her plan would work. "In a few minutes, I won't know any of this happened… nothing. We absolutely have to stay in your room and do nothing. Then we explain to David, and we finally let him do his job. You'll have to tell me exactly what I did and said just now. Just explain that I traveled
through time using the photo."

"Will you believe me?" she asked, sounding uncertain.

**Taking hold of Chloe's hand, Max softly promised, "I'll always believe you, Chloe."**

Max glanced over at the bluenette, catching her eye. She couldn't quite work out what she was thinking, too many conflicting and confused emotions swimming in blue irises. One thing she could decipher: Chloe was grateful for everything she had done and... wanted nothing more than to make sure Max survived.

The young time traveler hoped beyond hope that was still a possibility.

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**Chapter End Notes**

So, one more left for 'Polarized' and then it's the final chapters, wrapping up and whatnot. Tune in next time for that.
Chapter Notes

So, the last chapter for 'Polarized'. I forgot how messed up some of the nightmare dialogue was (or blocked it out more like, especially Jefferson's stuff) so yeah reminder: it's messed up.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twenty: Polarized, Part 4

Again, there was a shifting photo montage of events. Chloe being shot in the junkyard by Jefferson turned to them explaining the situation to David. The fight in the Dark Room became David confronting Jefferson with the police in tow. Max arriving alone in Arcadia Bay's center in the middle of the raging storm shifted to her and Chloe on the clifftop near the lighthouse, the storm swirling angrily before them.

They had all known it was coming and yet… the tornado still sent a shiver down their spines, chilled them the bone. It was an angry swirling mass of chaos and destruction. The week they had watched play out almost felt like a century - so much rewinding and repeating, trying to make things right.

Warren began to wonder just how many times Max had experienced that horrific week. This experienced seemed like a last ditch attempt to fix things for everyone, Max pushing her body to the limit and beyond one final time. How many times had she repeated this? Three? Eight? Twenty? Hundreds? Could she even remember? How deep into the rabbit hole had she ventured? He kept those questions for later, once this was all over.

When Max came too, she took a second to realize what was happening. The moment she did, she gave her friend a hug from behind. "Oh, Chloe!"

Chloe turned around to face her. "I see that the real Max is back… So, how was your time trip, dude?"

In disbelief, Max began rambling her relief. "Shut up. Oh, you're alive! You're alive, oh… Both of us! I did so much to bring you back, Chloe… and it worked. It actually worked. You're with me again."

The blue-haired punk went in for another hug. "It looks like even fate doesn't want us apart. And… you traveled through multiple realities just to… save my ungrateful ass over and over. I hope it was worth it, but..." She broke the hug, keeping her hands on Max's arms for a second longer. "I don't blame you for wanting me out of your life, after all my drama."

Max's insecurities came in full force now. "Come on. I'm the official Drama King and Queen of Arcadia Bay this week. Just look at what my powers have caused in… just a short time. I mean… I'm nobody."
Shaking her head, Chloe was quick to correct her. "You're Max-fucking-Caulfield, Time Warrior. Even if you weren't, you're kind and caring. Nobody could have a better best friend… Nobody. You didn't ask for any of this to happen, but it did. You need to accept how awesome you are."

"Maybe I willed it subconsciously, or something," Max suggested, ready to believe pretty much anything after this week. "I always wanted my life to be special… an adventure… but not without you. And it didn't happen until I moved back here, so… without you, my powers wouldn't even exist."

If it wasn't for the gargantuan tornado in the background, threatening to bring Arcadia Bay to the ground in a pile of dust and rubble, this would be a touching confession. It was fueled by desperation and fear. Neither of them wanted to be separated again; they wanted to end this.

Rachel knew the look Chloe was giving Max all too well by now. It was a look she had ignored and denied, had trouble committing to; honest and unrestrained love. For everything they had been through together, their undeniable connection had been rekindled, dragging up deep buried and unexplored feelings. The chaos had brought them closer than ever before, reminded them that they couldn't survive without each other.

Joyce allowed herself a bittersweet smile. It had been clear from very early on that Max and Chloe shared a special bond, one that had transcended time and distance. William had often commented on it, mentioning that he wouldn't be surprised if they ended up dating. In fact, he had done his best to encourage it, teasing playfully along the way. There were some bonds that couldn't be broken, no matter how many times it was put to the test. Max's parents had suspected it too, noted how happy their daughter had been when she spoke of Chloe, how she tried to spend as much time with the other girl as possible in their youth.

The bluenette let the words wash over her, heart aching. In another life, maybe this was simpler for them. They had already seen one timeline; another was perfectly plausible. Somehow, they had stayed in touch, or Max had never left and her father never died. Their friendship was never strained to breaking point by bullshit circumstances. They had time to explore their feelings naturally, without the looming prospect of death. Maybe Chloe would dare Max to kiss her again, and this time it would be much simpler.

Yes, now was complicated. They had been apart for five long years without contact. William had died and Max had left, leaving a hole in Chloe's life she tried to fill by any means necessary - alcohol, drugs, tattoos, a punk makeover, meaningless hook-ups. Rachel had come into the picture, a person the bluenette could redirect all those unexplored harbored feelings towards, and then disappeared without a trace. They had next to no time to sit down and work through all their issues - gaining mysterious rewind powers, evading death numerous times and uncovering terrible dark secrets.

Even with these complications, they had reunited and fought tooth and nail to get to this point. To stand on the cliff top, staring out over the waters at the oncoming tornado. Together.

"Then for whatever scientific, mystical reason, that we'll obviously never figure out… We were meant to be together at this exact moment in history." Chloe hesitated for a second. "I have to think that Rachel was somewhere behind the scenes, fighting for justice…"

"I'd like to think that, too… We all owe Rachel Amber. Now tell me everything that happened. You… You remember, right?" Max questioned, the gravity of the situation they
had found themselves in hitting her, the storm no longer just background noise.

With that, Chloe began to give her the details of their actions while she was out. "Well, we... we left the party and made sure Jefferson couldn't find us. For once, I was glad I lived in an actual fortress. Then the storm got hella crazy and... and you said we would be safe at the lighthouse."

"Chloe, look! The storm is getting bigger now. It's coming closer. I... I can't even believe this is real, but this is happening because of me." Max's distress levels were slowly rising.

Kate frowned at the tornado, almost seeming larger since Max's first vision. That might just be her imagination, or it could be a genuine observation. She had no idea which, though. Other people, like Warren and Rachel, noticed it too. Whatever the reason for its existence, it was huge. No denying that. It almost felt like the opening scene from the Wizard of Oz, only much scarier and with no chance of getting whisked off to another world.

For Joyce, who had lived in Arcadia for such a long time, this was highly distressing. This was the place she and William had made their home, started a family. It was also the place he had died and Chloe had been broken. So much promise and potential shattered.

"Stop it! Stop beating yourself up, okay? We've both paid our dues already on that." Chloe looked over at the storm, fear in her eyes. "Oh, God, look at that! Look at that monster! Who knows... This could be Rachel's revenge... Our revenge. The lighthouse is out of the way of the tornado. Come on!"

Max clutched at her head, managing a mumbled, "Oh... What... Chloe..." before passing out.

Chloe caught her before she could hit the dirt ground. "I've got your back, Max."

Yet another time Max had passed out due to her rewind. More proof that humans were not supposed to possess such a power, their bodies and minds incapable of housing and harnessing time. It wasn't even surprising to see her fall back into Chloe's waiting arms the number of times they'd already seen Max collapse... which was worrying.

Max knew what was coming next... her own mental torment, much worse than anything Jefferson could have ever done to her. Reality was nothing compared to the things her mind could imagine...

When Max regained consciousness, she found herself back in the photography classroom, back to the lecture from Monday. *I'm back in class... What the hell? I have to listen to this Jefferson lecture again? This might be Hell... Okay, this is messed up... Am I stuck in a time loop? Be calm and don't freak out... yet. The scene played out exactly the same as it had back then, with one exception. There was a thud at the window as a bird flew into the glass, leaving a bloody smear and cracks. Wait, what's going on? Nobody even cares?*

A second later, the windows were completely covered in red. Suddenly, the bell rang and the windows were clear once more. *Everybody's gone now... Have I totally fucked up time? This doesn't make sense... Max got up to have a look around. The photos, magazine covers and other pieces stuck to the walls had changed, many depicting Max herself. Kate's desk was covered in jagged white words, I WANT TO DIE. The ball of paper that had once tormented Kate now read: 'Max, if you're reading this, it means you're DEAD. Mr. Jefferson, XOXO'.*
The graffiti scratched into the desk that once bore Rachel's name had been switched in for Max's. The picture of the lighthouse at the front of the classroom now showed it ravaged by the storm and the one of the forest now showed her and Chloe digging up Rachel's body. The Everyday Heroes Contest poster, now titled Everyday Zeros, had her face with insulting digs at both her attempts to help people and her photography. I'm not going to take the bait… I'm not.

Understandably, everyone was shocked by the sudden change in scenery. So many inexplicable things going on in the space of a few moments. All Max's fears and doubts come to life. Things would only get worse and crazier from here on out.

Done with this, she went to leave only to be stopped by the very last person she ever wanted to be. "I see you, Max Caulfield. Don't even think about leaving here until we talk about your entry." As she approached him, he gave her a twisted smile. "I just wanted to know if... you'd like to spend the rest of your life in my Dark Room? Your purity inspires me so much... and we could be so happy together... Who needs selfies, when I can give you portraiture?"

Max's expression turned eerily calm, an uncanny smile tugging at her lips as her blue eyes almost seemed to glaze over. "I like to think of it as... our Dark Room. It's the only place I truly feel safe and protected from the storm."

"Of course, Max. I can capture you over and over... You can be my model for life... and death," he promised with a smile of his own. "We are going to be so happy together in the dark. Just make sure you stay pure... I won't like it if you get dirty like Rachel or Chloe." With that, he disappeared.

