Rope & Summit

Summary

DISCONTINUED

If you like reading stories which have an actual ending, I strongly advise you to stay away from this one!

Notes

The provided links throughout the chapter are soundtracks, to help set up the atmosphere
(especially nightmares)
Prologue: With great power, comes great bullshit

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=owouKyUd_zE ]

Everything was white. And empty. No walls, no roof, no furniture, no landscape. One big bunch of nothing. And her, right in the middle of this void. The silence is so deafening she swears she can feel her eardrums beating wildly.

"Hey!" Called an unknown voice on her right, "Just because you're his favorite doesn't mean you don't have to get in line!"

Dozens of girls were standing away from her, perfectly aligned one after the other. The one who just reprimanded her was glaring menacingly at her for some obscure reason. Max's eyes trails to the end of the queue to see Kate waving happily, which drives her to approach the religious teenager. It was so weird to see her smile so dazzlingly.

"Hey Max, are you excited?" She asks enthusiastically.

"Excited? For what?"

"For the shoot, of course." Her friend replies, rolling her eyes as if it was an obvious fact.

Shoot?

"Why is everything so white?" Max inquires while sweeping a worried look across the place.

"I don't know, that's all i can remember from my time here. I bet that's the same for the rest of them," she hints, gesturing to the young women behind her who had yet to move from their waiting line. "I know you're more used to it than me, but i can't help being thrilled everytime he calls for us. Did you bring a syringe? Look, i got mine." Kate showed her, bringing said needle out of her pockets.

Okay, this was a trap. Clearly. She needed to get out of this mess. Her mind was playing cruel tricks on her, once again. She turns away from her friend, intent on running far away from the situation, but finds herself in what looks like an art gallery instead. A gigantic photograph fills the space on the main wall in front of her, diverting attention from all the other small works hanging around the room. She can easily recognize her face. Glazed over blue eyes seem to stare right through her and a virile hand is holding onto her chin, a thumb pressing subtly on her bottom lip. The picture appears far too intimate for her likings. Her blood turns so cold she can feel the flow stopping.

"Do you like it?" A masculine voice breathes into her ear, sending unwanted chills down her spine. "This is one of my favorites." Something grabs her shoulder, forcing her to meet a dark smoldering gaze.

Before she can fully grasp the situation, the environment changes yet again.

Chloe's house. She can recognize it, even if her presence here doesn't make any sense since she was
at school in her last memory. A ray of light is passing through the small window next to the staircase. Everything else looks blurry and she can't decide which of the room or her vision is the most unfocused. The door to Joyce's room is slightly open, so the girl steals a peek inside. She's always been nosy after all.

"I lost them all... Everything is just... gone."

A calloused hand strokes the older woman's shoulder in signs of comfort. Max knows it's David's, but for some reason, she can't see him. A white flashy beam of light is taking his place.

"All this crap just for... one stupid teenager! Those evil Prescotts! What am i supposed to do now? I can't fix this. Justice isn't enough. It won't bring me my child back..." her sobbing voice is muffled by the hands on her face.

A gut-wrenching feeling lodges itself in the young girl's throat. It claws at it and keep her from swallowing. But she's used to it.

"I feel so useless."

The crying intensifies, and Max decides to leave them in peace. The freckled teenager closes the door and turns to face another one, leading to her friend's room. Her hand instinctively goes to grab the handle, but she pauses. She had no reason to enter this place now that no one was waiting for her inside. But Max Caulfield seemed to like rubbing shoulders with misery this days, so she did. The usually poster-covered walls were white and sickly clean. The walls didn't hold her attention for too long though. A terrified steel blue pair of eyes propped on deep purple bags met hers.

Nathan...

His hands were smeared with blood and curled tightly around his forearms, multiple stains of brownish tint spreading all over a worn cyan shirt. The sight of him was one of the most unsettling things she had ever seen, and she's seen a lot. A violent nausea immediately takes a nasty grip on her. From the ever present feeling of guilt or the horrifying visual display, she couldn't tell.

"They say i'm just like him... a monster."

He stares straight at her and she can't do anything. Her body is freezeed in place and unable to cooperate. His gaze holds no hate, no resentment for her.

"That i... don't deserve a second chance. They just won't believe me."

He's just a kid. An unruly one. Why would they? Sometimes, grown-ups were just as cruel as children.

"They think i wanted to kill her... It was just an accident... I never wanted to hurt anybody."

She wants to leave and desperately search for a safe heaven, but she has to look. Because this is all her fault. This was the consequences of being a giant failure.

There is no more happy place for me now anyway.

"I'll probably die in here." She has no trouble hearing the acceptance of fatality in his words.

Tears begin to soak the boy's cheeks, and his eyes refuse to leave hers.

"I can't sleep Max. Can you?"
She jolts awake.

A young delicate girl is sitting at one of the wooden tables and benches located in front of Blackwell Academy's main building. The weather hasn't been so pleasant in weeks, the warm sunlight giving everything an artistic orange hue. Three bullets are hanging from around her neck. She's eating chips as some kind of breakfast while reading a newspaper, whose front-page titles "Mark Jefferson claims Prescotts heir to be the leader and sole responsible of the terrifying operations who took place inside the underground bunker". Another girl—looking so similar that they could easily pass as twins—is circling around her, a joyful bounce in her steps. The issue, as always, is that her double is not visible to the rest of the world. The vicious little thing was perceptible only to Max Caulfield, who didn't appear really blissful about that fact.

"Wowzer! They're really set on sending him to prison, huh? He'll probably never get better if they do. Poor little Prescott boy... never able to find redemption! He'll probably kill himself as soon as they jail him."

Max just keeps staring off into space while popping food into her mouth. She knew she'll just end up throwing it up later anyway. The oily little things seemed to be the only thing her shrinking stomach could handle, yet the taste disgusted her to the point of gagging. Meanwhile, her doppelganger keeps teasing her relentlessly.

"I expected more from the gutsy selfish Max Caulfield. I thought she would actually try to fight back and never back down until her best friend was finally safe! Now she's just a moving corpse. And the poor people left in her life, unlike Chloe, are left to grieve their loved ones. Joyce and David lost Chloe. Victoria lost Nathan, well not yet, but since he'll probably never know the meaning of freedom again... I think we can cross him off the list."

The freckled teenager is still busy reading her article, but her mean double never liked being ignored.

"Kate still needs her friends to support her now that she knows what was done to her but, oh where is Max? Well, locked up in her room as usual! Fuck Kate, right? It's her problems, not yours. And fuck Warren too! God knows he's always been here for you but so what? He'll move on soon enough. Who in their right mind would want to date a zombie anyway? Not like he really had a chance. You've always been so indecisive Max. You don't even know what you really want. What a great hero!"

She's used to it by now. Her own voice and its uncharacteristically biting tone has become part of her daily routine. It was like hearing the wind howling softly across the leaves and trees in the background. Nothing she couldn't handle.

"Oh look! Dana's coming this way. It's time to put on your best smile Caulfield."
Footsteps get closer to the pensive girl. The queen of sarcasm with whom she shares a common face seems to have dematerialized.

"Hey Max," the pretty cheerleader tries her luck with a careful smile. "It's good to see you outside for once! How are you doing?"

Silence. Max knows she should respond if she wants to give the false impression that she's perfectly fine, but she also knows from experience that trying to get any word out of her mouth will force her to projectile vomit all over the floor. She had that stupid lump stuck in her throat to thank for that. And maybe that weird sensation that a putrid foreign organ was growing inside her, larger and larger everyday.

"Dumb question, huh?" Admits Dana.

That invisible spot across the horizon seems really interesting to focus on.

"Max, can you hear me?" her friend waves a hand in front of her face in a desperate call for attention.

The gorgeous teenager's eyes finally meet the empty ones of the Caulfield girl, who smiles in what she must think is a reassuring way, but really just appears artificial and creepy. Dana gets shivers down her spine and for the first time in her life, questions whether or not it is actually possible for a human being to still reside inside their body while their mind or soul is busy roaming across an entirely different universe. That's the exact feeling she gets when she looks at Max. Needless to add that the opportunity to do so was getting quite rare. She felt a surge of hope when she saw her cute little friend sitting at one of the benches in front of the school. But it was short-lived. It's been weeks since anybody saw Max Caulfield anywhere on campus. Or in Arcadia Bay. At first, the girl had been really active after her best friend's death... Visiting the Price household or the Two Whales diner to keep Joyce company so the poor woman could keep her chin up after this tragic event, helping with organizing the deceased funerals, going out on tea dates with Kate where the religious girl admitted Max was of great help and gave her good advice and support whenever she was called in by the police to narrate her personal story.

The cheerleader was actually quite astonished by Max's strength after all this. She was there for her friends and never seemed to take time for herself. She seemed fine, even powerful to be honest. None of them had seen her cry or loose her perfect facade during the first three weeks following Chloe's death. And that's probably what should have alarmed them sooner. That and the fact that Max's greatest passion and hobby had suddenly gone completely extinct. In fact, the girl would immediately turn away if a camera or photograph of any nature crossed her path.

Two weeks ago, Victoria told some of the girls that she came upon the freckled girl at the police station and overheard bits of conversation between her and some officers. The girl seemed keen on defending the Prescott boy and used a few derogatory terms while mentioning their former photography teacher. Chase admitted not being able to fully understand what she was telling them though, and that she knew nothing of what the police responded. Ten minutes later, Caulfield was dashing out of the office they were locked in, her fist in a ball and a look of panic on her face, completely overlooking Victoria to simply leave the building as fast as possible. From that point on, things slowly started to dangerously escalate.

According to Kate, weird noises kept coming from Max's room at any time of the day, sometimes joined by agonizing screams at night. But if one of them came to check if everything was alright, no one would answer or open the door. Dana had taken the habit of sitting behind said door for several minutes at times, since it was the only way for any of them to keep some kind of connection to Max. She often heard the girl speaking to someone else who she clearly believed was in the room with her,
someone pretty mean from what max's answers seemed to indicate. Victoria said she was speaking to herself and probably going crazy. One night, the Vortex Club queen had enough and forced her way through Caulfield's door, to end up finding her with a bloody hand and a broken mirror. Her floor was covered with newspapers and pictures of younger versions of Chloe and Max. The cute hipster girl's eyes were bloodshot from what looked like tearful breakdowns and serious sleep deprivation, no doubt. And now here she was... basking in the sun's glow, motionless and with a gaze that held no life inside.

Dana didn't know if she wanted to cry or flee anymore. Looking at her like this while being totally powerless was such an awful experience.

"I'll let you eat in peace, hmm? You should leave your dorm room more often Max, you know you can hang out with us anytime, right?" She proposes nicely.

"..."

"Take care of yourself..." she murmurs over her shoulder as she begins walking away.

Once she's alone, Max takes out something from her jeans pockets. A photo of a blue butterfly standing on a metal bucket greets the warm morning light. The girl puts her face in her left hand, still unoccupied, and rubs it across her eyes and forehead. The familiar feeling of an aching headache is coming around. She can't remember the last time her eyes didn't feel like burning. She hasn't cried for days. She has no tears left. Only insomnia. And emptyness.

Seattle. She never thought she'd be back here again. The Caulfield household was as cozy and welcoming as she remembered, a complete contrast to her actual state. No need to specify she didn't feel like she belonged here any longer. A pariah in her own house. Her very own family. Her folks were all smiles and good vibes. Like nothing happened. They were all sitting together in the dining room, enjoying a great meal that her mother had prepared. Well, her parents were enjoying it, meanwhile Max kept playing with her fork and peas.

"Does it taste weird?" Her mom questioned while sending little glances to her husband.

"I'm not really hungry. I ate on the train." She lies, praying for her deceit to work.

In truth, it's been so long since she last ate something that sitting straight is a challenge. She gets this weird sensation every ten minutes, like her body is bending on the side, when in reality, it's not budging at all.

"Oh," the woman was clearly disappointed and did a bad job hiding it.

"We're glad to have you back for the week-end. We missed you," her father decided to break the awkward silence filling the room.

Everyone had finished their plate at this point, except for the young girl.
"That's nice." Max was trying to make an effort there. Really, she was. But however she gave it a shot, her voice would always fail to fake excitement or affection.

The tension was growing with each passing minute, until Vanessa clears her throat and finally gets up to fetch something from the room next door.

"You didn't bring your camera, sweetheart?"

Max wanted to bang her head against the table till it fractured open. She loved her mom unconditionally, of course. But the woman had the habit of always choosing the worst topics of conversation at the worst times.

"Well, no matter. We still have this one," said woman emerged with something in her hand.

As soon as the digital camera comes to sight, Max is helpless to stop her eyes from blinking from the different flashes appearing in her mind. Pieces of memory that she attempted to bury deep inside. Time appears to slow down drastically around her. It's never a good sign when that happens.

"Hold that stare there!"

"Don't," she whispers with autority while standing up abruptly, praying to the heavens that her mother will listen, for once.

"Don't move!"

Her head turns towards the mirror hanging on the wall on her left, and her own reflection greets her with a cruel, twisted smile. She can hear snide laughs coming from all around the room—but she knows they're really just her own—while her other self waves at her tauntingly.

"Come on honey, i want to take pictures of you. I don't have anything recent that i can look at when we miss you too much..."

Say cheese~!

The girl's ears detect her own labored breaths and the forceful beats of her heart, then the room is starting to spin on itself once more. She needs to grab onto something. Fast.

"Nice... oh good... ohhh those eyes..."

Hearing the clicking sound of the camera made her blood turn cold. She felt something snap inside her. Something that, to this day, seemed to serve the purpose of keeping her rage under control.

"I told you not to do that!!" her hand brutally hit the object of her torment with force and sent it flying to the ground.

Both her parents had eyes like saucers, no doubt disturbed by the unfamiliar behavior of their usually very collected daughter. They didn't seem to know whether to be mad or sympathetic, but their progeny's tremors and heavy breathing drove them to choose the latter.

"Max..."

"You think you can photograph people without their consent?!"

"Max, change your tone when you speak to your mother." Intervenes Ryan.

This is fucked up!
"You're fucked up."

"Max, your reactions are far from normal. Is there something you forgot to tell us?"

"Oh yes, mom! Because this is the kind of things i can just easily forget!"

"Max!" Reiterates her father.

"It's fine honey," the Caulfield matriarch turns to her husband and put her hands on his chest to keep him at bay, "Sweetheart, we're not blind you know..."

That's precious...

"You loose more weight everyday, you keep playing with your food instead of eating it, and the bags under your eyes are awful. You don't sleep, right?"

"You got that all by yourself, Sherlock?" She spits in irony.

"Are you... Max, are you anorexic?"

"..."

"..."

"...What?!" The youngest nearly chokes as she bursts out laughing, completely disbelieving of what she just heard. "Are you fucking kidding me?" Her tongue darts out to lick her dried lips, her head rocking from left to right like she was trying to make her surroundings get back the right way round. "You think i'm anorexic? You think this is the problem? Food? Oh, mom! You need to upgrade your observation skills."

"I don't know what's the problem, Max! You won't talk to us!"

"Well! You're right on that point, at least."

"Maybe you should visit a psychiatrist... it could help, don't you think?" She advises, completely ignorant of the situation.

"No, mom! Nothing is going to help. You know nothing of what happened to me. I can't speak to anyone about all of that shit, not my family, not my friends, and certainly not a stupid fucking stranger calling himself a psychiatrist!"

She's fuming. She wants to hit something. This was new for Max. She knew all about sadness, exhaustion, insomnia, and particularly, emotional emptiness. But she previously never showed any signs of animosity or anger. She has no fucking idea how to deal with that sort of feeling.

"The only one who could understand... who could help me... was Chloe. But guess what, mom? She's dead. Dead and buried. My fucking best friend is six feet underground and it's all my fault!"

"Don't say that, Max. Of course it's not your fault!" The older brunette tries to embrace her daughter, just to be rejected as Max moves farther away from them, her index finger standing up in the air as a warning not to get any closer.

"You have no idea what kind of hell i've been through... What i had to sacrifice to get back here alive..." her hands anxiously grab hold of her own shoulders.

"You're not making any sense! How can we help if you speak in riddles?"
"You want to help? Both of you? Give me space. Stop talking about photography when i'll probably never be able to pick up a camera again. Stop playing the perfect happy little family. Stop acting like everything is going to be alright! Because it's not. Things will never be the same. You think i need a confrontation with my family right now? I need time to accept all this bullshit. You can't fight this for me, mom. Just leave me alone..."

She was shaking with rage, her mother crying silently. Her dad was avoiding her eyes and staring at the ground in an effort to contain his own tears.

"I'm going back to my room," the teenager announces as she makes for the stairs.

"Please Max," the girl stopped for a moment to listen, "Just do something... For your dad, and for me..."

Ten seconds went by before she resumed her climbing of the stairs.

"I miss my little girl," Vanessa's whisper was full of tears as the fruit of their affection disappeared from their sight.

"Caulfield!" a snappy voice called out far behind her.

Great. Max was on her way to her last class of the day, day that luckily went without any casualties, until now. Now, the last person she wanted to see was going to force her to have a conversation. She already knew it would not be a very pleasant one on her part.

"Don't try to ignore me. It may work on your friends but i'm not them." Warned the blond, never failing to sound bossy.

Of course. Victoria Chase could not stand being neglected.

"I went to the police station again." She informed.

Good for you.

"I had a little talk with the officers," Victoria miraculously appeared in front of her, "the ones you talked to the last time you went there."

This is starting to feel like an interrogation.

"I'm not here to start a fight, Caulfield. I... i wanted to say thanks."

That definitely got Max attention.

"I know you were trying to defend Nathan." Her false nemesis explained. "They said you knew a lot more than you should about all this dark room thing, whatever that implies. I'm not going to ask you why you know so much about all this shit, even if my curiosity is killing me."
Yeah, she could see how much from the way the rich teenager was tapping her foot against the tiled floor and her mouth was sucked in.

"Nathan feels so bad about everything, which you probably already know, or you wouldn't be so forgiving." She guessed, surprisingly correctly. "He has no support whatsoever, be it from the media, his "friends", his family... Jefferson's lawyer is doing everything he can to put the blame on Nathan. His father seems to think that paying him the best defense in the world is enough to act like a parent. None of them even visits him. Apart from me, you're the only one who tried to take his side. And you're the best friend of the girl he killed. That doesn't make any sense, does it?" She seemed to inquire this more to herself than Max.

The freckled girl didn't respond, wondering if her interlocutor was going to lose patience and go away. She wished she would, quite frankly. She already had a lot on her plate dealing with her own frustrating emotions, she wouldn't tolerate bearing the weight of another's.

"I will probably never understand how you are capable of being level-headed and objective in this situation, but i'm fucking glad about it. And i know participating in the trial is too much for you, or you would already be there to spit in Jefferson's face, i'm sure. Even if you feel unable to give your testimony, i'm grateful you took the time to at least... try something."

And here it was, the guilt. Max hanged her head backward in exasperation. Couldn't she just stop feeling bad everytime she didn't want to help somebody? Did she really have to be constantly such a selfless moron? Naturally, Victoria had to choose today to be nice. And disgustingly grateful. Yes, Max didn't want her as an enemy, she knew the girl could be a pretty good friend if you learned how to handle her. But seeing Chase acting so nice reminded her of Chloe's funeral. How the blond had embraced her at the end of the ceremony. And she actually let her, because at the moment, it had made sense. She felt like Victoria could empathize, with what happened to Nathan. Her best friend was behind bars, while hers was locked in a coffin for eternity. Even if Max had not cried, it had served the purpose of alleviating her a little.

"So, i was thinking... maybe you'd like—no, maybe visiting him could be a good idea. You two could talk..." she suggested, one corner of her lips rising in what Caulfield guessed was supposed to be a friendly manner.

*Here comes the puppy eyes.*

"Knowing that someone who suffered from his actions has been able to forgive him... I think it would help him sleep at night. A little bit at least."

*Don't fall for that, Max.*

"And i think talking to him could help you too. You obviously never talk about what happened. You avoid people like the plague. And the little episodes you have in your room are not exactly... discrete." She emphasized her final word, her fingers running through her pixie cut.

*Just don't.*

*Everytime* i look at you Caulfield, i see him. Looking exactly as empty and tormented as you are. You seem to share the same kind of coping mechanism. The self-destructing type."

*Damn, she knows you good!*

*Fuck you.*

"I'm obviously not gonna get a response right now so, i'll leave you alone. Please, think about it."
She insists one last time, spinning around to stroll away.

"I'd have to fill a visitor form, right?" Max finally speaks up, making her pause.

"Yes," she answers eagerly after blinking repeatedly like she's trying to wake up from a dream. "I'll ask for it and give it to you." She reassures, like it would have been a problem in the first place.

The most sincere expression she ever saw Victoria exhibit develops on her features.

"Thank you, Max."

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jWFb5z3kUSQ ]

It felt like a million years since she last visited the beach. The softness of the sand, the cries of seagulls, the sound of chill water sliding against the solid ground. Such serenity and peace... So different from the last time she's been here. From the furious howling of the wind and the dangerous flying pieces of wood and metal. From the hellish cataclysm that Chloe and her were witnessing as they grabbed each other for anchor. Her surroundings were slowly beginning to blend in the back of her mind and her ears started to pick up on distant voices that seemed to come from a time long gone.

"Come on Max! You have to dig faster than that!"

"Why am i the only one digging again?"

"Because i'm the captain!"

"Are you a pirate or a slaver?"

"Subordinates do not talk back to their boss!"

Max caught a glimpse of blue birds circling gracefully above her head, but didn't question it. She didn't question the reason why her feet and sneakers felt so wet and heavy either. She could only stare at the flat horizon that never seemed to end. Everything was so calm, so inviting...

"If we find a treasure, i'm keeping all the gold."

"What? Why?!

"Because i'm doing all the work."

"But Max, i can ask dad to make us some pancakes when we get back home... And let you eat my entire portion~!"

"You're such a schemer."

"I know how you roll. The only way to manipulate you is to speak directly to your gargantuan
The water was up to her thighs and the tip of her dress was drenched. She must have been walking straight into the incoming waves without realizing it.

This place gave birth to me, would it swallow me back now?

Her course was abruptly stopped as something grabbed the back of her dress and forced her to come to a halt. The teenager turned around to see a doe firmly biting the piece of clothing she was wearing. Once the animal was sure to have her full attention, it let go.

"You are bound to Arcadia, Max. It will not let you go."

Did that deer just spoke? Its muzzle didn't budge though...

It sounds so out of this world...

"Who... who are you?"

"Don't you know already?" Its head leaned a bit to the side.

"Rachel... is that you?"

It couldn't be anyone else. She didn't recognize the charming voice coming from the deer, which meant it didn't belong to someone she already knew. But why would Rachel be here? The deceased girl had been guiding her in this strange spiritual form in the past, but she never spoke before today.

"Come sit on the sand, Max." The girl couldn't help but oblige, drawn by the ethereal voice coming from the majestic beast. Once they were both settled on the ground, warm grains of sand sticking to her wet pale calves, her furry friend decided to speak up.

"We're very similar, you know. We care a lot about everyone."

From the information she had gathered about the teenager, Max knew what she meant. Chloe, Frank, Nathan, Jefferson... without taking into account all the other people she befriended when she was still alive, Rachel had cared for a lot of people. At first, Max had wondered if the girl was manipulative, which would more than likely explain why she kept all of her friendships and love affairs ignorant of each other. But now, Max understood a bit more. Especially since she was capable of sympathy for Nathan Prescott, she learned that barking didn't necessarily mean dangerous. Chloe couldn't stand Frank and would have been devastated if Rachel had told her about their relationship. Max could easily grasp how hard it was to care for so many different people, people that simply hated each other's guts and wanted you for themselves.

"Sometimes it helps them... Sometimes... it just brings more harm."

Or kill them.

"I wasn't always a gem, Max. I had flaws too. Way more than you."

At least you never murdered anyone.

"Are you... blaming yourself for what happened?" She queries, startled.

"Sometimes. I guess that's another thing we have in common." It sounded strangely amused.
"I can hardly imagine us sharing any likeness." She admits with a humorless smile.

"And yet you're wrong. I was more confident, sure, and i wanted to be in front of the camera while you desired to stay behind it, but that's all the difference i can find. Don't you feel a connection between us?"

Her eyes stray from the sea and land on the doe by her side, its thin legs were curled up under its bust, seemingly comfortable while she contemplates the phantom's question quietly.

"On occasion." She concedes, staring back into its vast black pupils.

\textit{A lot of occasions.}

For some reason, she senses that if Rachel had been under a human appearance, she could have witnessed her smirking slightly.

"You need to bounce back, Max." It comments after a moment of silence.

"That's so easy to say." Scoffs the girl.

"Drowning yourself will not solve anything, that's for sure." The reproachful tone she used, or maybe it only was the truth of her words, ripped tears from her eyes. In a matter of seconds, her face was drowning under the crystal clear drops cascading along her cheeks.

"You have to get back on your feet before you can fight back."

If it was possible, she would gladly do it.

"I don't think i can fight anymore. I'm so fucking tired Rachel."

"I know, Max." The doe whispers with acceptance.

Max feels a gentle pressure on her shoulder and realizes the animal next to her had hang her head on it. Rachel obviously wants to comfort her.

"Th-they made me kill her. A-and, no one even have the decency to explain why i got those stupid powers. I didn't ask for any of this. I'd gladly give everything back if it could save Chloe." The sobbing girl burries her face in her hands in a desperate attempt to control her meltdown.

"Maybe you can try again." Offers the apparition.

"I already did, Rachel. Nothing works. I'm not even sure if this is real. I'm probably hallucinating again... I wish i could just disappear."

She wipes her sodden cheeks, closing her eyelids in the process. The sun is burning her retinas, which makes it hard to see anything anyway.

"Why did you stop me from..." she couldn't manage to finish her sentence.

"You can't die, Max. Arcadia will not permit it."

"What does that even mean?"

"It means that this is not the end. A lot of things are still at risk, like the Bay. You have to try Max, no matter how hard it is. Yes, you can't afford to use your godly powers, so what? You don't need them. Be yourself. Be brave."
"Rachel... I'm not sure i'm ready to go back again in this state..."

The deer pushes its head in the girl's arms, forcing her to smoothly clasp its neck. Maxine cannot resist fondling the fluffy fawn hair.

"Didn't you make a promise some time ago?"

*She even knows about Nathan...*

"It wasn't really a promise... You're not angry?" she demands, her head buried in the animal's neck.

"There's no place for grudges where i am. I am in peace, and i think you deserve the same."

*Does Nathan deserve peace though?*

"I wish i had the luck to be able to take action, but i'm dead Max. And you're alive..." the spirit points out. "Your fate is your own."

"If this is destiny, i want no part in it." The teenager declares.

Max doesn't open her eyes, but she feels soft fur turn to skin, and two slim arms wrapping around her middle to push her further into this weird embrace.

"You have to choose, Max. You're the only one who can."

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SBRTtd4VCQo ]

It's been three weeks now. Three weeks of demanding efforts. Max spent days following Rachel's advice by planning how to make things right again and doing everything she could to get out of her unhealthy state. She would make a trip to Arcadia's shooting range everyday after class to learn how to use a weapon correctly. If she was going to put herself in the wolf's sharp claws, she needed to be prepared. To be capable of defending herself if it became necessary. No need to point out that all her previous experiences with guns had gone to shit so, better safe than sorry. She couldn't help but think Chloe would have loved going with her. Concerning her nights, it didn't get much better. Her nightmares still wouldn't leave her alone, and she ironically picked up on Nathan's habit of listening to whale songs before bed. She had to admit it was a pretty good idea. The sounds definitely helped her relax, even if it couldn't chase her insomnia away. The one thing she had the most trouble with was socializing. Since she was back to attending her classes, she obviously meddled with students everyday. What Max hated the most were the pitying glances she received from her peers all day long. And she had the strange impression that David was keeping an eye on her. Was he paranoid, or just worried? Maybe Joyce had requested it. Even if David wasn't a bad guy, she couldn't imagine him having the time to care for her when his step-daughter died only months ago. He seemed to deal better than her with the mourning process though. Not that it was very difficult. She never succeeded in much after all.
And now here she was, visiting Nathan Prescott in jail, the two of them sitting face to face in an eerie atmosphere. Other inmates were receiving visitors, mostly women and children, and she was grateful for the buzzing background they provided. The silence between the two teenagers would have been even more tense otherwise. Nathan was peering at her, analysing her meticulously from head to toe, hands set down on the table, damaged knuckles a mixture of red, blue and purple. He looked exactly like her dreams portrayed him, minus the blood. Max couldn't bring herself to put her own fleshy extremities on the metallic furniture, feeling like it would be an invasion of his personal space. Given that he was caged like an animal on a daily basis, space must be the last privilege he possessed. As a reminder, she hears the loud noises of heavy doors being shut somewhere above them.

"I know who you are." He announces promptly.

His steel gaze drops down to her necklace. Chloe's necklace. She wonders briefly if it revives as many crappy memories for him than it does for her.

"I know you're that girl's best friend."

"..."

"Why would you want to see your best friend's murderer?" He inquires, confused.

"There was no murder. It was an accident." She clarifies matter-of-factly.

"What makes you think that?" He archs a brow, curious.

"Because i was there. Hiding behind the stalls. Don't you remember me?"

He looks like he's trying pretty hard actually, his eyebrows coming together to form a frown as the boy vanishes into the depths of his mind, no doubt looking for any memento of her person.

"Chloe kept pushing you." She started again. "You used that gun to scare her, and yes, it was a dumb idea. But you never planned to kill anybody. You just wanted her to leave you alone..." Tired baggy eyes look up from the table to pierce into her. "I saw her push you off of her and your finger pull the trigger by accident."

She has absolutely no idea what's crossing his mind at the moment. Would her words really bring him relief, like Victoria speculated? This was also supposed to help her make a decision. Or more likely, give her strength before the next final step.

"If you had more help, more support... this might have gone a different way. I hate what you did... but... i can't hate you." She confides to him, internally acknowledging how good it feels to be able to say it aloud.

A long minute passes, then he's speaking again.

"Victoria told me you weren't the type to hold grudges. And that you took my defense against the cops. Had a hard time believing it." He specifies.

"The only evil one here is that bastard. Never think otherwise. That coward even has the nerve to put you on the stand. It's just so easy to blame a kid..."

"Well, at least there's someone who doesn't think i'm a monster."

"I'm sorry for not having the balls to testify at the trial." She apologizes. "If i were to explain how i know all that i do, they'd throw me in a mental institution."
"You're weird as fuck, Caulfield." He remarks, like a lot of other persons in her life had in the past.

As eloquent as ever, she muses with nostalgia.

"I am, right?" A thin smile crosses her lips, her eyes focused on the floor.

The painful hush of the start returns.

"Does Victoria come here often?" Max is blatantly trying to get their exchange back on track.

"Once every week." His disclosure is quiet, his mouth forming into a childish pout, probably because he found the turn of their conversation boring.

"I'm sorry. I have no idea what more to say to be honest..."

"S'fine. I don't need you to talk. Just stay here." She had no idea if this was an order or an advice, but she opted for the latter.

She nods briefly, understanding his preference for physical company rather than insignificant chatting. If she was locked up all day long, she would probably kill for the tiniest distraction. Several minutes pass, none of them uttering a word. Max can feel him eyeing her intently and is incapable to stop the blush cropping up on her cheeks.

"Time's up." Notifies one of the guards in the room.

People rise from their seats in near perfect synchronicity, followed by the annoying grating sounds of chairs gliding along the ground. Max is ready to depart, barely refraining from dragging the boy with her to the outside world. She knows better than to tempt jailors armed with tasers.

"Hey," he calls out, waiting for her to turn back to him before continuing, "Am i ever gonna see you again?" She perceives a faint glimmer of hope in his stare.

"You will, Nathan. Definitely."

Just not in a cold shady jail.

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VL6inz4WPhQ ]

Deep in Arcadia bay's forest, as the sun goes down and cast a bundle of warm colors onto its esthetic nature, the wildlife seems to scrupulously observe the ongoing construction of a certain infamous estate. One of the workers, carrying a plank of wood under his arm, walks in quick strides to the building to suddenly be stopped by a crow charging into his helmet.

"Ow! Fucking bird!" cried out the man, rubbing his painful skull with fervor.
"What's the problem with these damn beasts?" asked one of his co-workers who came with others to see what the commotion was about.

"I don't know, animals keep coming on the site and disturb the workers," informed another one.