At the sight of Jefferson, the entire group tensed and bristled, even more so when they heard the conversation between him and Max. Clearly, she hadn't wanted to say that, her nightmare forcing the words to come from her lips.

Chloe's fist clenched. What did that motherfucker know about her or Rachel? Out of all of them, he was the dirty one, tainted by sick passion and a fucked up vision; a murderer. And there was no way, no way, she would ever let Max become his 'model for life'. No. Fucking. Way. She would choke the life out of him before he could even try. She wasn't the only one; David and Ryan being her main competition for the person most ready to pulverize Mark Jefferson.

Rachel's hazel eyes hardened, watching this monster of a man verbally torture Max. After everything he had done, he continued to torment the young time traveler even if he wasn't physically there. His unforgivable deeds would remain with Max forever, change her beyond recognition more than they already had.

Pushing past the anxiety, Max kept the scene steady. This was an important part of the experience, as much as everything preceding it. Nearly there...

This can't be real... I don't believe it... Max left the classroom as quickly as she could only to find herself in the dorm hallway. It was dark, lined with candles. Someone was crouched outside Kate's door, sobbing. As she got closer, she could see it was Kate lighting candles in front of a mini makeshift shrine.

"Hey, Kate."
"Max, why did you stop me from jumping?" Like something out of a horror film, Kate transported to behind her. "What kind of friend are you? You never understood me..." suddenly, she was in front of her again, "or what happened to me... Now my family will never leave me alone..." Then she was at Max's side. "And that means I'll always be alone..." and then on her other side, "thanks to you."

Kate's eyes widened at her harsh words. She would never say anything like that, least of all to Max - the person who had saved her, gone above and beyond to help her. Had Max really been so afraid of being blamed and rejected? Was she still? One look confirmed the answer: yes.

"Kate, that's not true! I've always been your friend..."

Not responding, Kate opened the door to her room and jumped into white light. Max quickly followed her, not knowing what else to do. She was back in the hallway, echoed whispers surrounding her all related to a key. After some time, she found the one to Dana's room, 218. This time, the hallway was filled with Rachel Amber's Missing Persons posters. Not only that, but Max was now wearing her clothes and the echoes all related to the missing girl. After trying a few doors, only to find herself back in the same place, Max checked the dorm map and saw Rachel's name on the space for 224. Taking that as a hint, she entered that dorm room.

Again, the hallway change, showing graffiti and other things relating to Victoria Chase. The echoes too were the blonde's words from the week. Weirdest of all, Max seemed to have become Victoria, looks wise at least. Not needing any more of a clue, Max headed to Victoria's room and entered inside. Then, she was herself again, the hallway dedicated to herself with photos lining the walls.

Desperate to get out of this nightmare, she made her way to her own room and then found herself outside the photography classroom. Even stranger, everything seemed to be running in reverse. Her music, the people, her texts, everything except her physical body. Not only that, but her journal had drastically changed too, giving form to all her insecurities and highlighting her mistakes.

"This is like that bit in 'Being John Malkovich'..." Warren muttered to himself, recalling the film with clarity - exploring the depths of the mind, everything totally crazy and nonsensical.

"Or a Tim Burton remake of Max's rewind adventures," Rachel added softly, watching the bizarre scenes play out, constantly shifting.

"Or that," he agreed, getting that vibe from it too now he thought about it. "Might be kinda cool actually... if it wasn't based on real events..."

"It's fucking mental," Chloe breathed, totally confused by what she was seeing. "That's what it is."

Joyce glanced over at her daughter, nodding. "I'll second that conclusion."

"What is going on?" Ryan demanded, face stuck in a permanent frown of confusion as he tried to understand what he was seeing.

"A question we'd all like answering," Vanessa stated, glancing at her husband.

Victoria was just as confused as the rest of them, even more so when it came to her cameo...
appearance in Max's mind. When coupled with the Rachel section, it made more sense. Max was constantly being compared to Rachel, and Victoria was like a more confident version of Max in a sense - in all honesty, they weren't that different.

They had seen in the alternate timeline that Max had the potential to be 'popular' under different circumstances. It was all a matter of believing in her own talent and actually moving towards her dream, something Max seemed to struggle with because she feared rejection. Victoria did too, but she knew that it was the only way to get what she wanted.

Confused as hell, Max walked forward noticing the now familiar ghost doe trot into the bathroom. She opened the bathroom door, stepping into the bright, white light.

Next, she came to a maze, covered in messed up Dark Room photos as Jefferson stalked around, calling to her. "Don't try to hide, Max… Get over here… Let me capture you… Max… you used to be so pure, so innocent… Now you have to die."

*Jefferson is coming after me again… No…*

"Please understand, Max… The only place I can be 'myselfie' is in the Dark Room… What happened to your spark, Max? I thought I could be your professor… for life. I realize now you'll never be an artist, much less a photographer… Come here, Max. Class is dismissed… I miss those days when you looked at me in class with those wide eyes… I want to be your professor again… I can teach you so much… Show me the love… and hate."

Feeling an uncomfortable run down his spine, Warren shuddered. "Okay, this is some serious horror movie shit right here."

Kate felt ill listening to his mad rantings, especially when accompanied by the Dark Room photos. He sounded totally crazy, voice up and down like a yo-yo. It had been bad enough in real life; in Max's mind, he was a million times scarier. They all felt uncomfortable and sick to their stomachs, Max most of all.

"That bastard had better be ready for the beat down he's gonna get after this…” Chloe mumbled under her breath, teeth gritted. Whether he had ever said this in reality was irrelevant; he had fucked with Max's head.

Taylor had always suspected there was something a little… off about Mark Jefferson. Whenever she saw Victoria sucking up to him, she always had this feeling she could never quite shake. Maybe it had been something about his eyes or stance or voice… sometimes betraying a darker, predatory tone. When she told Victoria that, she had been brushed off. It seemed she had a reason for that sense of unease.

Max was shaking now, wincing at the words Jefferson spoke. She hated this, wanted him out of her mind for good...

*With some careful maneuvering, she made it out of the first section. The lighthouse could be seen in the distance, seemingly guiding her or maybe exposing her. Maybe I'll be safe in the lighthouse… maybe I'll wake up…*

In the next part of this living nightmare were boards showing even more Dark Room photos. In the middle was the bronze statue and fountain from Blackwell. The statue spun, lighting up parts of the area, leaving shadows when it hit the photo boards. Something told her that
getting caught here was not good.

Principal Well's voice boomed out of a hidden speaker, making several messed up and fake announcements. "Good evening, Blackwell. This is Principal Wells and I'm here to drop the mic on Max Caulfield. Attention… I regret to announce that one of your fellow classmates, Maxine Caulfield, has died under tragic circumstances that I promise to investigate after I get my drink on. Will Max Caulfield please come to the Dark Room immediately. I repeat, Max Caulfield to the Dark Room… now! Excuse me, can everybody hear me? If you know the whereabouts of Miss Caulfield, please tie her up and inform me or David Madsen. She's wanted for the death of Chloe Price and Rachel Amber. Thank you."

Chloe frowned at the accusations and threats. "Just when we all thought Wells couldn't get any more incompetent."

"I thought he was bad enough before, but now… this is a whole new level, even for Wells," Rachel agreed. Everything seemed ten times worse in Max's head, playing on her experiences and enhancing the guilty, the fear...

"The man is a sorry excuse for a principal, in this and in reality," Ryan grumbled, anger flaring up again. He thought he had reached the pinnacle of rage, used it all up. Seemed there was still a little left to draw on.

Joyce crossed her arms, not sure what else to do. "Can't argue there."

"How one school can have so many useless teachers and off the rails students, I don't know," Vanessa thought aloud, shaking her head.

"There are some decent people, like Ms. Grant and Samuel," Max replied stiffly. Their presence did little to counterweight the failings of Principal Wells and did nothing against Jefferson's handy work.

Using the boards as cover, she eventually reached the other side. There were a bunch of lockers forming yet another maze for her to traverse through. On the other side of the first lot was Warren. His lines related to the movie drive in he had asked Max to go to near the beginning of the week and his romantic advances.

Warren recoiled at his input to the nightmare, hating how aggressive and creepy he sounded. Was that how Max had heard him? Some creepy stalker who refused to give her a moment's rest? Given, some of his behaviors had been borderline... no, downright weird from what they had all seen. No wonder she pictured him like this.

Maybe he should've thought more about how Max felt, not just trying to pressure her into spending time with him and, in doing so, coming off as desperately creepy. He clearly hadn't even considered that she might already like someone, hadn't even bothered asking. Not to mention all the shit she got from Brooke because she was jealous of the attention. And that was amongst all the time travel stuff, trying to stop Chloe from dying every five seconds. He should have been a better friend. At least he had helped stop Nathan a couple times, that was something. A flicker of redemption, perhaps.

The next person she came across was Principal Wells, mentioning Kate's attempted suicide and how much he seemed to want Max out of Blackwell, as well as grumbling about the alternate timeline's Chloe. Samuel was there too, prowling the space with a flashlight.
Of course, Nathan was there too. "Chloe is a loser just like you, Max. And you can't keep saving her over and over and over… Oh, did you get all hot and bothered when your wimpy boyfriend gave me a beatdown? Oh, oh, oh, Max, you're way more disturbed and dangerous than me… Snitches get stitches! Only a feminazi would try to take on a Prescott… Blackwell is my turf, you whore! The only way you'll ever get into the Vortex Club is if a tornado swallows your ass up! Admit it, Max… You're just jealous because me and Victoria actually do the work while you do nothing and whine! Holy shit, you really think Victoria is going to be your best friend forever? She will always hate you!"

Victoria listened to Nathan's words, frowning. This wasn't the Nathan she knew and was friends with, much closer to the Nathan they had seen during the week. Taylor and Courtney knew that fact too. What was even sadder, now they knew he had gotten caught up in something he hadn't wanted to do… something he died because of.

If only Victoria had known then what was going on, she would have helped him in any way possible… gotten him the best care. It almost felt like she had failed him. She had to keep reminding herself that it wasn't too late to get him some serious medical help and therapy. Max had made that option a possibility.

The last person in this section was David. "Hey, Max. Pretty fucking ironic that I ended up being right about everything and you end up destroying the town. Hey, Max, please come here. So I can beat you up! Come on, Max, just admit that you're jealous of my service record. Admit it! You can't escape my surveillance, missy! You thought I was harassing Kate, but I was helping her! What the hell did you do for her? You're such a hypocrite, Max. I may be a dick, but at least I'm honest. You just use your power to cheat at life… and cheat your friends out of life."

David hated hearing his voice used like this, knowing what Max thought of him. She had every reason to picture him like this, no denying that. He had alienated her, even though she was doing more than anyone to keep Chloe safe. Not to mention Kate - he had failed there; she would be dead without Max. Kate knew that, too. Without Max she wouldn't be here, in this timeline or that one. The young time traveler had tried so hard to fix things, just like now. How much could she actually fix, though?

All their accusations echoed around her, threatening to swallow and overwhelm her. This is like an evil maze… Somehow, she managed to evade permanent capture using her powers and now entered what seemed to represent the junkyard with cars, the yellow bus and a small space that was reminiscent of Chloe and Rachel's hideout. Here, Frank, Jefferson, and Nathan were her stalkers.

Frank's gruff voice echoed around her, menacing. "Get your bony ass over here! I am gonna cut you open, freak! I sure hope you don't think we're buddies now. Psst, Max! Me and Rachel are floating down here in the sewer… Come on down! Oh man, you shoulda heard Chloe smack-talk you. It was brutal. But, of course, I see what she's talking about, now… Max, you need to get high like Rachel… Want some drugs? If you took some of my drugs, maybe you'd be a lot happier. Now that Rachel's dead… it's time for you to die too, skank..."

This version of Frank freaked Rachel out. She knew him, had seen his good and bad side - none of them measured up to this depiction. There was something… eerie about his tone, disturbing. Even Chloe was shocked, and she hadn't seen his good side as much as Rachel. Frank might come off as dangerous - and if you really pissed him off, put his life in danger, he was - but for the most part,
he was just trying to get by. He might threaten and talk a big game, but he would rather do that than hurt anyone.

*Dammit, Max… Wake up!*

Jefferson prowled the junkyard representation, calling to her in an eerily calm tone that fluctuated to anger at points. "Max… Max… I want to share my gift with you… Don't you dare run away… You will be my greatest portrait, Max… Now that Chloe is dead, you won't be distracted in class anymore… Rachel, Rachel Amber… Just like her last name, I can finally see right through her skin… and feel that cold, rotting flesh… If only you could have seen Rachel… my blood splattered angel… Max, Rachel not only gave great headshots… she gave great head. Especially after I dug her body up to be with her one final time. Why are you looking at me like that? Max, come back in the Dark Room… I know you're dying for it."

Some parts of that monolog from Jefferson seriously made them want to throw up. It was sick and disturbing… and possibly true. That was the worst part. Jefferson was more than capable and crazy to do that. Max clearly thought so.

Chloe bristled with rage, blue eyes filled with hatred and disgust. She couldn't think about him doing… that to Rachel, or to Max. It was too much. Obviously, Rachel was freaked out by the possibility. Mark Jefferson had always been a little on the creepy pervy side honestly; she'd caught him giving her strange look that no teacher should ever give a student.

And Max… the screen flickered as his words seeped through to her brain, swirling. She could just about handle the others in her head, blaming and threatening her, but Jefferson… he was something else entirely. He violated every sense, leaving no blood soaked stone unturned. The embodiment of the worst of all Max's fears.

The most unstable of all was Nathan, who seemed to have totally lost it. "Holy fucking shit, Max… That was hilarious when you guys dug up Rachel's body! Ha, ha, ha! 'Oh, oh no, no, no. Boo hoo. Oh, Rachel is worm food…' Comedy Gold. Genius! Oh, man, Rachel looked just like a zombie model in the dirt… Just bone, meat, and maggots. I would be all over that shit. You wanna take pictures? Hey, Max, do you want to say hello to Rachel? She's posing for me in Hell! It's going to be so sweet when I bury your carcass next to Rachel and do an epic photo shoot… Hey, Max. Whatthefuckever are you going to do now that I'm dead? Just because I'm mentally ill doesn't mean I deserve to die, Max! Nobody ever helped me, Max. Especially you…"

Nathan's words only made Max feel worse, plunging her deeper into despair.

"Max… Max…"

Max's eyes flickered as she looked around for the voice, finding herself in the junkyard again. She gasped when she saw who was calling out to her… a girl about her height, with long blonde hair and hazel eyes, her trademark blue feather earring swaying slightly.

"Hello, Max… welcome back," Rachel greeted, arms spreading out almost in invitation.

"No, leave me alone!" Max shouted as loud as she could, wanting to leave this place.
Rachel sighed. "No respect for the dead…" Flakes of skin peeled from the left side of her pretty face - one Max knew well from the 'Missing Persons' posters - exposing rotted muscle and bone - grotesque. And the smell…

"Please… stop…" she begged, shaking uncontrollably and turning away.

Shaking her head, Rachel forced her head up, making her look at her gradually degenerating appearance. "It's too late, Max. I'm dead. Chloe's dead. Everyone is. You included… a big family reunion in heaven… or maybe hell after what you've done, what you've made us all suffer."

"I… I didn't..." Max began, almost biting her tongue as Rachel lunged forward, grabbing hold of her head tight, fingers digging in and hazel eyes filled with hatred.

"I… I didn't..." she repeated mockingly, expression hardening. "You're the one who's supposed to be buried in a shallow grave, not me."

With a twisted smirk, she grabbed hold of Max, dragging her across the floor to the spot they had found Rachel’s corpse. The young time traveler could do nothing, unable to struggle – her body a dead weight.

When they got there, the grave was open, surrounded by familiar faces. Chloe at the head of the grave, with her various bullet wounds; Kate to her left - blood smeared, body battered and bruised from her fall off the roof; Victoria to her right, body covered in dirt, makeup running. David stood beside Kate, with injuries he had sustained from his scuffle in the Dark Room; Nathan was next to Victoria, face covered in marks from Warren's beatdown; and finally Jefferson - a single bullet shot to his head, the one David had delivered. Blood oozed from various wounds, dripping down faces and soaking into clothing.

Rachel stopped by the foot of the grave, hand clutched on tight to Max's wrist as she forced her to her knees. As hard as she tried, Max couldn't look away from the audience.

"We are gathered here today to witness the burial of one Maxine Caulfield. Would anyone like to say any words?" The group all nodded at the question, taking it in turns to add their reverse eulogies; a condemnation.

"I'll start," Jefferson offered eagerly. "When I first saw Max, I knew she had potential… as my model. Everything about her screamed innocence - the perfect subject to defile. I knew my session with her would be a career highlight. Then, she ruined it all… willingly rolled around in the dirt… I couldn't have that…"

Nathan was up next, face looking like a Picasso painting for all the bruises. "Max never understood my pain; she was selfish. Only thinking about what she wanted. If you factored into her plans, you were safe. If not… you didn’t matter. I was beaten up by her instruction, blamed for things I didn’t want to do. Because of her… I was killed."

After he had finished his piece, David stepped up. "Max got me kicked out of my own home, got my step-daughter killed. She broke her promise to keep Chloe safe… to stay out of the dark… I was trying to help; she sabotaged my efforts."

Leading on from him was Kate. "Max tried to play the hero saving me. She didn't really care; she just wanted everyone to think she was a hero, to make everyone like her. It took her days to realize the pain I was going through… some friend."

Chloe added her part next, blood dripping down her face from the bullet wound on her forehead as
she spoke. "Max abandoned me, ignored me for five years when I needed someone. And when she finally returned, I died... so many times. All because of her. She didn't care about me, not one bit. She thought I loved her... but why would I? Who could love someone like her? I had Rachel; I didn't need some shy hipster geek. No competition. So pathetic."

"Guess it's my turn, hmm?" Rachel asked, clearing her throat. "Max tried to take my place, but she could never come close. Everyone knew it, especially Chloe. In so many ways, Maxine Caulfield just couldn't compare. She tried to be perfect, to please everyone and force them to like her - cheating life. Well, cheaters never prosper..." She threw Max into the grave roughly, offering a twisted grin.

The audience - who had similar smiles - began shoveling dirt over her with their hands. Max tried to move, to jump out and run, but she couldn't... all she could do was get slowly suffocated by the dirt, all the while listening to their torments...

"Max... are you okay?" A voice called out to her, loud and familiar. She focused on it, dragging herself back.

"You look pale..." Kate observed, worry lining her face.

"Like, Casper level," Warren added, looking equally concerned. All eyes were on her now.

"I... I'm fine..." Max swallowed hard, noticing the screen had paused, now flickering.

Even as she resumed the images, she continued to hear the words mind-Rachel had tormented her with, her twisted laughter and reminders of failure. Now was not the time to fall apart... *Keep it together, Max. We're nearly there... almost...*

After some time, she managed to make it to the other side of the junkyard representation. Now at the lighthouse, she sat down on the bench at the base. Snow began to fall around her and soon she realized she was sitting in a snow globe on the fireplace in Chloe's house. She was watching the scene of William leaving again, the conversation sounding muffled. As William talked on the phone, she saw herself burning the photo of her and Chloe making pancakes so she could never come back to this moment. The image turned white at the edges, crackling from the outside in.

This scene made Joyce tear up a little, remembering how William had been alive for just a brief moment thanks to Max. She wished she could have told him how much she loved him one last time...