"Yeah, Patrick got jumped by squirrels this morning."

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Snorted the injured guy, an incredulous expression crossing his face as he turned to stare at the guilty bird standing on a cable line nearby and taunting him mercilessly.

*If put to the test*
*Would you step back from the line of fire*
*Hold everything back*
*All emotions and desires*

Meanwhile, a short-haired blond is pacing across her bedroom's floor, cellphone glued to her ear, scratching off her nail polish in a nervous tick.

"She said she'd come back again," says a masculine voice coming from the other side of the phone.

"That's cool, Nate. She said I was right, you know. That it was a good idea."

*Convince yourself to be someone else*
*And hold back from the world*
*Your lack of confidence*
*What you choose to believe in*
*Dictates your rise or fall*

Not so far away, in the Price's house, a couple is serenely eating dinner.

"The guy owning the shooting range said Max has been coming there for three weeks."

"Really? I don't like thinking about that girl playing with guns."

"Still haven't seen her?"

"No. She responds to my messages but it's always the same thing: she's alright and she's trying to find some time to visit. She won't even eat at the diner."

"She's beginning to come to class again. I've seen her in the hallways multiple times. Her eyes seem less... hollow."

The woman lets out a deep sigh as she drops her fork back onto the table.

"I'm worried David. She seemed so strong after Chloe's funeral... Max is a brave girl, but she's only eighteen. This is too much to handle for a teenager."

"Give her time Joyce. She'll come to see you again when she's ready."
With no one else around you
No one to understand you
No one to hear your calls
Look through all your dark corners
When you're backed up against the wall
Step back from the line of fire

Late in the evening, Max is sitting on the floor of the TV loundge with her diary on the ground while
the news are on. She's staring at the picture she took in Jefferson’s class that famous monday. The
one where everything began. Before the bathroom. Before her tragic reunion with Chloe. Her left
hand is cupping the picture of a blue butterfly. She'd need something to take her back in case
everything turned to hell again. Ironically, said butterfly instantly flies into the room and places itself
on her right palm.

"I'm sorry. I can't do this anymore."

She squeezes her hand for just a second and the shriveled and now lifeless insect falls soundlessly to
the ground. She focuses on her own captured face before a blinding light flashes in front of her eyes.

You'll have no reason to exist in this world.
I'm back. And i'm ready this time.

Her butterfly picture was clutched in her hand as she inattentively put her camera back on her desk.

It worked. I wasn't sure it would...

She could hear Jefferson blabbering his bullshit in the background. Hearing his annoying voice again drove her to wish she could smother his pathetic ass. Sadly, the pervert would simply die without even suffering for all his evil deeds. No justice in that. So she had to hold back.

Too bad.

"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."

The student scowled at the older man after promptly tossing the photo on her table, shifting her attention to the shady individual.

"I'm not into "capturing" your interest. That's kind of sick, isn't it?"

"Uh..." he chuckled, taken aback. "I guess somebody hasn't had their coffee... Do you want to try again?"

Play nice, Max.

"The Daguerreian Process, invented by a french painter named Louis Daguerre, around 1830." She sighed in an exasperated way.

"Somebody has been reading as well as posing. Nice work, Max." He grinned broadly.

Look at that nutjob, he's so happy. It's not gonna last.

"You can learn more when you actually finish reading the assigned chapters. Max is so far, way ahead of everybody."

Especially you psycho. You're in over your head.

The bell ringed, students standing from their seat with haste, the sunlit classroom emptying gradually. She wasn't registering any of what he was saying anymore, focused on a gloomy Kate sulking by herself. Her school supplies haphazardly back in her bag, she bolted up from her chair.

"Kate, listen to me." Max requested after striding to her desk.

"Um... Alright," agreed the sweet downhearted blond.

"You're not alone, Kate. I've got your back no matter what happens, so do a lot of other people. Like Stella, or Alyssa. And many others. You're an amazing friend Kate, nobody cares about what a
bitchy little bully says. We all care, we're all here for you. You need to realize this."

Her friend blinked in wonderment.

*She's so cute... It makes me want to squeeze her.*

"Max, that makes me feel so blessed for the first time this week," she giggled slightly, "I-i don't know what to say..."

"Neither do i. Maybe we could both use a hug," she proposed as she opened her arms to invite her friend in a comfy embrace that she gladly accepted.

"Thanks. You always know the right thing to do." She nodded at her with a grateful smile.

*If you only knew how wrong that statement is Kate...*

Maxine marched toward her teacher who was busy discussing homework with a flirting Victoria. She really was obvious. And completely unaware that the guy she fancied had more than his share of creepy tendencies.

"Mr. Jefferson? We need to talk."

"Can you see i'm talking to Mr. Jefferson now?" Argued Chase, because she always had to make things difficult.

"Yes, i see. But maybe you shouldn't..." she wisely advised, noting the sudden but brief hagard look on her professor's face.

"Uh, and why not?"

"Hold on, Victoria." Intervened Jefferson. "Are you okay, Max?" He asked, as if he was concerned.

*I'm more than that.*

She dismissed his question, merely engrossed in her classmate.

"You're smart enough to know that hiding behind a screen and posting videos of people is totally fucked up. You know how easy it is to hurt somebody, to destroy their life? Are you proud of yourself?" She motioned to Kate, drawing their eyes to the faithful girl. "If you have any conscience left, you should think about your actions." Admonished the teenager.

"Listen... I-i didn't..." she was stumbling over her words.

"Of course you did. You're so insecure you can't even be happy with your own talent. So you seek to bring everybody down to your mean bully level."

"Okay, i do not have to listen to this bullshit... do i, Mr. Jefferson?"

"Well, it looks like you already did, Victoria..." he asserted sarcastically, his left hand landing on his hip.

"Then i guess i'm done talking." Concluded the blond, crossing her arms in mimicry to Max.

"That's a relief."

*I'm sorry Victoria, but you have to learn.*
The snob stamped away in an indignant attitude. Mark's onyx gaze zeroed in on her.

"I'm not going to say i didn't enjoy that, but... why?" He questioned, raising his arms in a wondering movement.

*What the fuck? You shouldn't encourage this kind of things you piece of shit!* 

"Here's my photograph for the contest." She extended his treat to him.

He blinked owlishly, his lips parted in transitory puzzlement, openly gawking as his ebony eyes wandered between her and the picture.

"Oh... um, that was easy." The man inclined his head in contemplation, smirking smugly like he had just won the lottery.

"No. It wasn't easy at all." She rasped lowly, her face shaking from left to right, and casting him a look full of reproach.

"Well, i, uh... I-i can't pre-judge yet, but i'm very... happy you decided to enter. That means... a lot to me..." His eyes were fixed on her entry, entry that he kept carefully between his hands as if he was guarding a precious treasure. She couldn't refrain from rolling her eyes. "And Blackwell..." he added a little too late.

*That's right shitface, correct yourself. You keep making mistakes.*

"Th-the first step for any artist is to put themselves out there in the world without fear."

She easily noticed the way his gaze was roaming her face with... yearning... That idiot wasn't even trying to hide his sick daydreaming. Was the fact that she finally entered the contest really so exciting for him? Why? What was the freak planning?

*"Your eyes are so wide, so... lost. Beautiful..."*

"To be... innocent," and now he wasn't even making the effort of saying coherent things anymore.

"Or guilty," she retorted, lifting an insolent brow.

Damn, she never felt so sassy! The dumbass didn't seem to understand her hidden meaning but it still disturbed him. And, the icing on the cake, he appeared to be fond of her sudden slyness.

*You're not in control anymore, Jeffershit.*

"Uh... Well, thanks for the photo, and... maybe both of us will be jet-setting to San Francisco next friday." He foreboded, his mind already set on her probable success.

*Oh, we will.*

Would he still have used his creepy words if Victoria was still here? Something didn't make sense. His perpetual insistence and eager reactions seemed to denote he wanted to go to San Francisco with her, and she could guess it wasn't just to give her a personnel tour of the art gallery. He clearly wanted to spend some alone time with her. Why? It could have been for the opportunity of drugging her and use her for his sick pictures, but this option was out of the question since his dark room wasn't at proximity and that he wouldn't be able to bring all his material with him. Not that he could do it without looking suspicious. And Jefferson didn't like to appear suspicious. He also seemed to be a perfectionist when it came to his special *sessions*, so he wouldn't take such a huge risk just to do an
half-assed job right?

"I highly doubt that." She scoffed just to pester him, eyebrows cocking upward.

Did he wanted to get her under his wings like he did with Nathan? Rachel had already been dead for more than six months, which meant their relationship was already on the skids. Was he planning to get rid of him? Maybe her passion for photography distinguished her from his other usual subjects. And he did kept on repeating that she had a gift. If she hadn't stick her nose into his little business and had entered the contest as he wished, would have things been different in her previous timeline too? If she was supposed to have no clue about his doings, he didn't have any reason to murder her. Would he also refrain from kidnapping her? But she wasn't Nathan. She wasn't filthy rich. She wouldn't be of any use to him apart from the purpose of sharing his gift.

"Don't be so modest Max. Anything can happen in a week..." the low, nearly alluring tone he addressed her with was starting to get on her nerves.

Yes, maybe that's what the sicko desired after all. He did seem to love hearing himself talk and lecturing people. And now that she thought about it, he always sat directly in front of her in his class and tried to catch her attention at any possible chance. Which meant he spent the entire course turning his back to half of the class to face Victoria, Kate and her. But as she had the displeasure of learning, he already had his fill with Kate and wasn't interested at all in Victoria. God! Even the girl seemed more aware of it than Max herself! The blond's journal stated that Jefferson only seemed to care about Max.

Had she really been so blind?

"As you're going to find out, Mr. Jefferson." She smiled saucily, her hands leaving her hips to emphasize her words in a small open gesture and she noticed he was absent-mindedly shaking her entry in his right hand in an excited manner.

_Seriously, he's acting like a four years old opening his Christmas present. Ridiculous._

She wanted to punch the pompous grin he was flashing around. The bastard watched her exit the room while scratching his beard with such a satisfied look on his face. Disgusting! He didn't seem so aloof anymore. She never saw him smile so much actually. Whatever. She needed to get to the bathroom fast enough to hide behind the door before Nathan's arrival. She had to stop him and Chloe from fighting, or better yet, encounter each other. Then she could concentrate on destroying Jefferson's life.

_That's it! You like my eyes motherfucker? My perfect innocent face? Enjoy it. It will be your downfall._
advantage of his mistakes! That bitch was going to play the rich family card and ask for his money, he just knew it! They always did. That's all people are after. That, or the drugs he could supply them with. The teenagers of Blackwell were more like bloodsucking freeloaders than virtuous little students. If his father heard about this, he would be in big fucking trouble. Hell, the bastard would probably use it as leverage to force him to work at his shitty Pan Estate! He had to make sure that dumbass punk would keep her mouth shut. So what if he had one little lapse of judgement while being wasted? Like it never happened to her! Oh, the second he saw her in that shitty bar, coming towards him with a small glint in her eyes, he immediately got what she wanted! Chicks were so basic this days. A real bunch of gold diggers. Thank god Victoria was rich, at least she wasn't friends with him for this kind of materialistic bullshit. So yes, he slipped something in her beer, and she freaked out when she saw him with his camera. But he said he was sorry! The whore wouldn't even hear him and just proceeded to hit him with his own lamp. She acted like he was going to rape her, crazy bint! The painful blow had triggered him and she used that opportunity to flee.

Violent dyke!

Nathan stepped through the door of the girls bathroom, trying hard to remain composed even though his anxiety level was on a roller coaster. He ran his hands through his hair, sweat already beginning to pearl on his hairline.

You can do this. Stay cool.

He didn't even have the time to check the stalls to insure nobody would eavesdrop on them, that something relatively strong pushed him inside one of the innocupied ones. A light click resonated behind him, and he spinned around to see what attacked him in the first place.

"Hello Nathan." Greeted a small feminine voice.

"..."

This was definitely not the punk he was supposed to meet here. What the fuck was going on? Did the bitch planned to trap him?

"Who the fuck are you?!" The boy glared at the uninvited stranger in front of him, finally taking the time to scrutinize her.

She was dressed like a pixie hipster. Her stature was shorter than his, and she possessed a delicate face featuring wide cerulean blue eyes, eyes that were staring right through him with determination and spirit. Quite the contradiction to the rest of her image. Everything about her looked soft and dainty. The girl was the epitome of innocence.

Jefferson would love her.

Now, wait a minute. That description fitted perfectly the new girl Victoria kept rambling about since the start of school term. What was her name again?

Max something.

"Consider me an ally. Or some sort of guardian-angel," he swore he heard her whisper "a really shitty one" between her teeth after that sentence.

What the hell was she on about? Was she high? And why did she lock them inside a fucking bathroom stall? He was slowly loosing his patience.

"Get th—"
"No." She wasted no time cutting him off and took a step forward, getting closer until he could get a whiff of her perfume.

At this point, she had him backed up against the wall. Nonetheless, she seemed determined not to get into his face and avoided any physical contact. Maybe she knew he would blow up if she overstepped her bounds.

"Listen," she began softly, but with authority, "This is not me telling you what to do. This is not me trying to control you." She raised her hands in the air defensively, like she was trying to pacify a rabid dog. "This is me trying to save your ass from doing something you'll regret for the rest of your life."

Did she knew what he did? Was that what she was talking about?

"I know you're here to meet Chloe, and i know she's trying to blackmail you. I'm her best friend by the way," she clarified with a hand over her heart, "but that doesn't mean i approve of everything she does. So, i'm going to help you keep her at a distance, alright?"

"What?" He hissed huffily.

Why would she try to protect him if that blue-haired wench was her best friend? Nothing made sense right now.

"By the way, hiding a gun in your pants is an accident waiting to happen." She said matter-of-factly, pointing a finger down at his trousers.

"How the fuck do you know that?!" Barked the short-fused boy.

There was no way she could have seen it. The weapon was perfectly concealed by his clothes. And that Chloe couldn't have predicted it, so why her?

"I know way more than i should, but you'll learn that eventually." She hinted mysteriously.

He had enough. He bolted from the wall and pinned her against the one behind her, caging her between his arms, one hand on each side of her head to show her who's boss. She didn't even have the decency to flinch or look afraid.

_Seriously, where does that loony come from?_

"You best tel—"

"Chloe's coming. You keep your mouth shut while i take care of her." She had the guts to dictate.

"Hmph—" Her small hand immediately pressed against his mouth while the door accessing the bathroom creaked open, distant steps hastily getting closer to their hiding spot.

He gawked at her, eyes bulging in surprise, and saw she had her index finger against her lips as a warning for him to keep quiet. A loud bang resonated, drawing both of their gaze to the door next to them.

"Somebody in here?" Pried the girl he was originally expected to meet from the other side.

Something mournfully dark crossed Max eyes, the girl closing her eyes in complete silence for a moment, as if to find her bearings. A shaky breath slipped from her pink parted lips.

_Did she just spasm?_
"Of course." Responded the hipstery nymph within his arms after a few seconds.

"Hey, did you see Prescott around here by any chance?" The punk didn't waste anytime to solicit any information concerning his whereabouts, making him frown in displeasure.

Can't wait to extort me, skank?

"Um, i saw him leave the building right before i came in here." The twee chick lied huskily, trying to make her voice sound different than it normally was.

"Fuck! That asshole..." Chloe cursed and bailed precipitately, door slamming widly behind her.

She's gone. Good riddance.

"I did it." The brunette muttered under her breath like a weirdo. "Nobody died."

He brought his arms back to his sides, withdrawing from her as much as the tight space they were trapped in allowed.

"You did great Nathan," she beamed, briefly squeezing his shoulders with delicacy.

"The fuck..." he exhaled, royally lost due to her demeanour.

Max quickly unlocked the door and left the narrow cubicle, driving him to follow in her steps. He stayed there, immobile, as he retardedly stared at the young woman. She took her phone out of her pockets, then finally twisted around to eye him like she had just noticed his persistent presence.

"What are you doing? Go!" Her covered arms flailed around to point the exit. "If you delay she'll find you and this will have been all for nothing." She prompted.

Is that bitch ordering me around? Who does she think she is?

"Oh man, you're telling me what to do?" Sneered the boy, prowling toward her.