Next thing she knew, Max was in the Dark Room again. *How long will this nightmare go on?* Jefferson suddenly materialized, sitting on the table. Chloe was there too, posing for him.

As Jefferson took his photos, he began to speak. "I think you'd be perfect for my new photo series on retro-grunge... You have the same qualities that I loved in Rachel Amber... but not Max..."

"Max is a fucking child..." Chloe mentioned as she glanced over to the young time traveler strapped into the chair.

"Oh Christ, I know..." he agreed, "and she never shuts up, does she?"
Continuing to pose, Chloe stated, "I’m so over her hipster bullshit."

Jefferson smiled, looking for a good angle. "I think everyone at Blackwell is over Max... Let's prove it."

A flash of white light and Jefferson had disappeared. Now, Chloe was stood in her pajamas, Warren also there. "Booyah, Warren! I thought you were all over Max's shit..."

"She's not all that..." he scoffed, "So who cares if she doesn't kiss me?"

"You should have seen her make a move on me in my room... Hella lame."

"Max should see me make a move on you..." he suggested, "Come here..."

Chloe took a step forward and kissed Warren briefly, but Max didn't have much time to process it as the white light flashed again.

Chloe wasn't overly happy about that, although she was too preoccupied with other things to comment, namely Max. Did she really think Chloe would kiss someone like Warren? Or say any of those things?

Warren had been replaced with Nathan, sat on the white couch next to Chloe.

Nathan lounged around, sneering. "Goddamn, you are a sexy bitch! Why hang out with Max, huh?"

"Boredom. Plus she's like my personal puppet," Chloe explained.

"I hear that. Do you... want to party?" he asked, sounding like a total leering creep, "I got a drugstore in my room."

It was then that Chloe seemed to notice she was even there. "Oh shit! Look at Max spying on us... Take a fucking picture, bitch! Or take a selfie!"

The white light came again, now showing Chloe dancing on the couch in her underwear. "See, this is how you bust a move, Max... No mosh pit for you, shaka brah!"

Again, the light triggered a switch in scene. Chloe was now joined by Victoria on the couch, the two sitting close and holding each other. "Damn, Victoria... You're a real woman... not a little girl like Max..."

Victoria was all over the bluenette too. "I fucking love your tats, Chloe. You're so hot. I can't believe it took us so long to hook up..." No more words were exchanged. Instead, they kissed. This time lasted much longer than the one with Warren, much more involved as Chloe's hand rested on Victoria's thigh.

If it had been under different circumstances, Rachel might've made some comment about how hot this was. Now was not the time for that, even as a joke. Victoria's lip pursed as she watched her on screen counterpart kissing Chloe. Chloe herself was momentarily shocked. Max really did seem worried that she just wasn't good enough to deserve her affections... with someone like Victoria of all people - at the most basic level a more outgoing version of Max. She didn't want to kiss or flirt with any of the people who had been shown in the nightmare, not one bit because...
Then, the Chloe from the alternate timeline appeared in front of her. "Why did you get rewind powers? You don't even know how to use them… Rachel's dead and you're still alive. Life is… so not fair."

Chloe was still there when the image changed, this time her usual blue-haired punk self. She was the one taking pictures this time. "I wish you would have never come back to Arcadia Bay… You're the real storm."

Finally, the Dark Room disappeared and Max found herself in the Two Whales bathroom. She was locked inside with a code locked door blocking her path. When she looked away from the code pad, the walls were covered in four digit numbers. Great. Numbers are all over the place. How will I find the right code? Clearly not knowing where to start, Max looked for a significant set. When she looked in the mirror, only one code showed up. 0311. It was a date she knew well, Chloe's birthday.

When she opened the door, she was in the Two Whales Diner. Everyone was here frozen in place, pleading for their lives or sounding resigned to the fact that they were about to die, one or two thanked her for the difference she had made in their lives, but not many. Their voices overlapped, making the individual comments nearly impossible to make out. In the second to last booth, she saw herself sat there.

Of course, the group was confused. Maybe they shouldn't be after everything they had witnessed thus far. All they could do was sit and wait to see what happened next… something Max already knew, as always. If the previous sections were anything to go by, she was about to get ripped into.

"Who… Who are you?" Max asked, even more confused now.

"Holy shit, are you cereal?" the other Max retorted sharply. "I'm you, dumbass. Or I'm one of many Maxes you've left behind…"

"Can you get me out of here?"

"Oh, so you want help? Thought you could control everybody and everything, huh? Twist time around your fingers?" the other Max accused, voice filled with bitter resentment.

"I tried to help…" Max protested weakly. "I only wanted to do the right thing."

"No, you only wanted to be popular," the other Max corrected. "And once you got these amazing powers, your big plan was to trick people into thinking you give a rat's ass."

Chloe wanted to scream at the screen, tell this pretender she was so wrong. Max cared about all of them, her most of all, and she didn't need some figment of her imagination telling her otherwise, lying.

"That's true… I wasted my power on trying to be friends with everybody," the young time traveler admitted, hanging her head.

"About time you admitted that. But it's way too late after everything you've done…" the other Max reminded her.

"But… I still have great friends. And my power helped some," she continued, sounding
"Please, stop playing innocent. You're a goddamn hypocrite. You've left a trail of death and suffering behind you," her lookalike accused with contempt.

Max frowned. "That was not my fault, you son of a bitch..."

"Don't you dare talk about our mom that way... ha!" The short, sharp laugh faded away as the other Max continued. "What about the crap that was your fault? Wait, wait, let me guess... You fucked up time and space for your precious punk Chloe. You think she's worth all that?"

"Of course. She's my best friend."

"Oh yeah, you ignored your 'best friend' for five years while she went through hell... Some friend," the other Max snorted at what she believed to be a ridiculous statement.

Again, Chloe was biting her tongue. Yes, Max had gone AWOL for a while, and yes, Chloe had been angry about it, but she had come back and saved her time and time again. She was proving it now by doing this, putting her life at risk to show them what had happened and to stop it from happening again.

"Chloe does a better job of guilt-tripping me than you do," Max shot back.

"Because you let her bully you. It's called 'Stockholm Syndrome'," the other Max replied, almost calm. "But you didn't do that homework... so you'll have to learn the hard way. Like Rachel..."

Max had enough by this point. "Just shut up. You're not scaring me anymore."

"I'd be more worried about Chloe killing us than Jefferson..." the other Max goaded. "Max, do you really think she has any feelings for us? You're just another puppet... Man, you are so stupid. I'm embarrassed to have the same name... And someday Chloe will destroy-" The entrance to the diner burst open. "Oh hell, speak of the devil..."

Chloe stomped towards the booth, sitting opposite the other Max. "Dude, do not even fuck with her head! She knows what we went through this week and you don't! There's no way you can break our team! This is reality!"

The diner faded away, a dark space now showing static representations of Max and Chloe's journey along a winding path. Snapshots of their time together. In the distance was the lighthouse, providing a guiding light.

Yet another change in scenery for the group to try and comprehend, everything they had seen from Max's nightmare blending into one. Something told them the end was nearing, this last part already seeming very final. How it would all end, they had no clue other than the fact that the storm was coming and Max had traveled back to avoid the outcome.

The first still image was of them in Chloe's truck after Max had been saved from Nathan, echoed phrases from the past accompanying the frozen moment. Second, the time when they went to Chloe's room and Max had been given William's camera. Next came Chloe dancing on her bed while Max took a picture, them sitting on the bench up near the lighthouse and
Then, Chloe and Max sat at the diner discussing the rewind power, Max waking up from passing out at the junkyard her head in Chloe's lap. The train speeding towards Chloe as Max pulled her off the track and the two of them walking hand in hand along the tracks. Their attempt to break into Principal Wells office came next, browsing the computer when they uncovered Nathan's disturbing drawing.

After, the pool with Max dive-bombing into the water and them escaping from David Madsen. Waking up the morning after and taking a selfie, only to get photobombed by Chloe. The brief kiss they had shared in Chloe's room only moments after. Breaking into Frank's RV and finding out about Rachel. Max as a kid looking so happy with her hands in Chloe's after traveling back through the photo, hoping to fix everything.

Next up was the alternate timeline, Chloe and Max making their way down the beachfront, then the photo browsing ending in Chloe's death. Max returning to the 'real world' after her impossible decision, back to investigating. Finding the sick red binders in the Dark Room followed by the junkyard discovery, Chloe's sobs lingering on the air with uncomfortable echoes.

A summary of the week in still images… all the time Max and Chloe had spent together, laughed and cried, laid out before them. Before the Wednesday afternoon when Max photo jumped - despite Chloe almost dying and Kate's attempted suicide - the pair managed to have some fun, almost like old times. After that point, things had only gotten worse… the Dark Room, finding Rachel's grave, Jefferson… trying to bring Chloe back…

Where would it lead them? The group was about to find that out...

Then, Chloe supporting Max's weight as they climbed up towards the lighthouse. "Max, come on now! Don't worry… we'll be okay." Max approached the still image, walking into her body once more. Both she and Chloe collapsed to the floor, drenched to the skin from the rain. "Max? Max, can you hear me? Please, say something."

"Chloe? I… I must have passed out… Sorry."

Chloe let out a sigh of relief, rain lashing her skin. "Oh, thank God… Don't you ever do that again, okay?"

"I swear… but that nightmare was so real… was so horrible…" Chloe helped her up, both staring out over the water at the swirling tornado headed directly for Arcadia's shoreline. "This is my storm. I caused this… I caused all of this. I changed fate and destiny so much that… I actually did alter the course of everything. And all I really created was just death and destruction!"

Chloe's expression turned determined as she grabbed onto Max's shoulder briefly to get her attention. "Fuck all of that, okay? You were given a power. You didn't ask for it… and you saved me. Which had to happen, all of this did… except for what happened to Rachel. But without your power, we wouldn't have found her! Okay, so you're not the goddamn Time Master, but you're Maxine Caulfield…" she held onto her friend's arms again, getting her to really focus, "and you're amazing."
Max held her gaze for a few seconds before looking back out over the water at the storm. Silence passed between them.