"Nathan, i know this must seem really weird, but i have an emergency, and i can't deal with you right now. I'll explain everything later, if you want." She assured calmly, dialing a number he didn't care enough to peek at.

His eyes fiercely bore into her blue ones, assessing her continually, causing her to fidget nervously. She appeared sincere, if her thoughtful expression was anything to go by. For some reason, he could feel his face starting to warm up under the intense scrutiny of her wide blue orbs. It was only anger. Just that.

Alright ho, i'll give you the benefit of the doubt.

He had other places to be anyway. This day was getting too strange for his tastes. He made for the exit, leaving her behind to her so called emergency.

What the fuck ever.

"Warren, forget your drive for now, get your ass in the hallway." He heard her instruct as he walked away permanently from this cursed bathroom.
She had caught no sight of the butterfly in the bathroom this time. Maybe it was a sign. A good one hopefully. Hearing Chloe's voice again had been both an amazing and tragic experience at the same time. She had felt her eyes rapidly watering and decided to close them to keep herself from turning into a crying mess in front of Nathan. She'd have all the opportunity to do so later. For now, she had one particular goal in mind. She knew Madsen was wandering around here, since he'd been so fast at busting her out of the bathroom when she had set off the fire alarm. Well, in the past that is. She stalked over Warren, sagely waiting for her all by himself amid the corridor.

"Max." He welcomed her with a wannabe charming smile.

"You're the best." Maxine hugged him tightly for an instant, seriously happy to see him again, but not wanting to lead him on.

She gripped his arm tactfully and dragged him in a corner so they could monitor David's impending arrival without being spotted like dimwitted newbies.

"You memorized the plan, right?" She interrogated, wanting to prevent any possible mishap.

"I got it. I distract him, make some noise, you steal the keys, you flee, we regroup in front of the dorms." He listed dutifully.

"Perfect."

"This is pretty exciting." He was practically bouncing with thrill. "Hey, i almost forgot to tell you, i got a new car."

"I know." She blurted out without thinking.

"Huh?" The future scientist frowned, perplexed.

"I mean... That's cool!" She exclaimed exuberantly, struggling to fix her mistake.

"..."

Nope. He didn't buy it. Not one bit. She got back to surveying the corridor, acting as if nothing happened and hoping he would figure out it was best to drop the subject.

"Max... this little stunt, it has a purpose, right?" He inquired, eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"No Warren, i only wanna test my thieving abilities." She rolled her eyes. "Stop staring at me like i'm an escaped criminal."

"Sorry. I feel like one of the Men in Black." He dropped cheerfully.

"We're not pursuing aliens, Warren." She pointed out, her brows knitted in bemusement.

"I know but it feels so badass to be on a mission. Especially if we can trick that douchebag." He crowed in high spirits.
"I hear you." She chuckled.

At last, loud steps echoed in their direction, making them jolt.

"Shh, he's coming!" Max warned, ready to jump into action.

She signaled him to begin his pretending with a terse nod in the man's direction.

"Hey, Mr. Madsen!" Called out the younger boy, running up to their prey and forcing him to face the other way around so Max the rookie snatcher could get into his back.

"What do you want?" The guard grumbled, ever so delightful.

"I huh... I think i saw a shady old dude trying to flash students on campus."

"What?! Where?" David took the bait, always ready to overreact in any situation.

Meanwhile, the teenage girl sneaked over them stealthily, stopping once she was right behind the security guard, who was miraculously still unaware of her presence. Max widened her eyes gravely at the nerd to signal it was time to start making some noise. Warren took the cue expeditiously and faked the beginning of a sentence before coughing his lungs out in an exaggerated and loud manner. She didn't waste any time, palming the keys with dexterity, not producing any sounds in the process. She would proudly congratulate herself later.

You didn't fuck this up Max. For once.

Cautiously retreating, she slipped the little things into her useful bag, meticulously silent. Once she was at a safe distance from the two arguing individuals, she used her left hand to signal Warren he could cease his little sham.

"Wait, no! I remember now, he was trying to sell something he hid in his coat. Wait no—Um... Forget it. I think i'm just trippin'..." He stuttered unintelligibly, slapping his forehead with his right hand.

"Stop wasting my time kid!" Warned David, pushing past him harshly and stomping away wound up.

"Sorry," he mumbled apologetically, rubbing the back of his head with his hand as he observed Max exiting the building safely.

You kick ass Warren! I'm definitely indebted.

Neither of them had noticed the dark figure observing them at the end of the hallway, arms crossed over a white shirt and black jacket, the corridor's lighting reflecting sharply across an expensive pair of glasses. The corner of the man's lips was stretched up in genuine amusement.

When they regrouped in front of the dormitory a few minutes later, she noticed Victoria and her
goons were nowhere to be seen.

At least we won't have any trouble going past the stairs.

The two teenagers entered the building, climbing up the numerous floors and ultimately running into something akin to a domestic quarrel between Juliet and Dana. Ah, right. She had altogether forgot about the little sequestration incident.

Ah, that's right, Dana borrowed Warren's drive. I really need to start locking my door. Dana, Victoria, Nathan... everyone comes and goes as they please.

"Trouble in paradise?" Commented the boy as they passed the two girls casually, ignoring the commotion.

"Girls drama. Stay in my room while i get your drive back." She groaned, exasperated.

"Yes sir." He saluted in jest, disappearing through her door.

She slowly pushed Victoria's bedroom door, making sure the Vortex Club queen wasn't in there, or she'd get an earful. No one in sight.

Weird. She's nowhere to be found. She must be brooding somewhere after what i said to her...

Once the sexting proof was printed, she strolled back to Juliet to negotiate Dana's release. Her objective accomplished, the Blackwell Ninja—as Juliet just named her—returned to Warren, waiting in her room. The poor boy spent his life waiting for her it seemed.

"So, i finally get to see the inside of Max Caulfield's secret crib." He gloated, still examining her room as she entered.

"Finally? Should i remind you that you're not even allowed to be here?"

"Why? Because i have a penis?"

Such tact Warren, such tact...

"Exactly."

"You know i'm trustworthy! I didn't even rummage through your underwears drawer." He confessed, like it was supposed to reassure her somehow.

"It shouldn't even cross your mind, perv. But thanks for the disturbing picture."

Her phone buzzed, vibrating wildly against her thigh.

Where are you? I want some explanations about your little show in the bathroom! And you better keep your smart mouth shut about everything.

10/07 4:43pm

Nathan.
The guy had no patience whatsoever. She'd reply later.

"Something came up?" Guessed Warren.

"Yeah, sorry." She had to go anyway.

"You're awfully busy today."

"I know. And it's going to be like this for quite some time sadly..." she returned his flashdrive to him.

"I'll see myself out. Catch you later, Super-Max." He waved cutely.

Warren departed to his room. Outside once more, Max sighted Alyssa on the bench, seemingly unaware of her surroundings and nose buried into her book. On her way, the camera girl grazed her shoulder, leaning her on the side to push her away from the ball's incoming blow with a soft "careful". The colored-haired chick gaped as she observed it destroy the window and Max strolled away after winking at her shrewdly. Back in front of the school's main building, she conversed with Justin and his posse, Evan, Luke, and even let Daniel draw her portrait. She knew she had time before Chloe finished putting up all her posters of Rachel, so she seized the opportunity to reestablish the bond she had previously shared with her comrades. Living your life over and over again was truly outlandish. Max had her head in the clouds when she briskly bumped into something.

Stella.

"Oh, sorry. Hey, i know you! You're the new quiet girl in Jefferson's class. Isn't he incredible?"

"Yeah, incredibly creepy if you ask me..." she replied, scrubbing her jeans clean with her hands. Some grass had stayed hooked to it since she flopped down on the lawn to allow Daniel to sketch her.

"I think this is the first time i hear someone call him that. How come?" Her brow furrowed in incomprehension.

"Didn't you hear his lecture earlier? "I could frame anyone of you in a dark corner, and capture you in a moment of desperation". I have serious bad vibes when i look at him for some reason..."

Oh you know the reason, Max... I wish i could sell his ass to everybody already. Patience, Max. Patience.

"Mr. Jefferson just has his own style."

Yeah, the lunatic type.

"Plus he is pretty hot for an older guy," she continued. "If Victoria wasn't all over him, i would definitely make a move. I don't think she's closed the deal. But she's not the only player." Stella clued in with candor.

Come on Stella, you're smarter than that! Now i know i'll have to watch out for her too.

"This sounds like a terrible idea to me." She commented, soon spotting a familiar beat-up car coming into view. "Be careful, okay? I have to go. See you later, Stella."

"Bye, Max."

She sprinted to the parking lot to see Chloe's vehicle about to leave. She dangerously rushed in front of it with her arms in the air, Chloe barely having the time to brake before the impact. Thank god for
her great reflexes, because Max didn't seem to have any survival instinct left.

"Chloe!" She cried out.

"Max?!" Exclaimed her childhood friend from inside her truck.

"We need to talk," the young photographer declared with tears in her eyes.

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VzMa8eU15QQ ]

"From the future? You're trippin' balls!" Laughed the punk rock teen.

"I'm perfectly sane! I can prove it!" Defended Maxine after roughly wiping her cheeks with a tissue her friend had lent her.

"Come on, take a breath, okay? At least i can tell you're happy to see me... seeing how you groped me and cried your eyes out for five whole minutes." Teased the ruthless girl, the very... romantic sounds of Max blowing her nose resonating in the car.

"I do have powers Chloe!" She affirmed in a self-assured tone.

"Listen to yourself Max. You don't give me any signs of life for five years and now you dive in front of my car like you're ready to die and tell me you can rewind time? Do you realize how bloody nuts that sounds?!"

Max sighed and took a deep, deep breath as she closed her eyes.

"Your mom remarried to David Madsen. You don't get along. You owe money to Frank Bowers. He taught you how to pick locks. You were best friends with Rachel Amber. You were in love with her actually... she was your angel. You two were supposed to leave Arcadia together and kick it in Los Angeles, but she disappeared six months ago. Her parents are in denial and think she just left to start a new life and be a star, like she always wanted. The TV that used to be in your living room when we were younger is now in your bedroom. There's neon lights above your desk, which is an horrible mess by the way. You have a bunch of parking tickets in your trashcan. Your glass snow dome is in a cardboard at the top of your shelves. There's a small box under your bed with a cd, a postcard, a feather earring, some coins, and a picture of you and Rachel that you used to make her missing person posters. Your keychain is a cute robot panda. You say "hella" all the time. You stole David's gun from the garage, i swear you better put it right back in its place by the way. And finally, you're planning to medicate once we get to your house, but you better not because David is going to bust you and slap you in the face like a douche."

"Oh my god..." Chloe blurted out.

"Do i need to fucking go on?" The camera girl opened her arms in a questionning gesture. "Cause i'm out of saliva." She lifted her legs to place her feet on the dashboard.
"Dude this is like a fucking movie! Wait, are you playing a trick on me?" She scowled and dangerously turned her gaze to her passenger, not liking the idea of being deceived like a fool.

"This is not a movie, nor a trick. This is real life. And it sucks. And stay focused, you're gonna get us killed."

"What do you mean? It's exciting as hell!" Grinned Price, paying attention to the road once more.

"Believe me, once I explain everything to you, you're not gonna be so excited anymore."

"Well please do!" She demanded frenziedly.

*I missed this impish grin...*

"We need to get to your house first. I'm not saying this kind of shit while you're driving... Got my fair share of accidents for a lifetime already."

"We have to get to Joyce's room and open the window." The brunette comments, the entrance door shutting close behind them and the sound of keys being discarded on the nearest surface available emitting throughout Chloe's entryway.

"Why?" Asked the blue haired chick as she gave her friend a weird look.

"A bird is going to fly into it and die, we have to open it so it doesn't happen. That way you'll see I'm not lying to you. It's like, killing two birds with one stone." Max explained while climbing up the stairs.

"You're still bad at puns."

"Wasn't intentional..." she confesses.

Once upstairs, they enter Joyce's room casually and approach the sealed window. Caulfield slides it open and, as predicted, a beautiful blue bird flies in to perch itself on top of the wardrobe, chirping happily. She spins around to face her childhood best friend, frozen in place and blinking repeatedly like a broken machine.

*Chloe Price has officially glitched.*

"Amazeballs." She finally whispers.

*Ah! There she is.*

"Now we have to get something from David's locker." Hints the smaller girl, getting the much needed bunch of keys out of her faithful bag.

"How did you get that?"
"I stole it from him at school." She admits with absolutely no shame.

"...Marry me..."

"Illegal in Oregon. For now." She appends with a coy smile.

"Fuck that shit! Let's elope!" Suggests Chloe, curling an arm around Max's shoulders as they rush back downstairs.

Max raids David's locker after Chloe threw a coat on the concealed camera in the garage, putting his precious folder in her bag. She asks Chloe to lend her the big painted board they decorated as children, saying it would be useful in their search for Rachel. They get back in Chloe's room and sit on her bed.

"Okay Max, no more buying yourself some time. Explain everything."

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nco7qfrPG7I]

American Rust. She had so few memories of this place, yet they were the worst of her existence. Only dreadful things ever happened in this location.

Like Chloe getting run over by a train, or getting shot in the head... No need to mention Rachel... Jesus...

"So you know my secret hide out too? Damn." Revered the Price teen, scanning the area she was already acquainted with. "Why are we here Max?"

"You'll see... It's better to show you."

She had told her about the storm, about her time trip to their younger past, recounted the consequences of saving William. Related how Nathan accidentally shot her in the girls bathroom and how she set off the fire alarm to prevent it. There was one last important detail she left out. Something Chloe would sadly have to see with her own eyes. She could already feel the bile climb up her throat at the idea of what was coming. Her blissful reunion with her favorite person in the world will have been short-lived. She was genuinely anticipating her future reaction. Her best friend was gonna turn in a devastated mess in a few minutes. Then, desperation would transform into anger. Max took a deep breath as they closed in on the junkyard's center. She knew Chloe like the back of her hand.

"Look, i know i cried like a little bitch when we talked about my dad but, you don't have to make that sort of face, alright? I'm okay." Reassured Miss Badass Punk.

Maxine simply kept walking toward their destination, her associate following close behind.

"You still didn't tell me if we succeeded in finding Rachel though..."
"That's precisely why we're here."

"What—" her eyebrows shot up in astuteness. "Is there a clue to where she's been in the junkyard? That would make sense since the two of us always used to come here." She concluded, a hand stroking her chin in reflexion.

*Here we are.*

Rachel was awaiting patiently, resting on the ground in her spiritual form, straightening up as soon as she spotted them.

"What's with that deer? It looks... translucent." Chloe seemed to feel uneasy, if the way she suddenly cringed was of any indication.

"You can see it?"

"Hell yeah i see it! Okay, this is freaking me out..." She stepped back carefully, eyeing the doe with bewilderment.

*Maybe... Maybe Rachel wants Chloe to see too... I have to try.*

"Take this." Max extended her camera to her friend.

"Max, i know you're all over your photography shit but, i don't think this is the moment for an epic photoshoot." She was examining the object which had been given to her, turning it around playfully. The ghost was right next to the soft-featured photographer by now, gazing up at her expectantly. It leaned its cute muzzle forward and nuzzled her human arm in a consoling manner.

"Now take a picture."

Chloe's eyes traveled rapidly between Maxine and the impressive animal.

"Alright... If that's what you want. I guess it will make a cool shot." She shrugged before complying. A familiar noise clicked and soon enough, a small polaroid came out of the retro device.

"Max," gaped the tallest of the three, turning around the photo so her friend could regard it. "What the fuck does that mean..."

Max rechecked the picture twice in astonishment. This was not what she had envisioned, but since it would only confirm the reality of her next words, she couldn't pass the opportunity. The image depicted a human Rachel standing at her side, her head resting against her frail shoulder in compassionate support. She appeared see-through, but everything was there, from her long straight blond hair, to her famous azure feather earring.

*It's splendid... There's a sort of mystical aura to it...*

The Caulfield girl came back to her senses. She had to do this properly.

*All you have to do is be honest, Max.*

"I'm so sorry Chloe... Rachel is dead. She's buried in this spot. We found her together. We had to dig her up with our hands." Tears leaked slowly from her cerulean pearls. "It was so horrible Chloe. I don't want you to see this again..." she weeped grimly.
"No. No no no no no, this can't be real..."

Her interlocutor was clearly in denial, shaking her head frantically in pure nonacceptance.

"This is a nightmare..." Chloe muttered insanely, letting go of the polaroid which fell on the ground. "Rachel..." The deer took a step closer in response, ready to intervene at any moment.

"The one who killed Rachel..." Max carried on with difficulty. "He put a bullet right through your skull. Right in front of me... He drugged and kidnapped me. I was tied up in a bunker. He took—" uncontrollable sobs began to escape her, "He was going to kill me, but David saved my life. Then i used a picture from the night before to warn you and save yours. We went to David for protection and he busted that bastard but... The s-storm still happened... It was b-because of me! Rewinding time is what caused the storm! You asked me to... To go back to before i used my power... You didn't want Joyce and other people to die. You asked me to let you die! To save everybody else..."

By now, Chloe was crying as hysterically as the poor Maxine, her glassy stare never leaving the animal, as if an empty shell had took the girl's place. The two best friends were in such despair that they were shaking like a leaf.

"I was at your fucking funerals for God's sake! You shoud have seen your mom... She was devastated. She already lost William, and now you... I tried to stay strong, for you... But i can't live with this guilt... I couldn't sleep, or eat, or do anything else... I had this lump stuck in my throat whenever i tried to talk... I knew i would just vomit if i opened my mouth... I had no one to speak to about my powers, or the storm, or every sinister things that happened to us all week long! Because they wouldn't be able to remember... They would have think i was insane. And you weren't there anymore... You were dead. And i felt dead too..."

She had an hand weakly clasped around her throat, trying to contain her agonizing sickness.

"I can't live without you Chloe... You brought me back here, and i can't lose you again. I won't!"

"I'm so sorry Max... You shouldn't have gone through all this..."

"I'd do anything for you Chloe... I love you so much..." she told her brokenly, taking a step forward.

"Me too..."

Their arms naturally found their way around one another and the blue-haired teen stroke the back of her friend's head in order to pacify her breakdown.

"Tell me who did this... so we can kill that fucker." She breathed wetly against her ear.

"No!" Max recoiled, wincing at the suggestion. "Not this way! Chloe, i can't keep fixing everything! I can't use my power! Don't you listen?! Trial and error is not an option anymore!"

"Okay Max! Okay... calm down. Is it that punk Prescott? You said you were drugged and kidnapped right? He did something pretty similar to me."

"I know. It's not Nathan. He's involved but, he's just a scapegoat. Nathan suffers from all kind of mental problems. Trauma, schizophrenia, you name it. His father is a huge asshole who abuses him and refuses to get him serious help. Rachel's killer brainwashed Nathan and he's using him so he can put the blame on his ass and walk free from all the evil he has done."

"Then why don't you want to tell me who it is?!"
"Because you're too impulsive! This is my only safe-card since i can't trust you not to get your rage on and go on a killing spree! It happened before and you ended up dead! As always..."

"Chloe i only want you to be safe. I want everyone to be. I want to spend time with you and get revenge for Rachel and—" she cut herself before she could mention Kate, or even herself, "But you have to listen to what i say."

"I have a plan. It's a pretty good plan... i think... As long as you listen to me and do not freak out, everything should go smoothly. Believe me, you'll know his identity before the end of next week."

"But why wait such a fucking long time Max?!" She exploded, utterly at a loss.

"Because i have to gather proof that Nathan is not the real killer and make sure that no one dies this time and it's pretty fucking hard as you can guess! It's going to take some time! I feel bad about letting Rachel's body in this nasty place but we don't really have a choice at the moment. She's already been there for six months. And this might sound cruel, but Rachel is gone, and you're not. We have to keep it that way."

Max crouched down to retrieve the abandonned polaroid and handed it back to Chloe.

"Rachel guided me through all this shit." She continued. "She doesn't want you to die. Or Arcadia Bay to get ripped apart. Or for some people to go to jail for something they had no real control over just to get fucked over even more."

"Look at me Chloe," she grabbed her face between her hands and lifted it until she could stare right into her eyes, "He is far from stupid. He is smart and dangerous. Whatever we did, he was always two steps ahead of us. I've let you handle this in the past and everytime it leaded to disastrous results. I'm done. We're doing this my way from now on."

"Okay Max... I believe you. You've endured so much shit..." the blue-haired punk acknowledged regretfully.

"I'm here now Chloe. I'm never leaving you again. You're not alone. You can count on me. I need you too. More than ever."

"I have to see Max... I need to be sure."

The freckled young woman nodded sadly and made no move to stop her friend as she watched her dig into the ground. She didn't have to go deep for the foul smell of decomposition to accost their nose. It was becoming an horrifyingly familiar odor to Max. The girl threw a sorrowful glance at the fading beast next to them. The spirit was watching her old friend unearth her remains from the dirt, gradually vanishing from their sight.

We found you Rachel... You can rest in peace once again.

What a fucking shitty day.
His fingers were twitching and drumming on the table impatiently. Those hillbilly truckers always smelled like sweat, invading the diner with their foul fragrance every chance they got. It wasn't his fault if he had a delicate nose. At least the place wasn't as cramped as usual for a week's evening. He dipped his nose into his phone, trying to find a distraction while he waited for his order.

Victoria had spilled every information he wanted about Caulfield—that's the name he couldn't remember—phone number included. The hipster didn't even bother to reply to his text. After she had the gall to act like she gave a shit about his misfortune earlier. What a joke! His friend had spent their entire time together raging about the humiliating lecture Max had gave her in front of Jefferson this afternoon. The blond always had a bad temper—they weren't friends for no reason—but he never saw her so worked up until then. Seems like Caulfield was a mutual thorn in their side. Perhaps she had something against rich kids. Like a lot of hicks in this town. He sighed, his right leg jerking repeatedly because of the tension in his body.

He'd have to suck up to Frank if he wanted to get anything at all tonight, thanks to his erratic behaviour of the early morning. It had been hours since he last medicated, the withdrawal symptoms from the coke would soon show up to fuck him over. He'd better take his pills once he got back to Blackwell. He could already feel the convulsions coming. He really didn't need to have a fit in the diner. Not that anybody would care enough to help him, they'd let him tweak to death on the floor if the occasion arised. Ungrateful bastards. No respect for their betters. If only all the annoying people in his life could fuck off and leave him to do as he pleased. Owning Arcadia Bay wasn't all that his father had made it out to be. He only wished to study at this shitty school to learn about photography. Well, look where that got him! Plus, all his dad could speak about this days were his ridiculous fantasies of Nathan taking over the family business. Wasn't he allowed to be a simple teenager who liked to take pictures?

Seriously, how much time does it take to make one fucking burger?

He was momentarily distracted by the sound of a crummy truck pulling up rapidly on the opposite sidewalk, outside the window. A tall girl dashed out of the car, ran to the closest garbage can and threw up so violently he thought her stomach was going to follow soon. A second girl exited the wheeled wreck, which he instantly recognized as the screwball from the bathroom. He also quickly identified the one pucking her guts out as Chloe, the crazy blue-haired bitch he met in a bar, when her head rose from the now filthy bin. Max took a bottle of water from her bag and forced her friend to drink. Well, she didn't really have to force too much since the punk gladly grabbed the bottle out of her hands to chug it down savagely. Even from where he's sitting, he noticed how deathly pale they both appeared. Their eyes seemed messed up, full of tears and they had a hollow yet intense expression on their faces. It was haunting. Max facial expression made him crave to snap a picture. But he restrained himself.

What the fuck are they up to?

Caulfield put an hand over her mouth, looking quite sick herself, before lifting her distressed visage toward the sky, reminding him of someone praying fervently to the gods. Maybe that's what she was doing. Nathan noted that her fingers were soiled with dirt. An irritating buzzing thrust him out of his musing.

Get home. We need to talk.
10/07 7:29pm

Fuck you big daddy.
The smell of pine trees was heavily present in the air. Night had fallen before they could even realize it. The Price girl was leaning against her car, hands in her pockets, head hanging low as she stared at the asphalted ground. Max and her appeared kind of disconnected to the rest of the world, their eyes red and puffy from crying, a glazed glint in them displaying their internal turmoil. The fact that it didn't snow, as she pointed to Chloe earlier, had been of little consolation. They had spend hours together, her partner in time needing a friend like never before. Well, at the exception of her dad's death. Max hadn't been here for her in this tragedy, but she was now. Her ally had drove her back to school and helped her unload the board they drew on as kids to put it in her room, then Maxine had walked her back to her truck. Her gaze kept wandering between the ground and the blue-haired teen. She was so powerless for someone so powerful. How ironic.

I hope i didn't break her...

"Breakfast at the diner tomorrow morning? My treat." Offered the caring girl.

"Okay." Simply agreed her associate, understandably distraught ever since their visit to the junkyard.

"I know it's hard, and this has been one big shitty day... but we can't let anyone get suspicious. You must act as normal as possible in front of Joyce and David." She recommended after consideration.

"Yeah, i could have conclude that myself." Chloe quipped, her tone curt.

Ouch...

"Promise me to call or text if it gets too rough tonight. I'm probably not gonna get a lot of sleep so, it doesn't matter if it's late. Don't hesitate."

Chloe hummed in response. Max obviously tried to mask the hurt in her gaze but failed miserably. She mumbled a small farewell before turning around to leave.

"Max..." the concerned party stopped dead in her tracks, "I'm sorry. I know i'm giving you the cold-shoulder right now, i just need some time to get used to all of this." She admitted with more maturity.

"I completely understand Chloe. I hope being alone to think helps. You had to stomach so much horrible things all in one day... of course you need time to adjust."

"It probably was the same for you... but you didn't get any." Conceded her best friend.

No, i didn't...

"I'll stop being a whiny bitch now and get back home. See you tomorrow Max."

"Yeah, get some rest if you can." She said, waving slightly at the retiring girl.

They finally parted, the novice photographer silently watching her sidekick climb back in her vehicle and ride out of this cursed place.
Water was running from the faucet, producing a placid tune while she was actively scrubbing her fingers with a brush. Dirt was so damn hard to get once lodged under your nails. Once it was done, she proceeded to splatter her face with the refreshing liquid, hoping it would miraculously rouse her out of her weariness. She turned off the tap and grabbed a towel to dry herself.

*It's nice to take a breather...*

Catching a glimpse of her reflection in the mirror, she lazily blew a strand of hair out of her eyes, noting that they seemed less swollen. Her skin didn't feel so irritated either compared to earlier. She had done her homework and stopped by Kate's room to kiss her goodnight. Her poor classmate needed support too after all. Now, she was ready to go take a walk in front of the dorms to relax a bit before she had to immerse herself in her investigation.

*11:30pm already... I didn't have the time to eat anything... Nevermind, i'll have more appetite tomorrow for my breakfast with Chloe.*

Exiting the bathroom, she tramped over the door leading to the outside world. The air was pretty cool for an october night, so she'd be able to survive a little stroll without freezing to death. Crickets and owls were singing an harmonious nocturnal melody, fireflies hovering in the air, dimly illuminating the striking scenery. She heard human noises echoing remotely, which drew her attention to the totem. A student she recognized as Nathan straightaway was smoking something she was confident wasn't a simple cigarette, humming some sort of unheard-of teenage song, his head swaying in rhythm with his voice. Well, trying to. He was so intoxicated he could barely stay upright. The boy looked completely unaware of the rest of the universe.

"*Bro is fucking hilarious when he's blazed. And he does always have the best shit.*"

*I don't know Hayden, i find this as sad as it's entertaining...*

His hands were repeatedly touching the Tobanga like it was supposed to accomplish a specific thing only he knew about. It didn't seem to work though.

"Come oooon! Blasted—" he kicked the poor wooden sculpture, who somehow offended him.

"Are you planning to destroy it because you failed at stealing it?" She jibed, startling him. He spined around so his unfocused gaze could find who dared to disturb his risible transe.

"You again..." He didn't have the opportunity to begin throwing insults at her since something apparently went down the wrong way and made him fall into a coughing fit. "I should strangle you, you're lucky i'm not in the mood." He threatened as soon as his little problem was over.

"More like totally baked..." She had the nerve to retort.
He snarled, squinting to peer at her.

"Man, you look busted!" He remarked humorously, satisfied by her awful state.

"I'm flattered," the girl countered in a flat tone. "What's with the totem?" She couldn't help her curiosity.

"It's not working." Divulged the plastered young man.

"What is it supposed to do?"

"None of your business, ho." He snapped in his perpetually grouchy voice.

He sat down on the grass, legs crossed, taking a drag on his joint. Max found herself examining his face more closely for some obscure reason. His nose was rather prominent amid his aristocratic features, located right below a pair of hawkish blue eyes. He was clearly wasting his physical potential by louring all day long. A nasty feeling jabbed at her heart as she recalled the sore bruises that had adorned his face thanks to Warren after she had ransacked his room in her previous timeline.

*It won't happen again.*

"Sit the fuck down, your bony ass is blocking my light." His majesty commanded wittily.

The camera girl obeyed wisely, crouching down at the bossy teen's side. An entire minute went by, none of them breaking the pleasant silence. She busied herself admiring the fair view provided by the lush landscape.

The atmosphere is pretty sweet at night...

"It shows me things, sometimes." He confessed out of nowhere.

*Is he talking about visions?*

"Maybe it's trying to tell you something." She figured out.

"What am i, a fucking shaman?" Nathan snorted, loosening up at last.

"Are you always high when it happens?"

"Stop treating me like a junkie, Caulfield. And no, not always."

"There you go. It must have a meaning."

"Last week... it was a storm. Dead animals all over. Dead people too."

Did he always see the storm? Or was it just a vision of what happened in the past because of her actions? Either way, it meant she wasn't the only one having those crazy previsions.

"Samuel tries not to judge people, but Nathan shouldn't be here. Maybe he's supposed to be here though..."

*What did you mean Samuel?*

"Forget i told you that. Seriously." He bade, throwing his spent reefer on the lawn. "So what do you want?"
She assessed him, brows knitted in a frown like she couldn't figure out what he was talking about.

"You knew about the gun, but you didn't snitch. I bet the slag asked you to blackmail me since she couldn't do it herself. She told you everything, right? Wanna see the rich kid get disciplined? What are you gonna extort from me to keep your piehole shut?" He snarled.

"Chloe won't fink on you. I took care of it. And i don't want anything from you Nathan. I'm not that type of person. Stop trying to picture me as the enemy. It's pointless."

His steely orbs skimmed her from head to toe. He didn't bother answering.

"Look, i helped you, but you have to admit it was a fucked up thing to do. You can't go around drugging people anymore, Nathan. You can get arrested."

"I know, okay! I said i was sorry. Bitch didn't care."

"Would you have?" He doesn't respond, which gives her her answer.

Would she really manage to help him with his mental issues? She had no idea if he took his prescriptions correctly. He seemed more inclined to resort to cocaine or weed. From what she read in that letter to his father, even his primary psychiatrist had given up because of his family's failure to cooperate with his medical demands. The boy was really all alone. It must be terrifying to know you had no one to turn to when you were inclined to psychotic episodes. How could you boycott your own son? Some people shouldn't be allowed to reproduce. Maybe she could find that doctor and convince him to take Nathan back into care. He sounded pretty concerned for him.

"Victoria asked me to ruin your life. Since you proved useful today, i'll let it pass this time." He sassed.

"My, my... Nathan Prescott showing mercy... Never thought i'd live to see the day."

"Don't make me regret it." He warned. "I was sure you'd try to screw me over."

"Why? Cause nobody cares about you? Perhaps you're not looking in the right places."

He leered at her, intense in his quiet inspection, which drove her to avoid his stare by turning her face away.

"Shit... You in love with me, Caulfield?" He snickered in a gravelly tone. "Can't blame you. I'm pretty hot." He boasted, unashamed, actually managing to make her chuckle when she tought it would be impossible.

"Ah yes, it's so hard to resist your mad charms, Prescott." She bantered back.

To her surprise, his lips thined into what looked like a smile. She knew he was trying to hold back because he didn't want to laugh with an annoying twee hipster.

Maybe with some time and effort, he could grow into a more likeable person...

The boy's head started to bend forward and light tremors began to seize him. The drugs aftereffects no doubt.

"Shit's fading." He informed her, his face in his hands to soothe his painful head.

"You should go to bed, you're drooping. Come on," Max urged, offering him her hand as she stood up. He glowered at it, like its mere presence near his face was an affront. "You can't even hold
straight, a little help is not going to kill you." She was testing the waters.