"Max, this is the only way." Chloe held out the photo of the butterfly Max had taken right at the beginning of the week.

"I feel like I took this shot a thousand years ago," Max muttered softly, staring at the photo that had started all of this.

"You... You could use that photo to change everything right back to when you took that picture... All that would take is for me to... to..." Chloe held her hands to her face, stifling the sobs.

It only took a second for the group to understand what Chloe was hinting at. A deathly silence passed over them as the implications set in. Chloe was suggesting Max return to the moment where she had saved the bluenette and... let it play out without intervening. Let Chloe die.

"Fuck that! No... no way!" Max replied predictably. "You are my number one priority now. You are all that matters to me."

Chloe's face dropped, bittersweet recognition in her watery eyes. "I know. You proved that over and over again... even though I don't deserve it. I'm so selfish... not like my mom... Look what she had to give up and live through... and she did. She deserves so much more than to be killed by a storm in a fucking diner. Even my step... father deserves her alive. There's so many more people in Arcadia Bay who should live... way more than me..."

"Don't say that... I won't trade you," Max insisted, tears mingling with rain.

Taking a deep breath, Chloe shook her head. "You're not trading me. Maybe you've just been delaying my real destiny... Look at how many times I've almost died or actually died around you. Look at what's happening in Arcadia Bay ever since you first saved me. I know I've been selfish," Chloe took hold of Max's arm again, turning her so she was looking straight into her eyes, "but for once I think I should accept my fate... our fate..."

"Chloe..."

"Max, you finally came back to me this week, and..." her voice faltered, threatening to fail her, "you did nothing but show me your love and friendship. You made me smile and laugh, like I haven't done in years. Wherever I end up after this... in whatever reality... all those moments between us were real, and they'll always be ours." Her next few words were almost swallowed up by the wind they were so soft. "No matter what you choose, I know you'll make the right decision."

"Chloe... I can't make this choice..." Max replied, pleading her to drop this.

Reaching out to hold her steady, Chloe's voice became oddly calm. "No, Max... You're the only one who can."

Two choices popped up on screen, a decision none of the group wanted to make: SACRIFICE CHLOE/SACRIFICE ARCADIA BAY
They sat there, stunned into silence. After everything, all the hardships and struggles… this is what it came down to: saving Arcadia or saving Chloe.

David stared at the two choices, tears slowly welling up in his eyes. There was no way he could choose to kill Chloe. No damn way. He had seen what he had been when Max told him in the Dark Room - broken. Chloe may be a lot of things - selfish, childish, jealous, easy to anger, sometimes manipulative - but she was also loyal and would do anything for people she deemed worthy of her time and affection.

Understandably, Joyce was beside herself. Chloe couldn't die, especially not like this. Not in a bathroom, shot by Nathan thinking nobody cared about her - that couldn't be further from the truth. After William dies, Chloe was all she had left; aside from David. There was no way she could come back from another death in her family. She didn't care what happened to her or anyone, her daughter couldn't die.

Ryan and Vanessa Caulfield also couldn't make the decision to let Chloe die. They knew and had seen how much she meant to Max and vice versa. Chloe had been a second daughter to them, Joyce and William their friends. Max might not be able to spring back from Chloe's death. She had been trying so hard to keep her alive, to let it end now would be cruel.

Warren had been expecting something like this - why else would Max come back this far? - but it still came as a shock. It was like in movies he'd watched, the final choice was always big on consequences, especially where time travel was concerned. A whole town or one girl. On paper, it might seem obvious - sacrificing one to save many - but that was much too simple. When you loved someone so much, would do anything for them - mess around with time and push yourself to the absolute limit - the decision wasn't so easy.

Victoria was equally conflicted. It was a lot of people to let die. Then she thought about if this was her decision with her own people she cared about - Taylor, Courtney, Nathan - and it seemed like a small price to pay for a moment. Taylor and Courtney were having similar thoughts. Could either of them kill the other or Victoria to save a town of people they had only passing connections to? Could they live with themselves after letting the town burn?

Kate let the tears roll down her cheeks. This was a horrible and cruel decision. After everything Max had been through and done to help, this was a gut punch. If she was in Max's place and Max was in Chloe's, Kate would choose to save her, as hard as it might be to let innocent people die for no reason. There were some people who you just couldn't let die and if you had the chance to save them, you'd take it… no matter the cost.

Rachel kept a neutral expression, not giving away her emotions. Internally, she was considering - not that it needed much time, honestly. She'd save Chloe in a heartbeat. Arcadia had done nothing for her, the place she had ended up dying because of that fucker Jefferson. Chloe… she had been a loyal friend and… even when Rachel had gone all uncontrolled hot and cold, she still stuck around. Yeah, they fought and got angry at each other, but they had a lot of fun and good times to cling onto. She'd probably fucked up with Chloe now, but… their time together still counted for a lot.

Chloe was stunned into silence. This was… insane. So, this was why Max had been trying so damn hard to find a third option… she didn't want to let anyone else die, not even one person. Not even her. That was how much Max cared. She was willing to keep torturing herself over and over - physically, mentally and emotionally - to keep Chloe and the others alive, to give them a happy life. It was too much. Chloe didn't think she was worth that much, but Max clearly did.

If the roles were reversed… the bluenette would certainly sacrifice the town. Max was the only person who she had been able to trust, who had saved her time and time again regardless of the
consequences… who had shown her that life was still worth living. She had spent five years trying
to live without Max and it had fucked her up. A lifetime without her… now knowing what she
knew from the experience… she couldn't.

All of them came to the same conclusion… it was an impossible choice, leaning slightly more on
the side of sacrificing Arcadia if they really had to choose.

Max wasn't about to put them through that particular decision; it was too cruel. "And that was the
decision I had to make… or should've made. I tried so hard to come up with a third option, so
fucking hard… Eventually, I realized that one week was not enough to fix everything. I had to go
back further… to here." A melancholic, tired smile tugged at Max's lips. "We'll now begin the
Q&A part of this experience. So, any questions?"

Chapter End Notes

   So, questions will be answered. Obviously, if there are any questions you want
answers to, now would be a good time to leave them in the comments/reviews before
the next chapter is released (somewhere around 1-2 weeks after this one's initial
release, I imagine. Maybe longer) so we can take them into consideration. For
example, we will be explaining how Max's new power development works.
Loose Ends

Chapter Notes

So, here we go. The penultimate chapter… So, here we go. The penultimate chapter… Tyler and I tried to answer as many questions as possible. Max simply doesn't know the answer to some questions, hence why they have only been mentioned in passing. Something to keep in mind: some questions will be answered through actions later on in the remaining chapters, not through direct questions.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twenty-One: Loose Ends

Minds still reeling from that final impossible decision, the group couldn't really think straight. A million different questions jumped to the forefronts of their minds, all demanding answers. It was difficult to prioritize or even sort them out into clear, coherent sentences.

Having expected this kind of initial reaction, Max took the time to shut down the screen - she didn't need it anymore. Not a moment too soon, either. Maybe pushing this far hadn't been the best plan in hindsight, but… the ends would justify the means. They had to.

After some time, Chloe finally spoke up. "So, you came back all this way to avoid making that choice? To find another way."

Max nodded slowly, a pang of guilt gnawing away at her from the inside. "Yeah, I did. Maybe I should've given up, accepted it… but I just couldn't. Maybe it was selfish of me to make you all suffer repeatedly while I tried to figure out a way to save everyone. Guess I'm the living embodiment of that quote about insanity: doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results."

"How many times have you experienced that week?" Warren asked, seeing a window of opportunity.

"Enough." Honestly, Max had lost count. She'd tried so hard to change things: fuck up, rewind and repeat. "Too many before I figured out I needed to go back further."

"To when I was… alive," Rachel concluded, knowing the only reason she was here now was because of Max.

"Yes, to that point in time," Max confirmed. "Everything I did came back to you, Rachel. When you disappeared, that was the real start of this whole mess. Not your fault, but the truth. So, I guess you could say Jefferson was the one who started everything."

"You said you had Jefferson…” Kate paused, trying to look for the right word, "detained, what about Nathan?"

"Yeah, what about that fucker?" Chloe pressed, frowning at the name of the boy who had killed both her and Rachel - according to Jefferson anyway - in another timeline.

Max had considered that question many times, coming to various conclusions. Of course, she
wanted revenge for everything he had caused - he had been the reason her powers triggered in the first place. Not to mention how he had threatened Max at every turn, hurt her friends more than once. On the other hand… he wouldn't have done any of that without Jefferson's input. Sure, he was an entitled rich kid with anger issues, but a murderer of his own volition? She wasn't so sure…

What he needed most of all was serious help, and maybe she could make sure he got that help. "I have something in mind."

"It'd better involve a lot of pain…" Chloe demanded in a low voice, "he has so much to answer for."

"You're right, he does," the young time traveler agreed. "It will probably be painful, just not the way you're thinking." She knew better than anyone that facing your own demons could be so much more painful than any physical punishment.

"Speaking of Jefferson, have you decided what you're going to do with him?" David asked stiffly, hands clenching into fists just saying his name.

As far as Jefferson went… she had two options. One, expose him and hope he would rot in jail for eternity. Two, put him through as much pain - physical, mental and emotional - as possible, emulating only a fraction of that she had suffered at his hand, before putting him down for good. As much as she might want to pick the first to hurt his ego and pride, the second was the only way to ensure he would do no more harm.

"Whatever I decided, it'll never be enough. A lifetime of torture wouldn't even begin to amount to all the pain and suffering he's caused." She took a deep breath, calming the rage and hatred bubbling up inside her. "Honestly, right now I want him out of the picture, permanently, so he never hurts anyone ever again. People like him, without remorse, they don't deserve a second chance."