Seconds passed, and finally, the young Prescott yielded. She snaked her arm around his back while his hand gripped her shoulder. They reached the dorms effortlessly, the boy letting her guide him without fussing. She sincerely hoped Warren wouldn't barge out of his room and find them like this. She would never hear the end of it...

Me and my luck...

She stops in front of his room, opening the door and gently pushing him inside before proceeding to slip him out of his renowned jacket, which lands on the floor of his room after a careless toss on her part.

"Tryin' to make a move on me Cockfield?" He assumed in an husky voice.

"Yep', totally what i'm doing right now." She deftly unhooked his belt, sliding it out of his pants to drop it on the carpeted floor. His pupils are blown, certainly an effect of the cocaine she fathoms he snorted earlier—thanks to Frank's account book—but an odd heated glimmer that she never witnessed before shines in his eyes. She remains impassive anyway.

"Are you going to rape me? You're not my type at all." He bantered.

"Glad to hear it."

"Hmfh—" was all the boy could muster as she pushed him backwards until he landed on his bed.

"Unlace your shoes."

"This is how virgins turn out when they don't get any attention down there," the stoned teenager sighed like she was a lost cause, "Bossy crackhead whores."

"I'm not going to molest you Prescott, i have common sense. You need to undress a bit so you can go to sleep," she finally explains.

"What are you? My fuckin' mom?" He slurrs mockingly while unexpectedly doing as she asked. Maybe he was of a more compliant nature under the influence of narcotics.

Is that why his family lets him get wasted all the time? Shouldn't they know better? He's taking antipsychotic medicine for Christ's sake!

Let your son mix his meds with alcohol and drugs. What a good idea!

"What about putting on some whale songs, huh? It's pretty relaxing right?"

"How the f... How do y'know that?"

He was finally done with his shoes and ready to pass-out from the way he sounded.

"I like it too," Max laid him on his bed again and pulled his sheets up to his collarbone.

"You're wasting your time bitch. I don't fall asleep that easy."

"I know, it's hard, right? Let's try something, see if it works..." she got on her knees next to the bed, her arms snugly installed on his sheets.

"Close your eyes and relax." He eyed her for a bit, not sure if he was in the mood to be receptive,
before complying, letting her carry on. "Take a deep breath, now exhale, keep doing this. Empty your head. You can't think about anything. No nightmares, no worries, nothing. Concentrate on the sound of your breathing, or the whales, they're soothing right? That's all you need to do. I'm gonna stay right here until you fall asleep. Then I'll let you rest in peace," she started stroking his forearm warily, helping him sense her presence close to him.

To her amazement, he actually followed her instructions. She had a feeling Prescott thought he was hallucinating all of this, but whatever. If it could help her in assisting him, then let him fantasize. In a few dozen minutes, Nathan had succumbed to slumber. Max ensured the Prescott boy was absolutely unconscious, then attempted to escape just to realize he had a death grip on her sleeve. No matter how hard she pulled on the cloth, he wouldn't let go. She peeled her hoodie from her shoulders and gave it to him, not having much choice at this point. He took the opportunity to nuzzle it, inhaling its scent unknowingly. In a flash of recollection, Caulfield's gaze was drawn to the black sofa not far from them.

Well isn't this convenient...

She walked up to it, lightly pushing the hefty furniture, cautious of not making a ruckus. The sheet protector containing his secret phone was where she last discovered it. She wasted no time typing the PUK code written on the prepaid phone card, going through his messages and taking screenshots of it before sending it to her own phone. She didn't forget to delete her actions in the history of course. She wasn't stupid to the point of thinking he wouldn't notice if she looted the gadget, so she had to resort to this method. After being finished with her business, she stood up to leave the room. She cast one last glance at Nathan's sleeping form, observing how peaceful he looked in this state. What a rare sight.

Sweet dreams Nathan...

She knew she wouldn't have that luxury.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eR6sKBtOAA4]

The big colorful board that Chloe lent her was already swarmed with papers, pictures, notes and maps of all kind. Her little investigation was proving to be even more wearisome than the first time, and her room had quickly turn into a disastrous mess. So many things to print, so many points of interest to pinpoint on this freaking map, so much fatigue and so little damn time. She was currently focusing on the location that both Jefferson and Nathan had visited the night of october the fourth. The gas station.

Most gas station had surveillance cameras, right? How else would they catch someone fleeing quickly in their car without paying? That was the best way to recognize a face or a license plate. So maybe... maybe Max could get access to this surveillance system—if it exists—and find proof that Nathan and Kate were at this location, followed closely by Jefferson. The slyness of her teacher really knew no bounds. The fact that he would use Nathan as a chauffeur to their little hideout
proved that he somehow suspected David was tracking his ass with the help of his car. He didn't want to take any risk. But he missed some important details. If this GPS coordinates were used as evidence in a court, wouldn't the fact that his vehicle reached the station only five minutes after Nathan's arrival, without ever leaving this location until morning, be proof that something fishy was going on?

He would probably have the audacity to state that it didn't prove anything. She had no problem picturing his smug expression while he explained that there was no concrete proof he was the one driving the vehicle that night, or that he didn't really stay there 'til morning. Or that Nathan and him even crossed paths.

That's probably what him and his lawyer did during the trial...

Jefferson might be smart and calculating, but his hypertrophic ego often led him to think he was too good to get caught, and that was what pushed him to make stupid little mistakes. Mistakes that she could use to her advantage.

There was also the fact that Kate and Rachel weren't his only victims. Numerous other girls had to deal with the fucker before. And some of them must have been from Blackwell. Max knew Jefferson only taught at this school since 2013, meaning this year. She herself had been studying here for only one month, since september, and he already got his post when she got back to Arcadia. Knowing that Rachel has been dead for six months, since late april precisely, and that Kate only fell victim to his schemes last week, he seemed to let a certain amount of time pass between each kidnapping, or "session". Max visualized the last row of binders she found in the dark room's closet. They were obviously arrange in a chronological order. The last one was Victoria's, which was empty. Then Kate's, followed by Rachel's, followed by...

Shit!

She had it on the tip of her tongue. She knew she had memorize it because it resembled Kate's name... Something beginning with a "K"...

...Kelly! I need to find a girl attending Blackwell with that name.

It wasn't going to be easy, of course. There could be multiple girls sharing this appellation—it was a popular name after all—including the probability that the girl had changed school after what happened to her. The best way was probably to sneak into the principal's office again to take a look at the students files. Max couldn't really imagine herself asking everybody around campus if they knew about a potential assault consisting of drugging and kidnapping on a certain Kelly that she didn't even know.

Way to look suspicious Max, like you're not already nosy enough...

She made up her mind. She would focus on going to the gas station tomorrow morning, once this was done, her next objective would be to find a way to enter Wells office once more while completely avoiding detection.

Something that doesn't involve using explosives on his door would be a great start.

It was going to be one long fucking week.
A snotty blond was perusing her laptop, the radiance of her screen glowing across her features, the controversial video of a drunk teenage girl fooling around at a party playing in front of her. Two little buttons were displayed right below, a red "delete" and a white "cancel". The elitist girl did feel bad about spreading around the short humiliating clip, but the way her nosy classmate had addressed her left her boiling. That self-righteous looser had no right to talk to her like that. She grabbed her mouse hesitantly, torturing her lips with her teeth, and clicked on the "cancel" option. If Caulfield wanted to convince herself she was a cruel bitch, she would give her a reason to. Or perhaps Victoria was still too ashamed of her behavior to do the right thing, yet.

Where do we go from here?
Where do we go?
And is it real or just something we think we know?
Where are we going now?
Where do we go?

The chesnut-haired Prescott was snoring discreetly, unwittingly snuggling a grayish sweater, all warm and cozy under his bed sheets. Jerky movements and frightened whimpers his room usually witnessed nearly every night never came this time. Instead, his dreams were haunted by peaceful visions of graceful whales and dazzling ocean depths.

Cause if it's the same as yesterday, you know I'm out, just so you know,
Because, because our paths they cross,
Yesterday was hard on all of us, on all of us,

Chloe was sitting cross-legged on her bed, her favorite beanie removed, exposing the stylish azure tint fading on top of her hair, paling into a faint lavender in some places. Long feminine fingers were holding a polaroid stained by salty drops of water, a pair of streaming bloodshot eyes lingering on the picture. The fumes coming from her cigarette were infesting her room little by little, but she didn't seem to care enough to open her window. Meanwhile, downstairs, a mustached man discovers that the weapon that had vanished from his armory was inexplicably back to its original place.

Who can we trust from here?
Who can we trust?
And are you real or just something from wanderlust?
Who can you trust when ears we flower?
Who can you trust?

Max was sprawled on her grey carpet, yawning idly. Her white blinds were filtering the moonlight, casting ribbed shadows onto the blank ceiling she was fixated on and lulling her to sleep. The hardest was behind her. The road will be long and arduous but, being with Chloe once more was worth all the trouble. She shot a tired glance at her alarm clock displaying a green-lighted "4:00 am", her
heavy eyelids drooping innocently despite her pointless resistance.

*From cradle to grave, from ashes to ashes, from dust to dust,*
*Because, because our paths they cross,*
*Yesterday was hard on all of us, on all of us*

Long dark strands of hair were dancing in the wind while a golden-skinned woman swayed back and forth on a wooden chair amid the suburbs of the sleeping city. Her garden was the perfect place to appreciate the starry sky. Something slithering around her ankle tore her attention away from it however. A thin onyx snake was gliding up her leg, but she ended its course by seizing it with care. Face to face with the animal, its tongue came out teasingly as if to greet her politely.

"*Deja vu, huh?*" She wondered to the scaly creature, before raking her gaze over the horizon enigmatically.
Tuesday, October 08

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TZ4gbXRHXNY ]

Her right hand was scribbling something on a paper smeared with blue ink. She could feel her hair falling on top of her cleavage, which was not normal. It usually didn't brush any lower than her shoulders. Lifting her head from her shaky writing, she came face to face with a giant golden sheet adorned by a majestic black elephant. She recalled seeing this somewhere in the past. Sweeping an inquisitive gaze across the room confirmed her doubts. This was Rachel's and Chloe's little grungy crib, located in the center of the junkyard. But what was she doing here? More than that, why was everything feeling so off and why did it feel like she didn't really have control over her own body?

Her head bent down to concentrate again on what looked like a letter. Who was she writing to? Why was she doing it anyway? Max tried to read some of the hastily written sentences. A lot of words were crossed-out, especially near the end of the page.

This is Rachel's letter to Chloe... the one where she says she's met somebody...

She suddenly wrinkled the piece of paper in a fit of rage before throwing it in the gargabe can on her left. Her head twisted to the improvised wooden table behind her. She glanced into the round mirror standing next to some makeup products. This was definitely not her reflection.

"I was really pretty don't you think, Max?" Rachel's lips—which were also her own at the moment—were moving in perfect synchronization with each word. "Are you going to leave me in the dirt forever, Max?"

Why was she in Rachel's body? Was it just another nightmare?

"Now i'll never be a star, never be famous, nobody will ever see my face again." Continued the gorgeous wannabe model.

"It's not even there anymore." She remarked with a sneer, her voice suddenly turning demonic as the entire skin of her face started to fall apart, uncovering gross red patches of flesh. Soon, her whole visage was reduced to a repulsive skull, which disintegrated into ashes.

Max stands up in fright, incapable of catching her breath, the harrowing beatings of her heart making her think she was going to die of a heart attack. Her eyes drop to her trembling hands and she discovers she is herself once again. As a sharp crack urges her to spin around, she finds a fancy looking door on one of the crib's walls. She walks up to it, listening intently to the weird sounds coming from the other side. Thumping noises resonate loudly, followed by barely audible little moans of pain. Everything stops for a few seconds, before heartbreaking muffled cries reach her ears. She grabs the handle and pushes the door open.

A little brown-haired boy in a sailor outfit is weeping discreetly, arms around his knees and head burried inside them. Something charges into the room, running up to the distressed child.
girl. She's a bit taller than the other and also looks a few years older. The resemblance between them is striking though. Her cute white floral dress touches the ground as she drops onto her knees.

"Did he hit you again?" she demands, grabbing the boy's arms to take a look at his bruised face.

He doesn't respond and his wailing accentuates since he has nothing to muffle his noises now.

"I told you to come to me when something like that happens!" She exclaims in frustration. "You dunce!" She flicks his forehead in an affectionate manner.

Still no response. The boy's face is red and some snot starts dripping from his nose. The girl hugs him tightly against her small body.

"Shhh, it's gonna be okay. I'm gonna protect you." Promised the sweet child, rocking what Max supposed was her baby brother into her arms.

"Damn Max..." a voice on her left tears her eyes from the heartwrenching scene.

It's Chloe. A younger Chloe, with long blond hair and a sinless, naive face that she hasn't seen in years.

"These kids are not alright," she deadpans, staring straight at her.

Max bolts up with a gasp, all ragged breaths and drenched in sweat. The first thing her ears detect is the light chirping of the birds from outside, which gives her a little bit of comfort since it means she's safe in her room. Even if she's on the floor and her back feels as stiff as a stick. Oh, and her eyes burn like hell. But that's kind of a given when you're a chronic insomniac.

I thought seeing Chloe again would help me sleep a bit better...

Yeah, because Chloe dying is the only traumatic thing you experienced recently... Obviously.

You again? Don't start.

There she is. Sitting on her bed with her legs crossed, her arms supporting her from behind her back and a look of smugness plastered on her stupid face, like she owned the world.

You followed me here.

You can't get rid of me that easily, idiot. It's called PTSD. Look it up.

Music suddenly rings inside the dimly lighted room and saves her from picking a fight with her mental bitchy self. Her alarm clock... Which meant it was time to play Sherlock Holmes again. When she glanced back to the place the evil Max was supposed to be seated, no one was there. She groaned, falling back on the carpeted ground, and brought her left hand up in the air, inspecting it closely. She was constantly anxious of accidently rewinding time whenever she stretched her hand forward, whether by habit or simply because she still didn't really know how to control her abilities. There was something weird about her powers. If she hadn't got them to save Chloe, then why? How could she accomplish anything while being kept in the dark? Rachel had said the Bay was still in danger when she convinced her to come back here, and she clearly wasn't talking about the storm. What else? Since she was a child, she always felt like Arcadia was trying to tell her something. The forest especially, would... whisper things to her. That sounded completely insane but, it was true. She didn't know how to explain the sensation. Rachel was right, she felt a connection to this place. Not
that she wanted to spend the rest of her life here but, this was her home. The best years of her life had happened in this town. And now, the worst too. If only somebody could help her decipher the message Arcadia's wildlife seemed keen on sharing with her...

There was also the issue with her dreams. She was used to nightmares, she knew it was normal after the traumatic things she had experienced, but they were just getting more and more strange. She felt this poignant impression of realism when she saw those two kids. The Rachel part had just been her usual nightly guilt-tripping, but that last part... Fucking weird.

*I feel fucking gross*! Better hit the showers.

A cold one preferably. The sleepy teenager finally got up, turned her investigation board around so nothing suspicious was in plain sight anymore, and grabbed her bathroom supplies. She sent an hesitant glance to her camera, standing on her nightstand, before going straight for her destination.

*No camera today.*

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1BCEk68lY3c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1BCEk68lY3c)

The hood of her red sweater was doing a pretty good job at keeping the sun from killing her fragile eyes. When she dressed up earlier, she searched for her grey hoodie out of habit before remembering it was in Nathan's possession. She was pretty sure the boy was going to have a tantrum as soon as he'll wake up. But whatever. It was investigation time. Max kept crossing her fingers all the way to the gas station in hopes of succeeding in getting what she came for.

*If there's no surveillance camera, i'm screwed.*

It was still early, leading to the streets being nearly empty. People were barely waking up to go to work, some cars passing her by noisily, causing her to cringe. She was just as dozy as when she woke up, even if the rousing had been pretty violent. The girl finally arrived, at 7:39 am according to her phone's clock. She saw the landlord ambulating inside the small building as she walked up to the fuel dispensers. After looking around for a second she spotted three little security cameras above her head, one for each pump plus another one recording the small area of free space where cars could park when people who didn't want to use the credit card machine needed to go pay for their fuel.