Victoria asked the question all of them had been avoiding so far, direct as usual. "And what about after? I assume that storm is still coming."

"I have time to prepare," Max replied, sounding a little uncertain of herself. "If things play out as before - and honestly I'm not sure if they will - the storm will hit on October 11th. What is it now… mid-April? Something like that. That gives me six months or so if we assume that date hasn't changed."

"You think it might have?" Joyce asked, sounding worried at the prospect of the due date being brought forward.

Yet another thing Max didn't know the answer to. "Maybe… maybe not. It might be a set point in time, only happening on that one day, triggered by a certain event. Or it might hit when it reaches a certain size, once I've messed around with time a certain amount… like I said, I have no clue. All I can do is wait."

"So, you do have a plan?" her father pressed hopefully.

"Of sorts, yes." Already pre-empting their next question - she didn't need her rewind power to know it - she continued. "And no, I can't tell you before you ask."

"That's bullshit, Max and you know it," Chloe interrupted. "You can't just show us this and expect us to accept it all without knowing what you're going to do to try and stop it."

As much as she might want to tell them, she knew they would never agree to her plans, saying it
was too risky. "I'm sorry if that answer disappointed you but I have nothing else to say on the matter. You're just going to have to trust me.

"So, you want us to trust you, but you don't trust us enough to tell," Chloe summarized, sounding a little hurt by the assumed lack of faith.

Max shook her head. She did trust them, Chloe most of all. "I wouldn't have called you all here if I didn't trust you, revealed my power so openly and showed you all this. I'll let you know when the time's right, I promise. Right now… is not that time."

As expected, Chloe wasn't overly happy with that answer but didn't question further. It would only lead to an argument both she and Max would regret. Besides, she did trust Max.

Now they had moved onto Max's power, Taylor had a question that she was sure they all wanted to ask. "How did you show us? Obviously using your power but…"

Courtney finished the thought off for her. "You never did anything like this in the stuff you showed us."

"I don't know about that…" She tried to put it as simply as possible. "Think of it as a kind of reverse photo jump: instead of jumping into the medium, a photo, and experiencing the memories, I transfer my - and sometimes other Maxes' - memories onto a medium, aka the screen."

"How did you figure out how to do that?" Warren asked, sounding a little too excited about her power. He was a science geek through and through.

"A lot of trial and error… this rewind thing doesn't come with a manual, unfortunately."

If only it had... "It takes a lot of concentration and effort. Whenever the connection is broken unexpectedly, it puts more strain on me, if I get distracted or… my emotions get in the way. There are natural breaks in memory - in this case, the end of each day and smaller ones when major decisions diverged - where I can take a breather."

"Why would you do something that clearly put you under a lot of pressure and stress?" Victoria asked, again direct.

"Because…" Max let out a deep sigh, ready to explain her logic. "it was the only way to make sure you understood. If I'd just told you, I doubt you'd believe, not without some kind of demonstration, and even if you did, it wouldn't be the same. You had to experience it yourselves, make the same decisions I made."

Vanessa was next to voice her question. "Why did you disappear so suddenly before this, Max? And why did it take so long to get in touch?"

"Before when I jumped to another timeline, I switched bodies with the Max already there. Not this time. For whatever reason, my entire physical self was thrown into the timeline, which caused a few… problems. Two Maxes running around… that's not supposed to happen. It took a while for my presence to stabilize, and presumably win over the other Max." She frowned at that, a flicker of guilt present.

"Then you were getting busy setting all this up, right?" Rachel hypothesized, confident that was the reason.

Max nodded once. "Yeah, I was. Everything needed to be ready before I made contact. Until I had it all in place, there was no point. The mystery made it all the more impossible to resist coming here."
At that point, Taylor frowned. "Why us? Me and Courtney, I mean. I can understand pretty much everyone else being here but…"

"We do seem to be background characters in all this," Courtney finished the sentence for her.

"Well, that's simple. I figured Victoria would be more likely to show up if you guys came along. And, I think you'll agree that you learned a thing or two along the way, right?" Taylor and Courtney exchanged glances, suspecting that she was referring to Kate in particular. "Sure, I could've invited other people, but… I wanted to keep it on a need to know basis, gather together those people who really needed to know or could learn something important from this. Obviously, I couldn't invite people like Frank or Nathan, imagine the fights. I'd never manage to finish this."

"Speaking of Nathan," David interrupted, "his father built that bunker, right? He must've known what it was being used for."

"Oh, I'm pretty sure he does," she added, tone bitter. "I don't think he originally built it for that purpose, though. Honestly, I don't know what is going on with the Prescotts. Maybe they are just paranoid… and maybe something bigger is going on. I wish I knew which."

"While we're on the subject of weird inexplicable shit, what about the butterfly? And that doe?" Rachel asked, already having her theories but interested to hear Max's take.

"Again, I'm not sure but I think the doe was guiding me to…" Max's face scrunched up, remembering exactly when and where the doe had put in an appearance. Always near that spot in the junkyard, "...to find you, Rachel. As for the butterfly… my best guess, it's related to my powers. Could be a coincidence, could be a spirit, who knows. After the things I've seen, I'm not discounting anything. If I knew more about my powers, where they came from or what I'm 'supposed' to do with them, that might help."

"So, you really have no idea where they came from?" Warren actually sounded disappointed by that, eager to know more about the mysterious time powers.

Max shook her head, wishing she could tell him more. "Nope. All I know is that they triggered on that Monday in the bathroom and I used them to save Chloe. And that every now and then I get a surprise new development, like being able to photo jump, stop time completely or isolate sections to freeze."

"Like you did when me and Vicky came to blows," Chloe remembered, not her proudest moment. "What other things can you do?"

The young time traveler managed a tired smile, which only broadened when she saw the bluenette pout slightly at the cryptic response she gave. "Now, that would be telling. A magician can't give away all her tricks."

There was silence, the group having run out of questions they could ask Max, ones she'd know the answers to anyway. Well, there was one last question.

"So, what're we all supposed to do know?" Chloe asked the obvious question on all their minds.

"You all know what's going to happen now, or what would have happened. With Jefferson and Nathan soon to be out of the picture, that solves most of the problems…" she paused momentarily, "...aside from the storm. We can't do much about that until it comes."

"And we're just going to have to sit and wait?" Victoria concluded, sounding a little frustrated.
"For the most part, yes," Max confirmed. "I… have a few things to tend to in the meantime, things I have to do on my own. I'll be in touch with you if there is anything else to prepare. When the storm hits, if you really want to help you can make sure everyone gets to safety… just in case. Nothing's guaranteed."

Those last two words hung over the group, very ominous. Now, all they could do was wait.

October 11th, 2013 - Arcadia Bay, Clifftop Lighthouse

This was it. The moment Max had been waiting for, dreading. She stared down the gargantuan tornado, swallowing hard. It roared, a swirling mass of wind whipping through the water towards Arcadia Bay's shoreline. Maybe she was imagining it, but it seemed larger and more violent than before. Rain lashed at her skin, cold and unforgiving. She shivered from the cold, blue eyes never leaving the oncoming hurricane.

She had avoided the events of that week, made sure everyone had survived. Jefferson had been dealt with… forever. She had sent an anonymous tip to the highest power she could about the Dark Room, sending pictures. No doubt there was an investigation underway. Maybe the victims of Mark Jefferson's sick and twisted vision would get some sense of justice that way. Nathan was currently getting help from the best facility available - she'd had a hand in getting him that help, meeting with him personally and having a rather confusing conversation, for him at least.

The others, those eleven people she had shared her deepest secret with six months ago, were down below, helping evacuate and aid anyone they could. She had told them she would wait, stay back to help them… a lie. They would realize soon enough. In just a few moments, they would all be finding the letters she had written for them - ones she had hidden in their pockets without their knowledge; each with a general overview and short personal message.

She could quote the damn thing word for word, having rewritten and read over it a million times over these past few months...

Hey everyone,

I'm not sure how to say any of this, so I'm just going to get straight into it.

When I first got this power, I thought I could just wiggle my fingers and fix all my mistakes. Problem is, the act of rewinding, taking back all your awkward blunders; it's addictive.

In the space of five minutes, I suddenly had the power to change… everything. I could bring my best friend back from death, make people like me by knowing what to say, take risks without consequence… How wrong I was.

I'll never be the same person I was. That Max – the carefree, naïve, idealistic Max – she's gone. The Max I am now, she's full of bitter vengeance, fear, the determination to make sure each and every one of you lives, and very little else. You've all seen the effect all this time travel has had on my body and mind, and that's not even half of it. I don't need to remind you of the details.

There's only one way I can fix this… and I hope beyond hope that it works. Only time will tell (and yes, I expect some groans here). Whatever happens next, know that I care deeply for you all and I want you to make the most of this second chance. Don't waste it.
David,

I know we didn't really see eye to eye and I rushed to conclusions. For that, I'm sorry. You really care about Joyce and Chloe, I can tell. You're a good man, you've just experienced things you shouldn't and it changed you, not always for the best - I can relate. We've both made mistakes, done things we regret.

Use this chance. Make sure Chloe knows how you feel every second you can. You can't ever replace William - nobody could, no matter how much they tried - but you don't have to. Just be there for her as David Madsen, her step-father.

Oh, one more thing... don't EVER hit her again, okay. In one timeline, a Max hid in the closet on the Monday when you came in and found her weed. I believe you can change, so prove me right.

Joyce,

First off, I wanted to say that it was so great seeing you again. You and William were like parents to me, the best kind. I love both of you so much.

Chloe has a lot of issues to work through. I get it, you managed to work through some of the grief and start over as best you could after William died. And I know how stubborn and rude she can be sometimes, or all the time, but she needs you and you need her.

David crossed a lot of lines, but that doesn't make him a bad person. If anyone deserves a second chance, it's him. I know you love him, and he definitely loves you. You guys can make this work, I know you can.

They still might not get on, they might still fight, but I hope in time they will come to some mutual understanding at least.

I just wish I could've given you a chance to say goodbye to William one last time...

Mom and Dad,

So... I guess you weren't expecting this. I disappear without a trace and then come back with time powers and a ton of emotional baggage. I'm sorry for any worry I put you through. I had to do it, though. I hope you can understand now why I put myself through hell. It was painful for you to watch, I know, but necessary.

After all this is over, if I survive, I want to make the most of having you in my life. I'll listen to all the stories you have to tell, all the terrible dad jokes, even the complaints a million times over. Until I know them all off by heart. We can go camping like you always wanted to dad, and yes finally go on that spa day trip, mom. Family is important, more so now than ever.

I couldn't have asked for better parents and I love you so damn much.

Warren,
Thanks for everything you did with Nathan. I really appreciate it, like more than I can ever say. You were a great friend.

I know that the you now doesn't have the same feelings for me as the you from before - or after? Complicated time travel - but I felt like I should at least give an honest answer. You deserve that much.

I couldn’t return those feelings for reasons I hope are now obvious - a certain blue-haired punk. It was confusing at the time with everything else going on so I kinda avoided it, hoped it'd all just go away if I pretended.

One day, I’m sure you'll find someone who is a total film buff, a complete science nerd and has an appreciation for all your bad jokes. Someone much better than I could ever be.

Live long and prosper.

____________________

Victoria, Courtney, and Taylor,

Never thought I’d be writing a letter like this to you three, honestly. I'm not really Vortex Club material.

Taylor and Courtney, stand up for yourselves sometimes. You're people with your own feelings and opinions. Yes, Victoria can be scary, but you guys should know better than anyone that she has a softer side underneath all the bullshit. She does care - like with your mom, Taylor.

Victoria, we had an… interesting relationship. The more I gave you a chance, the more I realized you were a person - complex. What happened with Kate, that wasn't all your fault - Jefferson is mostly to blame - but you played a part. We all did. I hope now you see that your actions can have dangerous consequences - something I learned the hard way.

You have the talent and the ambition, so there's no need to step on other people. If you take nothing else away from this experience, from me, please let it be that.

____________________

Kate,

Where do I start? What happened to you should NEVER have happened. You are one of the kindest people I have ever met in my life, maybe even THE kindest. Everyone abused that, pushed you to that roof. In the end, you beat them, showed them you were stronger, stronger than any of them. I have so much respect and admiration for you.

You never failed to make me smile, and I loved our little tea dates - the highlight of each week. Your drawings are amazing, definitely children's book material. I'm honored to have been able to call you a friend.

So, just remember: you are never alone.

____________________

Rachel,

Okay, this is definitely the strangest letter I'll be writing today, so bear with me.
I heard so much about you from literally everyone. Everything I did and everywhere I went, it all linked back to you. After… well, I never thought I'd actually get to meet you; our paths never crossed until now.

Now, about Chloe… I know you probably don't want a lecture, and I'm sure I don't have the full story, but I'm kinda pissed off with you if I'm honest - mostly because you remind me of my own failures and I'm projecting. We both let Chloe down, big time. I don't know if we can be forgiven.

I have no idea what Chloe wants next, and I might never know if… this fails, but whatever happens, please don't hurt her again. She has enough pain in her life. I don't know if you love her or not, but I do. So please, be gentle and understanding to the best of your abilities.

You don't have to be perfect, I'm sure as hell not, and you can and will make mistakes. Just… try.

Now, this part is just for you, Chloe.

I'm sorry I abandoned you for five years. Nothing I do will ever make that right, and believe me, I've tried. All I can say is, I'm glad that I returned to Arcadia and that my power kicked in when it did. Without it, I'd have never had the chance to see you again. That would be the one mistake I could seriously never forgive myself for. That's saying a lot considering what I've done.

That week we spent together was… so scary but with you there, I felt like I could do anything. It's why I am still trying, otherwise I would've given up a long time ago. Because of you, I want to keep living, to forge new memories, to… to do what I'm about to do. It's the only way I might be able to stay by your side, and I really want that. More than anything.

There will be a price to pay (and not you this time - insert groan here -), but I'm sure you'll agree it's worth it when all is said and done.

Just know that… I love you. See you on the flip side,

Max

She knew they would be angry with her, come to find her. Before they did, there was something she had to do. Maybe it would kill her, erase her from existence. Maybe it would break her, leave her as nothing more than an empty shell. Maybe she would survive, battered and bruised, but alive. Honestly, she didn't know.

I do hope you realized there is a good chance you will die, a familiar voice resounded in her mind, her own worst enemy… herself. A Max from another timeline she had created. Ever since she passed out and had that awful nightmare, this Max had been hanging around in the background.

Yeah, I do. I'm not stupid, Max replied internally, still focused on the storm.

I beg to differ, the other Max goaded. Not like you've given me any reason to believe otherwise.

You were the one who told me I was being irresponsible with my powers before, using them to just make people like me. Now I'm actually trying to fix my mistakes, Max defended, tired of this.
All of it.

That made the Max in her head laugh, short, sharp and mocking. Or you're just trying to make yourself feel better. Get rid of the guilt. If it works, you don't have to face the consequences of your actions. If you die in the process, it'll be a 'worthy sacrifice' - Max the Martyr.

**You know what?** Fuck you, alright. You criticize everything I do, whatever I try. What do you want me to say? What do you want from me?

There was silence and Max started to wonder if she would ever get an answer. She didn't expect the softer tone she finally heard in response. I want you to stop lying to yourself. You claim to be doing this for other people, and maybe that's true to an extent, but ultimately, you're doing all this for yourself. And, that's okay.

**For myself?** Max repeated.

Her ex-mental tormentor confirmed the question. Yes, all these people mean something to you - family, friends, crush, whatever - and that's the reason you're trying so hard to save them. Otherwise, you'd have given up a long time ago. And it's okay to feel scared, to want to live, to be selfish... nobody's perfect, and no amount of rewinding will make you perfect.

Max didn't reply, she didn't need to. Instead, she allowed the tears welling up in her eyes to fall. She didn't want to die... especially not after everything she had been through. There were too many things left undone and unsaid, too many people who she cared for, loved. That was when she realized she was shaking, and not just from the wet and cold.

So, stop with the 'Woe is Max' act and do what you want to do. Not what you have to do. Make a decision and stick with it. No regrets, the other Max finished, once again fading into the background.

What did Max want? So many things... she wanted to follow her dreams, become a bonafide photographer or take photos until she managed to make it, and even if she didn't. To spend time with her mom and dad, as much as possible. Get to know people like Victoria, Taylor, and Courtney properly, understand them - perhaps even hang out with them. Maybe see what Nathan used to be like before Jefferson dug his claws in. Become friends with Warren and Kate again, appreciate them more than she had the first time. Find out who the real Rachel Amber was under all the secrets and rumors. Spend some much needed time with Joyce, and David too. And of course, learn everything there was to know about Chloe all over again... get back to how they used to be, but not quite. Better than before, different and new, maybe a little scary.

That was only the start of her list. There was still so much to live and fight for. In that moment, watching the tornado loom, getting closer and closer, she knew what she had to do, no what she wanted to do. This was her choice.

Chapter End Notes

Will Max be able to combat the storm and survive? Join us next time for the conclusion to this fic.
Chapter Notes

Hey guys, welcome to the very last chapter. We hope you've enjoyed the story and see you at the bottom for a big ass monologue, including some story suggestions if you enjoyed and want to read something similar.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Epilogue: Reset

Two Weeks Later

Blue eyes flickered open, blinking at the sunlight filtering through the window. They belonged to a girl with chin-length brunette hair and pale, freckled skin. She had no idea where she was, or why she was there… The room she was in had a light color scheme, an antiseptic smell filling her nostrils. Everything ached, her head most of all. She was hooked up to so many machines, monitoring and regulating her vitals.

She tried to move, failing miserably. Her entire body felt numb, limbs dead weights and mind hazy. The gentle melody from the birds outside, hushed whispers and the occasional set of footsteps were the only things she could hear. All she could do was stare at the ceiling, too exhausted to do anything else.

After some time, the door to her room opened and a woman stepped inside. If the girl had to guess, she would say this woman was a doctor given her attire. That fit in with the layout of the room, too.

"Ah, Ms. Caulfield, glad to see that you have joined the world of the living," the doctor greeted cheerfully, coming over to the bedside. "We were starting to get very worried."

Frowning at the name, the girl looked at the doctor. She recognized the words the woman was saying but… She was very confused, finding it hard to focus. A mental block. There were things she wanted to say, but couldn't. Her mouth refused to translate hazy thought to speech. So many questions and no way of asking.

The doctor began checking her over, taking notes as she carried out the examination. "Hmm… considering the state you came to us in, you seem to be relatively okay."

"Wh-" the sentence ended before it had the chance to start, the sound slurred and lost to a cough.

Giving her a sympathetic look, the older woman poured a glass of water and helped sit her up to drink. "Don't force yourself. Full recovery may take some time. You came to us in quite the state. Your friend was quite worried. Tall, blue hair, tattoo, punk rocker vibe. Goes by the name of Chloe Price."

"I…" Again, she couldn't get a sentence to form.

"You don't remember?" Slowly, the girl shook her head. She couldn't remember. "Ah, that… is worrying. Ms. Caulfield, can you remember your first name?" The doctor's words were hard to
understand, took her a while to process.

First name… first name… no, she couldn't. She shook her head slightly, confused. Why couldn't she remember something so basic? Her mind was fuzzy, everything jumbled up.

Not getting a clear response, the older woman's face became lined with concern. "And do you remember why you're here?"

How did she get here, and why? Hospitals meant illness, injury, disease… something bad had happened, maybe.