*Yes! Score Max! Now to sweet talk the owner...*

A faint chime was heard as she pushed the door open and walked up to the man who was waiting in front of the cash register. His light auburn hair were tied in a small ponytail, a long hawaiian blue shirt falling onto his khaki slacks. He seemed to be in his late forties. The constant whir of a refrigerator filled by multiple cans of sodas and beers was loudly buzzing in her ears.

"Hello sir," she greeted, trying to get his attention away from the clipboard he was holding, engrossed in perusing his daily checklist.
"Hi gal, can i do anything for you?" The man raised his gaze to her, clicking his retractable pen repeatedly with his thumb.

"Actually, yes. If you could let me take a look at your surveillance footage, you'd be saving my life." She announced, her hands gripping the thick strap of the bag pressed against her shoulder in a nervous tic.

"And why would i do such a thing?" The older man raised a quizzical eyebrow.

Just tell him the truth. He'll understand... This is a serious situation.

"I have a friend who had some... serious trouble four days ago. Somebody drugged her against her will at a party and dropped her off to her room the next morning. She has no memories of what happened, or if anything bad was done to her."

"Wow!" He exclaimed, rotating to face her directly. "I'm sorry... that's... some pretty serious shit for a teenager. But, what do my cameras have to do with all this?" He inquired, not quite yet putting two and two together.

"Well, i did some research on my own and i think i know who's responsible. I only need the proof so we can go to the police together. The people who did this went to your station on that night." Informed Max. "Have you seen the posters of the missing girl all over town?"

"That Rachel Amber girl? Yes, it's all over. Hard to miss it." He remarked, glancing outside the window panel briefly, searching for a reminder.

"Rachel used to go to my school. I think the people who hurt my friend may have hurt her too. Nobody at my school is doing anything to help. We have no one else to turn to. Please sir, i don't want anyone else to get harmed." Begged the teenager, trying to sound as convincing as possible. Not that she was lying, but that didn't mean he had to believe her.

"I'd really like to help missy, but isn't it going to take you forever to watch an entire night's of footage?" One of his brows arched up in concern, no doubt about the busy schedule of his shop.

"It's gonna be pretty quick actually. I already know at what time they came around." She specified.

"Really? Well then i guess there's no problem," the manager glanced over his shoulder at what Max recognized as a black door standing in a dark corner, "it's over here, in the back. Follow me." He instructed gently with a wave of his hairy hand.

"Thank you so much!" she exhaled gratefully before trailing behind him, a substantial weight lifting off her shoulders.

"What's your name, girlie?" He asked casually, flicking the light switch on his left to illuminate the cramped room through an old bulb hanging from the ceiling.

"I'm Max."

"James," he offered, already slanted over his computer to search through his footage. "What's the date you need?"

"Fourth october, sir."

"Okay, here we go. It's the night's footage." He straightened, stepping backwards to give her some space.
She reached for the folder in her bag and took out the papers with Nathan's and Jefferson's coordinates, seating herself at the desk, the man standing behind her hands on his hips.

*Let's see here... 9:54pm for Nathan and... 9:59pm for Creeperson...*

"I'll leave you to it, i still got this stupid inventory to finish." He drawled, exiting the room to get back to his business.

"No problem," she answered abstractedly, already absorbed by her activities.

Maxine skimmed over the footage's timeline, stopping once she reached the exact hour she was looking for. Nathan's car parked up at the indicated time. A nearly passed-out female passenger could be seen in the back. Dark blonde hair tied up in a messy bun, soft confused features and a tiny golden cross hanging around her neck.

*Wowzer... Kate...*

Then came Jefferson five minutes later, who hurriedly got out of his vehicle to join the Prescott's side in his red truck. Said boy wasted no time driving them out of the parking as the teacher was eyeing the inconscious body laying in the back while talking to the other teen. She couldn't contain a smirk.

*Gotcha motherfucker.*

Max quickly plugged her flashdrive in the computer to copy the video, taking some screenshots where all of their faces were clearly visible to also transfer it to her drive. This phase of her plan had been smoothly accomplished.

Mark Jefferson walked inside the little store facing the gasoline dispensers. Of course, he had to forget his credit card before leaving the house. Like he had to spill his cup of coffee all over his breakfast this morning. Or nearly drop his car keys in a sewer grate. Luck didn't seem to be on his side this morning, but as usual, he tried to stay positive, and hoped that this wouldn't be a shitty day. He approached the counter where the cashier should have been standing, yet no one was in sight, and two voices coming from the back of the store could be faintly heard.

"Yes. Everything's in here. This helps a lot, i can't thank you enough sir." Thanked a soft female voice.

"No need kiddo. It's nice to see youngsters looking out for each other this days. I wish i had friends like you when i was young. Would have probably saved me from a lot of trouble..." replied what sounded like a middle-aged man.

"I hear you."

A dainty silhouette cloaked in a red sweater suddenly emerged from the back door, followed closely by what he supposed was the owner of the place. The girl had her hood up and ironically reminded him of the little red riding hood. Until said girl turned to face him, a familiar pair of stunning blue
eyes greeting him. Perhaps he had spoke too soon earlier. Maybe this day wouldn't be so unpleasant after all.

"Max Caulfield!" He exclaimed, visibly taken aback.

Max groaned with the ferocity of a wild beast. Well, inside her head that is.

Of course! He had to replenish on gasoline today! I swear this fucker...

"Mr. Jefferson..." she exhaled, attempting not to sound too disappointed to find him here.

"What are you doing here?"

"It's... complicated." She sighs heavily, looking down at the ground.

I'm planning your complete and utter demise. But please, don't mind me.

"Little Max was helping me with some stuff," the owner came to her aid, his arm reaching around her shoulders. "We just finished. And you are?"

Thank god this one is not dumb or oblivious to awkward situations.

"He's one of my teachers," she replied before the man could.

"Oh! Well i wouldn't want to make one of Max's professors waste his time waiting for me when he could be at school doing such a respectable job!"

"It's no problem. Here." Calmy assured Jefferson, fetching out some bills from his wallet.

"Thank you sir. Have a good day. You too missy." He smiled at her sweetly.

"Goodbye, sir." As soon as Mark had his back turned to them, Max mouthed a discreet "thank you" to the owner who winked in return.

Teacher and student stepped outside. Transitioning from a dimly lighted room to the warm and glowing sunlit world represented a challenge for her vision. She prayed he would take his leave without prying further into her business. She had no idea what lies she could serve him if he did. When she halted her course, he did the same. He obviously wasn't going to leave it at that.

"Are you alright? You look... well, exhausted would be an euphemism." He questioned, hands in his pockets, fiddling with what sounded like keys.

She had to crane her neck to look up at him since he was much taller. His glare made her want to crawl out of her skin and run far away from here.

"Watch out Max... He wants to hurt you next."

"The night was rough. Too much work. I—I need to get back to Blackwell." She croaked, clearing her throat soon after.

"Same. Want me to give you a ride? There's no bus stopping in the area." He proposed casually.

"Huh..." she faltered, uncomfortable at the idea of sitting in his car in his shady company.

The suave man noticed the nervous glances his student cast at his hands and pockets, which made him slightly frown in confusion.
"Is there a problem?" He implied uncertainly.

Yes.

"...I don't know..."

Three seconds passed, Jefferson trying to find the right words to reassure the schoolgirl while observing the busier street across from them.

"Come on Max, you look pretty tired, i'm sure you don't want to walk all the way there in your condition. It's no big deal for me." He attempted to convince her, assessing her listlessly.

Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck!

"Okay..." she complied.

Great Max. Where did your punch from yesterday go? What a joke.

"I'm glad you were able to see reason. Hop in," he urged her on with a thin grin and opened the passenger door for her.

Welcome back to Hell Max.

Bzzz bzzz bzzz

Groaning.

Bzzz bzzz bzzz

A hand sneaks out from under a pillow and gropes for the noisy gadget to throw it against the wall.

"Shut the fuck up!"

Nathan never liked morning. Like a lot of other people no doubt. There is three categories of people in this world when it comes to morning. The first is always happy to get the day started and can't wait to see what today has to offer them. The second couldn't care less about that kind of drippy bullshit, is full on grumpy and have no desire other than go back to bed. And then, you have Nathan Prescott. Yes, he is a category all to himself. Grumpy is an understatement when it comes to this boy. He was capable of gripping a pencil to stick it in your eyeball just for waking him up. Like one of the maids at his family house had the displeasure to nearly experience when he was twelve. Good thing he still had his eyes closed and missed. The woman had survived with only a small scrape on her forehead. Since then, every person who tried to rouse him had done so from behind his bedroom door. Where it was safe. Perhaps it was one of the reasons why his family constantly treated him like a freak. It wasn't his fault if the crone had bothered him in the middle of a nightmare. He had felt bad enough all by himself after the event, there was no point in adding another layer to his guilt, really.
This time though, his unwillingness to get up comes from a different reason than usual. He actually slept last night. Like, slept! From point A to point B. No nightmares. No waking up savagely like a bomb's about to drop on his ass. No nothing. Just pure, recharging sleep. Which he hasn't had in months. Oh and something smells nice. *Really* nice. It's definitely not as strong as a perfume smell but more like a fresh softener one. It's comforting, and doesn't threaten to claw at your nose until you need to sneeze your brains out to get rid of it. Like some girls colognes... Not that girls smelled bad at all but some of them were clearly heavy-handed when it came to spraying themselves.

So yeah, he had a nice night, and he didn't want it to finish now. He had a weird dream though, or maybe it was an hallucination since he could remember being completely stoned last night. It was about Crackfield undressing him and whispering crazy hippie shit before tucking him in. Kinda funny actually. He even told her about his visions and that crazy Tobanga bullshit. She had react like what he had related made sense, so of course it wasn't real. A sane person would have laughed in his face and told him to consult. The girl must have traumatized him if he was prone to have hallucinations about her when he was smashed. He stretched out like a cat, rolling over languidly, when his hand fell on a zipper.

What—

Nathan opened his eyes. The thing he was holding to his face was not his covers, but a grey hoodie. Hoodie that could only belong to *one* person.

*What the fuck?*!

He threw the blasted thing at the end of his bed. He wasn't dreaming. The nosy little bitch from yesterday really put him to sleep like he was a fucking five years old. And she...

"That crazy—UGH!" he grunted as he flew out of bed, grabbed his phone—which magically didn't die from the blow—and made his way to the showers. He was gonna give his undesired sleepover pal a piece of his mind.

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xOCDUQ2zuXE ]

What the fuck Caulfield?!
10/08 8:08am

Ah. Somebody's awake.
10/08 8:08am

U think this is funny bitch?! Care to explain why i have to wake up with ur dirty rags in my fucking bed?!
10/08 8:09am
I tried to leave but you wouldn't let go. So i had to take it off! You seemed pretty desperate... I guess Blackwell didn't let you take your teddybear with you when you enrolled~
10/08 8:10am

U better pray we don't cross paths today hipster!
10/08 8:10am

Did you sleep well?
10/08 8:11am

It was horrible. It smelled like shit because of your stupid sweater.
10/08 8:11am

I'm glad you had a good night of sleep. You look like you really need it.
10/08 8:11am

Whatever the fuck!
10/08 8:12am

Max smiled as her eyes scanned the screen of her phone. She knew he was simply embarrassed to have been caught in a moment of vulnerability. It was going to be hard to pierce his armor and she knew she would be pricked more than once by the boy's sharp spikes but in the end, if it could help, it was worth it. Regardless, it felt good to hear about him right now. The last time she heard from him, he was dead. So this was a nice reminder that things were still okay, for now. That everyone was still alive. It helped her keep her composure while Jefferson was driving and sitting right.next.to.her.

In awkward silence. Well it must have been for him since she clearly didn't have the face of someone who'd like to talk shop. She could tell by her reflection in the rear-view mirror.

"Since we're not at school right now, i can say this: Victoria's face was utterly priceless yesterday," Jefferson confessed with an amused smirk.

"Should have seen yours behind bars."

"Shouldn't you have scold me for treating her like that?" She inquired, her eyes squinting due to the sun's pesky obstination to blind her every chance it got.

"Why would i scold my student for being truthful?"

"Even if i was, i could have been a bit less... hostile." She admitted, thinking about the bitchy state Victoria would be in today. Not really different from every other days but still, she didn't need to sour the blond even more.

"You were only trying to defend your friend, Max. Maybe the humiliations will lessen now, since Victoria seems to be the source of it..." He assumed, pushing up his glasses on his nose with
middle finger.

You are the real source of all of her problems you bastard!

"Things won't get better until people realize that their actions can have dire consequences. Kate simply wants support from her friends." She huffed.

"Well, maybe Kate should learn to stand up for herself instead of counting on others to do it in her place." He called out, hands on the steering wheel as he negotiated yet another curve.

Max couldn't contain a scoff of disbelief at his hypocrisy. That definitely got his attention and his gaze shifted to her as the vehicle stopped next to a red light. Her face must have expressed her disdain because he was staring at her in a way she had never witnessed before. In distressed surprise.

"How can you make light of this?" She demanded, seemingly baffled.

"Excuse-me? Max, i'm not." His eyes returned to the road and he started driving forward once again. "On the contrary, this is a very serious matter. You can't just walk around throwing accusations at people. She keeps acting like everyone else is at fault for her predicament, but no one was holding Kate's hands when the content of that video occurred."

No, you were too busy preparing that needle you stuck into her neck, fucker!

"I'm sorry Max. You seem quite upset by our conversation. It wasn't my intention. I'm glad Kate has someone to come to her defense in difficult times. You're a great friend, don't think otherwise, but being close to her may also cloud your judgement. I'm only trying to see things in an objective way." He defended in a soft voice, trying to get her out of her sulking mood.

You have quite the strong opinion for someone so "objective".

"Well, i do not judge my friends." Her tone was getting too harsh. She needed to cool down. She couldn't let her hatred for him transpire so openly or he would get suspicious, and if he did... it would probably fuck up all of her plans again.

"Um—" he stammered.

"It's... fine." She yielded, hands rising up in surrender before falling back down on her thighs.

"It's not. You're going to pay for everything you did."

"Mr. Jefferson, i'm sorry," she sighed tiredly. "I'm just really worried about Kate and nobody is doing anything to help, so it turns me into a cranky bitch."

I can't believe i apologized to that shitface.

"It's okay Max. I understand. In fact, i appreciate your honesty. I promise you this matter is being discussed by the faculty."

Wow! A bunch of pricks having conversations while a young girl is getting bullied. How useful!

Blackwell was finally coming into view. Max bet she looked ready to leap out of the car by now. But she was also a bit anxious of being seen in the company of her teacher outside of school hours and campus, even if it was still a bit too early for students to roam around.

"You can come talk to me anytime if you have too much on your mind." He offered, his tone curiously warm.
And you can go to Hell. There's already a warm spot waiting for you there.

"Thanks." She replied monotonously.

Kate should still be in the dorms at this time.

Let's hope it's not in Victoria's foul company.

Hey Kate! Hope you and Alice slept well. Do you need your book back?
10/08 8:18am

You're so caring Max. How did you know? I was gonna ask you when i see you...
10/08 8:18am

Don't worry. I'll be at your room in ten-fifteen minutes, is that alright?
10/08 8:18am

Perfect. Thank you Max.
10/08 8:18am

"Here we are," announced Jefferson while pulling up into the only shady spot of the parking lot, seeking protection from the burning sunlight.

The engine shut off and he snatched his car keys from the keyhole.

"Thank you for the ride. I'll be going first." She hastened to state, opening the door to dart out before he could go back to scrutinizing her with his smoldering gaze.

"See you in a few hours Max."

The two people didn't notice the young man wearing a letterman jacket watching them from a distance with a concerned eye. What was Caulfield doing inside Jefferson's vehicle? Said man had a gloating smirk eating up his face as he shut the door of his silvery car. This did not bode well...

Max entered the dorms in quick strides. She sneaked behind an oblivious Alyssa, too preoccupied by the bulletin board in front of her.
"Careful." She cautioned, moving her to the side as the toilet paper that was originally aimed at her fell on the floor, useless.

"That was close! Thank you Max, this is the second time you do something like this." She noted, her curiosity peaked.

"No problem. It might not be the last..." she smiled while resuming her path to the showers.

*Let's take a look at the bathroom first.*

No link to the video was present on the mirror. Maybe her little speech had an effect on the Ice Queen's morals.