"Don't worry, we'll do our very best to help you," she reassured. "Let's start off with the basics, and I hope you can take them in. Your name is Maxine Caulfield, eighteen years old. You were brought in after collapsing in the middle of a storm. You've been in a coma for two weeks."

"St… orm?" There was a flicker of recognition, one that soon died out.

The doctor nodded. "It was a fairly bad one, caused a lot of damage. Thankfully there were few injuries and no deaths. You aren't the only patient here because of that. Now, we need to run a few more tests on you, I'm afraid. Give me a moment…" She turned on her heel, walking out of the room with purpose.

The girl, or Max as she had just learned her name was, waited. It was all she could do. A while later, the doctor returned with several people. A bearded man and brunette women, older than her, and a tall girl with blue hair. They all stared at her like they had seen a ghost, tears welling up in their eyes as they moved closer to her bedside.

"Oh, Max…" the older woman managed between sobs.

The man's jaw stiffened as he pulled up a chair, staring at her. "Max, the doctor told us you can't remember much. Is that true?"

She didn't know who these people were but they must be close to her if the doctor let them in. Family, perhaps? After a moment's delay, she nodded, weak and slow. Her gaze shifted to the younger girl, who was hanging back. Was this the person the doctor had told her about earlier? She matched the description. A friend of hers…

When their eyes met, the girl gave her a watery smile, gentle. Max tried hard to recall her, failing. There was… something there, a very faint flicker of recognition but nothing else. It felt like she should remember. Of course, that didn't help her much now.

Would she ever be able to remember? She wanted to...

A Few Months Later

Slowly, Max was getting used to life without her memories. As hard as she tried, they refused to return – infuriating, to say the least. Her family and friends had tried to help her fill in the blanks, except she had a feeling they weren't telling her everything. Maybe she was just being paranoid. And maybe she was onto something…

Either way, maybe it didn't matter. There was no point trying to claw back the past eighteen years of her life by force. In time, it might come back. If not, she had to start making new memories to fill the void, and she was certainly doing that. She had spent as much time as possible trying to reconnect with the people in her life. Her mother and father were there to answer her questions and
support her in any way she needed. They had made sure she got all the care she needed to aid her recovery. She'd had a lot of aftercare.

A few people had come to talk to her in the past few months, people who knew the old Max Caulfield before the storm. Some she was surprised by, Victoria Chase certainly didn't seem like the type to give her the time of day. Despite that, she and her friends – Taylor and Courtney – had paid her a visit, even thanked her for… something she couldn't remember.

Warren and Kate had kept in constant touch, two people she had been fairly close to. The former reveled in the chance to re-use all his awful science puns and insane movie recommendations on an unsuspecting victim and the latter arranged a major teashop tour of Portland, something they had apparently discuss before. Max could understand why she had been friends with them, both really funny and friendly.

Joyce Price, someone she used to consider a second mom from what she had been told, took great delight in reminding Max how amazing her cooking was, and Max was a more than willing participant in that experiment. Not only that, but Joyce had a ton of photos to share, again an activity the young photographer was happy to get lost in. She learned a lot from the older woman. Sometimes, David Madsen joined in, eager to learn more about his family's past from before he entered the picture. It was something he had neglected to do before now.

The person she had spent the most time with was her childhood best friend, Chloe Price. Apparently, they had reconnected when she returned to Arcadia Bay to attend Blackwell Academy. Max had moved to Seattle soon after Chloe's father died and they lost touch - something she felt bad about even if she couldn't remember doing it. She had also explained a little about what they had gotten up to when they reconnected, details somewhat vague. It was mostly about them getting to know each other again, trying to work through their unresolved issues. From the sounds of it, they had been partially successful.

Max sensed there was so much Chloe was withholding from her, possibly related to her condition. Maybe there was a good reason, she didn't know, but it was still kinda annoying at times. Sometimes, there was a ghost of a memory, soon crushed before it could properly take form. Certain phrases and locations seemed to inspire these brief flickers of her past and she got a taste of the emotion linked to the area or words in question. Melancholy, happiness, fear, desperation, regret, mild longing… maybe one day she would be able to understand them all.

"Come on, slowpoke," Chloe called back to her from up the winding path leading to the clifftop lighthouse, where she had collapsed and lost everything.

Taking that as a sign that she should get a move on, Max picked up her pace, climbing to the top. She was a little out of breath when she caught up with Chloe, who grinned.

"Glad to see you're still as fit as ever," the bluenette chuckled, watching her take deep breaths.

"Cut me some slack," Max whined, still panting lightly. "A few months ago, I couldn't even speak properly."

"Shame that didn't stick, huh?" Chloe added with a wry grin, nudging her shoulder.

"Ha, ha…" Max exhaled deeply, looking out over the still waters. Weird to imagine a tornado had been here.

Chloe got this distant look on her face as she too stared out to the horizon. "You know, this place is a weird one for me."
"How so?" Max asked, hoping to drag some new information out of her. If she pressed enough times, one day someone might slip up and tell her something they had been trying to hide all these months.

"I learned some pretty crazy surreal shit in this very spot once upon a time." That moment seemed like a million years ago now, the same day Max had saved her - not that she remembered - and their literal whirlwind adventure had started.

Now this seemed like it might be interesting, so Max tried her best to extract the meaning behind those wistful words. "Care to share?"

The bluenette shook her head, smiling. "You always were curious… unfortunately I can't divulge that information right now. Maybe one day, we'll see."

Hitting a dead end, Max's shoulders slumped with disappointment. "You are so cruel, you know that?"

"It's all for your own good, trust me." Eager to change the subject, Chloe cleared her throat. "I, uh, got an update from Rachel earlier. Seems she's enjoying herself, partying a lot, and actually working sometimes."

Chloe had told Max some things about Rachel Amber, leaving certain parts out for obvious reasons. The ambitious blonde decided to start seriously following her dream of becoming a model, getting some money together to travel to LA. What Max had shown them before she lost all her memories seemed to have encouraged her – no wonder really. Near death experienced had a way of doing that. Of course, she was in her element there, enjoying the high life.

Max had been told about Rachel and Chloe's… complicated relationship, or parts of it at least. Something had happened between them, making them drift apart for a time. Chloe didn't like to go into detail about that. Long story short, Rachel broke her heart - that's what Max had deduced. The bluenette always looked so sad when she talked about Rachel, filled with regret and sometimes a hint of betrayal. The pair did seem to have mended things somewhat, still talking to one another, tentative friends. There was too much between them to just give up completely.

Not sure how to reply, Max settled on a neutral, "Good for her."

"Yeah, she finally got out of Arcadia…” Chloe sounded slightly jealous about that, and bitter. It didn't last, though. She turned to Max with a grin. "There are still some things worth sticking around for."

Curious, Max tilted her head. "Like what?"

The blue-haired punk simply smiled. There was a huge secret in that one mysterious gentle smile. "One day I'll tell you, maybe."

"Ah, come on. I want to know…” Max whined, wanting to know now, not later or never.

Chloe didn't answer, turning her head back to look out over the water. As she did, she cautiously slid her hand into Max's. The young girl was happy enough to let her, the action seeming as natural as breathing. "Nope, not saying. My lips are sealed."

They stood there for a long time, hand in hand watching the sun make its descent. Chloe began to hum softly, a tune Max vaguely recognized. "What's that?"

Pausing, Chloe turned to her. "The song? It's called 'Obstacles'. Know it?"
"Maybe…"

"You should, it's right up your alley. Seemed relevant now." She went back to humming, louder this time.

Even though Max couldn't remember the lyrics, somehow… she knew *exactly* what Chloe meant by that.

Chapter End Notes

Basically, Max managed to lessen the tornado and in the process, she (mostly her mind) did a major reset – aka forgot everything. Just to clarify. A relatively happy ending, I'm sure you'll agree.

So, thank you all very much for reading, leaving your feedback and supporting the story. It's always appreciated, and I'm sure any author would say the same. Don't forget to give other fics a check (there's a lot on my end – mostly LIS)

If you liked this story, you may also like:

- Butterfly Wings (collab with tylerbamafan34) – Amberpricefield, After choosing to sacrifice Chloe, only to change her mind part way through, Max goes back in time much further than she had anticipated. Far enough to save Rachel Amber. These two, along with Chloe, reunite and work towards getting rid of Jefferson and battling the storm. When Max's powers have a major freak out, another person joins the party, making it super complicated for all involved.

- Missing Link (collab with tyler) – Amberprice, Rachel has noticed some weird things happening around Arcadia Bay, yet nobody seems to acknowledge them. Along with a reluctant Chloe, the pair investigate and soon realize they're onto something… strange.

- Time Loop (collab with Thecivilian, who you should all totally go check out if you haven't already) – Pricefield, When Max Caulfield receives two letters from a mysterious sender – going only by the name REAP – the day before her powers are activated, she is more than a little confused. Especially since REAP seems to have all the answers to the problems she faced that week. Alongside Chloe, she struggles with her powers, all the while getting hints from her mysterious helper. The true identity of REAP will certain be a shock to the system…

- Playing for Keeps (again with Civ) - Pricefield, After finally admitting how she felt about Chloe Price, Max Caulfield said goodbye forever. After saying her final farewells at her funeral, the young time traveler keeps torturing herself. However, it seems that Fate is not quite done with her yet. When Max gets a sign that things are far from over, she decides to break the rules… and this time, she's playing for keeps.

Obviously, if you want more Pricefield (there wasn't anything overt here), there's plenty to choose from, like 20 or something – some plot based multi-chapter AUs, others one-shots, all under 'The Pricefield Playlist' series. There's also a 'Collaborations' series where all collabs are stashed away. Oh, and there's a lot of other ships floating around too – Chasefield, Marshfield and more.
From Tyler and myself (Olivia), goodbye for now and we hope to see you in another fic very soon.

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