"Oh look! It's the selfie ho of Blackwell!" Remarked Victoria who was busy checking herself in the mirror earlier.

"Victoria. Good. Let's talk. Privately." She hinted toward Taylor, standing right behind her clique's chief.

"Why would i bother sharing words with a mousy loser like you?" Questionned the bossy girl.

"Because i have to talk to you about the little conversation we had yesterday, which i am sure Taylor knows nothing about..."

*You looked way too embarrassed to share this with your minions.*

If a glare could kill, Max would be dead by now. With all the nasty looks Chase kept sending her way everytime they crossed paths, she couldn't even tell if her irises were blue, green or black anymore.

"Get out."

"Bu—" her tall blond friend tried to protest.

"Out!"

She obeyed, leaving the room with her eyes on the ground, like a kicked puppy.

"What do you want? Haven't you done enough?" Victoria crossed her arms over her chest, disapproving.

"That's coming from you? I didn't hurt anybody, *well,* other than maybe your pride, i'll admit it. But you left me no choice Victoria."

"Oh, yeah, you clearly had no choice than to do your little show in front of Mr. Jefferson!" Fussed the groupie.

"Who cares about Jefferson?! I only wanted you to leave Kate alone. And to delete that stupid video!"

"Well, *i didn't.* See how it worked?"

"When will you stop? When she jumps off a roof? Is that what you want? We both know it's not."

"Boo fucking hoo! You're fucking crazy, Max! Stop dramatizing everything! Kate is not going to kill herself! Not that i would care anyway."
"See?! Can't you drop the act for one second? I know you're nice so don't try to fool me. You know what's bothering you? You care what people think, and i don't. That's the problem. That's why you try to hate me so hard, but deep down, you know it's not even sincere." Scolded Maxine.

"I—"

"You're insecure Victoria." She started again on a more gentle tone. "No shame in that. Guess what? I'm insecure too. But do you see me playing mean girls all day? No. You're so fucking talented but you prefer wasting your time with that immature high school bullshit!"

"So now i'm talented?" She inquired sarcastically, or maybe she was just fishing for compliments.

"You always have been. And you shouldn't have to choose between art and kindness. Being spiteful won't get you to the top any faster. So get your fingers out of your pristine asshole and show everybody how talented and awesome you can be. Bring them up, instead of down. It feels a lot more rewarding, believe me." She probed her classmate with her index while talking, before stomping to the door.

She opened it, turning to face the blond one last time.

"Stop giving a fuck Victoria. I can give you classes about that." Max proposed, slamming the door behind her.

As soon as she was out, her cellphone rang.

Max! I had a sick dream about Rachel last night! We were at the lighthouse! She told me she loved me and to do as you said. That i had to stay strong. She also said i better look after you!
10/08 8:28am

How nice of her!
10/08 8:28am

It felt so real...
10/08 8:28am

It was. For sure. I'm so glad she was able to reach out to you!
10/08 8:29am

Me too. It makes me feel more at peace.
10/08 8:29am

:):):):)
10/08 8:29am

I'll tell you more at the diner later. NO EMOJI!!!
10/08 8:30am
The October Country in hand, Max knocked on Kate's door, the girl telling her to come in softly. The atmosphere was as gloomy as the day before, her mirror still covered by a baby blue sheet and the room barely getting any light in. She couldn't wait for her fellow classmate to get better. Changing things with a snap of your fingers would be a far better power than rewinding time, especially when you can't even use it anymore. The religious teen was sitting at her desk, just like in her souvenirs. She journeyed to her side, putting a caressing hand on the girl's shoulder to get her attention.

"Hey Kate, i brought your book..."

"Oh, thanks Max..."

"Kate, listen. I know you were drugged at that party." Stated the freckled teen as she crouched down next to her to be on a similar eye level.

"Really? Nobody believes me... Did you hear about it from Alyssa?"

"Not really. Just me and my old sixth sense, Kate. Look, i'm gathering proof about what happened that night. And i think you're not the first Blackwell girl to go through this. Once i got everything we need, we can go to the police, Kate. Together."

Ten minutes later, after a long and serious conversation, Maxine exited the student's room. Music was blasting from Dana's bedroom, compelling a drained Max to stop by. The cheerleader was bouncing up and down on her poor bed, dancing joyfully. Probably because of Trevor's visit.

"Hey Max! You look tired... Cute, but tired!" Saved the gorgeous girl.

"That i am. I got the dark circles of death under my eyes. Which reminds me, do you have a concealer? I don't want to get harassed with questions all day because i look like a zombie..."

"Of course! Know how to use it?" Quizzed her friend, already gripping her makeup products.

"If you ask, it means you know the answer..." Joked Max.

Dana giggled.

"Come here, let me help you." She beckoned her to the bed, sitting her down hurriedly, visibly excited.

The athlete girl started drawing little dots under her eyes before brushing it delicately. Max had absolutely no idea what was happening to her face. Not like she cared. The girl's fingers were lulling her to sleep.

"Guess what? Trevor asked me to the Halloween shindig." She announced, practically boasting.

"That's cool, Dana."

"You absolutely have to come with us!"

"I don't know..."
"Max! You came to Blackwell to discover yourself, not hide in your dorm." She took advantage of having her hands on her face to pinch Max's soft cheeks, turning them back to their naturally rosy state. The girl had looked way too pale when she penetrated into her room.

"Yeah, i guess you're right. It's just that, i'm going to have a busy schedule in the coming days."

"Well the party is next week, so no stress!"

"I'll think about it. I promise."

"Okay, fine by me. BOOM! You're good to go Maxaroni." She informed, letting Maxine get up from the bed.

"Thanks a lot Dana, you're a gem."

The girl winked in response and bade her goodbye. Once out, the camera girl spotted Taylor by the tree. She's chilling by herself, some leaves falling around her because of the soft breeze of the early morning.

"Hi Taylor."

"Why would you talk to me after you just pushed me out of the bathroom?"

"It was important. I don't wanna fight with you or Victoria. Instead of smacktalk... let's just talk."

"You're funny. What was that shit you pulled off earlier?"

"I had to talk to Victoria about Kate. She has to stop tormenting her."

"Stop being such a drama queen." Her comrade raised her eyes toward the sky. "Kate will live."

"I heard that your mother was sick." Max decided to change the subject. "I'm so sorry. Is she doing alright?"

"Well, if you do care, yes, she's better now. Victoria is there for me, like you are for Kate. I'm not about tearing people down, Max." Confided the trendy student.

"I know. That's why i wanted to talk."

"I'm... glad we did." She admitted with a tiny smile.

The young chesnut-haired woman carried on until she reached the school's custodian, sitting peacefully on the bench, surrounded by birds.

"Hey Samuel."

"Oh—Hello, young Max."

"How do you commune with the critters so well? I wanna learn!"

"You should know Max... But maybe you haven't tried yet..."

"You lost me, Samuel. What do you mean?" She tilted her head, always the attentive student. Well, when the subject didn't bore her.

"What do you do when you want to see a friend, young Max?" He questioned mysteriously.
"I uh... call them?" she pondered for an instant.

"Then why not try that?" Suggested the man in his janitorial uniform.

"What? Like, i just yell "squirrels!" and they'll come running?" She jested.

"Keep in mind animals do not talk like we do. If you really wish to communicate with nature, it will answer. You just have to want it enough."

"...Alright. It can't hurt to give it a shot." She shrugged.

The girl kneeled down on the ground, feet carefully set under her bottom, hands on her thighs and eyes sealed in concentration. She started to think really hard about the squirrels who usually hanged around here.

>You just have to want it enough Max...

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s0KOZKTobxM]

Eventually, her eyelids fluttered open, and the sight of three little squirrels staring straight at her greeted the teenager, compelling her to blink in shock. Her gaze traveled back to Samuel to find him sending a knowing smile at her gaping form. She returned it tenfolds.

Soon afterward, Max was resolutely treading to the school's building, head held high. Samuel was truly magical... She needed to spend more time with the guy. He may not exactly know about the cause of her powers, but he was still far from ignorant. He always sussed out things before you had to tell him anything. Now that she thought about it, she recalled everything beggining with the rewind in the first place. Just a day later, she had been able to freeze time to reach the roof where Kate had threatened to jump to her death. Then finally came the picture time-traveling ability the next day. She could see a pattern here. She had progressively become more and more powerful. Would things stagnate from now on or did the future held more surprises for her?

The young Maxine entered through the school's main doors, halting near the principal's office. Taking a prudent peek inside, she made sure the school's secretary wasn't in the room so she could drop David's keys into the "lost and found" box. When she exited, Nathan was standing at the end of the hallway, looking at her strangely from afar, fists clenched. He reminded her of an angry bull ready to charge. Which got her fairly nervous, leading her to try to distance herself when she watched him coming towards her. He didn't really scared her of course, but she didn't want him to cause a scene right in the middle of the corridors, even if they were still nearly empty. Plus, she didn't have the time to deal with him, a delicious breakfast with her childhood best friend was waiting for her at the diner. The chestnut-haired girl spotted Miss Grant passing by all of a sudden—Science be hailed!—and decided to accost her to stop the fuming Prescott in his tracks.

"Hi, Miss Grant!" She nearly jumped on the professor. "Want me to sign your petition?" she proposed cleverly, knowing it would raise the teacher's interest.

It worked like a charm. The smart woman started blabbering something about the campus turning into a high security penitentiary, while Max gripped the pen she offered her to sign the paper, peering over her shoulder at her faux-nemesis, who glared nastily and changed directions. A sigh of relief escaped her lips.
Max wandered around the diner after getting off the bus, stumbling upon Pompidou who greeted her happily. Strange. The dog was normally wary of strangers. Especially when they were near Frank. She crouched down to meet him.

"Hey puppy..." she petted his fur lovingly. "Do you remember me?"

Woof!

"I guess you do..." she whispered in wonder.

Animals really are special...

Could the ones she had encounter in her previous timeline recall the events that transpired? The brown dog let her stroke his face as she swept her gaze around the parking lot. She felt like she had lived through hundreds of years already. Distant voices reached her ears, the girl staring absently at the restaurant, memories gradually invading her mind.

"Come on Max! What are you dragging your ass for?"

"Just a second Chloe! I wanna take a picture."

"Ahah, you and your pictures..."

"Here we go."

"Damn Max! It looks pretty neat... The lightning is sick!"

"Thank you."

"Can i keep it? You always manage to turn the simplest things into something cool."

"Of course, Che. Come on, let's get inside!"

"Yeah, before our dads get too drunk and make a laughing stock out of us."

"I'll never understand how they get wasted on beer..."

"Me neither. They're lightweights i guess!"

"Thank god for our moms!"

When she finally snapped out of her daydreaming, she was standing in the diner, Joyce coming her way and beaming at her.

"And there she is—a lovely young woman. How are you doing, Max?"

"Hi Joyce, it's nice to see you again. You look the same." She complimented, shifting her gaze across the woman's silhouette.
"Like i'm still a waitress at Two Whales after all these years?" She accused humorously.

"No, like you still look pretty."

"Nice save, kid. You're still smart. But i wish you had been here to save Chloe. She hit all the phases while you were gone, Max. Expulsion, running away, drugs, tattoos, piercings, bad boys, blue hair..." The woman sighed heavily.

"Don't be so harsh on her. I'm sure she's trying to behave as much as she can."

That doesn't sound like Chloe at all.

"It's good you're here. I was hoping you could be a good influence in her life now..."

"Oh, i will. Count on it."

"Now let's get down to the nitty gritty. What do you want to eat?"

"Actually, i was thinking about buying something for the nice lady behind the dinner... Do you know what she likes by chance?"

"Max, you're a real sweetheart. I remember her being fond of cupcakes. And coffee."

"Coffee it is then! Could i get two cupcakes from the displayer there too?" she requested, pulling her wallet out of her bag.

"Put that back, Max. This is my treat to you for coming back to rescue my daughter."

"Here. For you." She stretched the plastic bag to the wrinkled woman who wasted no time rummaging through it.

Her face illuminated when she spotted the cupcakes. Max found it pretty cute.

"Aww, aren't you a nice girl?" She cooed in a raspy voice.

"Sorry, i never asked for your name." Apologized the student.

"Well we just met, so..." remarked the homeless person astutely.

"Uh... Yeah! Ahah, sorry i'm... a bit dumb sometimes." Recognized the teenager, rubbing the back of her head in embarrassment.

"You look pretty wise to me... Max."

"What?" Maxine's eyes turned into saucers, her body tensing in bewilderment.

"My name is Max." Cleared up her interlocutor.
"I... me too!" she blurted, puzzled.

"Really? Ah, i get why you looked so stunned then."

*Is this for real? How ironic...*

She crouched down next to the woman and the two of them started a nice conversation while she was waiting for Chloe to arrive. Ten minutes later, as the beat-up truck of her friend pulled up on the sidewalk, her phone started to beep.

I deleted the video. For Kate. Not you.
10/08 9:16am

_Nice Victoria. You're turning human again._

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QAV13bGCWNg ]

The diner was buzzing with activity, clanging silverware resonating throughout the place and appetizing fragrances of food floating in the air.

"So, about that dream..." started the cute brunette.

"Damn Max, it was so intense!" Exclaimed her acolyte, banging her hand on the table in emphasis.

"What happened exactly?" Max had her chin in her hands, listening to her best friend carefully with a small smile on her face.

"Well, i was at the lighthouse, near the bench, and there was that deer from yesterday! So i walked up to it and it started talking. It felt so... You know how a dream feels like? It was something different."

"I'm sure it was real, Chloe. After yesterday, it totally makes sense Rachel would try to contact you."

"Well... there's one way to confirm it." She divulged, her index finger drawing imaginary patterns on their table. The atmosphere had suddenly took a darker turn.

*What's with her?*

"And what would that be?"
"You could start by telling me the truth." Said her accomplice, staring straight into her friend's orbs, her grave expression full of insinuation.

"What?"

"Rachel said you lied about her killer." She avowed tersely.

A deafening tension filled the air, Max not saying anything and instead, gawking at the blue punk.

"Suppose it's true since you're looking at me like I've grown two heads." Her eyes left hers to roam across the scenery outside the window. Her face was emotionless but her body language clearly indicated anger.

Max sighed and her shoulders slumped down in defeat.

"I'm so sorry Chloe. I thought you were gonna blast his brains out with David's gun. I was planning to tell you the truth eventually. I swear." She hastily explained.

"It's fine. She defended your lying ass. Said you did it to keep me from getting in trouble. She doesn't want him dead anyway."

"What else did she say?" inquired the mousy girl.

"That it would have never happened without your mystery villain controlling that Prescott dick."

"She told you who it was?" Sweated Caulfield, her face altering in a frown.

"No. I guess she doesn't trust my anger management either." The tone was a bit bitter.

"Chloe..."

"Listen, I'm not gonna lie, okay? Yes! I'm fucking angry, and yes I want to beat his stupid punk ass until he dies! But—" she exhaled like a bull. "I don't wanna go against Rachel's wishes, and by respect for all you've been through and all the times you saved my ungrateful ass... I can't do this to you." She concluded. "So I'll make the effort of keeping him alive. But he better play nice, or else..." she seethed lowly, sending glares to passersby since she couldn't drill holes into the person she wanted at the moment.

"I'm not completely letting him off the hook, you know..." Clarified the young brunette. "What Nathan did will have consequences. But in a mental hospital, not jail. He needs serious help."

"Yeah, tell me about it." She snorted, agreeing with her last statement and rolling her eyes in exasperation.

"He actually tried to warn me before you know who came for us."

"Oh, so it's Voldemort now? Don't tell me your plan is to hunt down Horcruxes..." mocked the insurgent punk.

"Shut up!" Max chortled. "I think he was giving me trouble on purpose. To scare me away. He knew that bastard would try to kill us if we knew too much."

Chloe fell into a deep reflexion, glancing at her friend's hands and snatching the bottle of ketchup next to her to fiddle with it.

"I think... deep down... I always knew she was dead. I didn't want to admit it though." She
recognized after a moment.

"Who would?"

"How do you cope with things like that Max?"

"You don't... Not really. You never forget. But you keep going. You learn to live with it."

"Do you feel able to live with that shit?"

"I... honestly don't know. I'm not really in sync with my internal feelings lately. All I wanted was to see you again."

And to make amends for your shitty mistakes.

Go to Hell!

And stop feeling tortured over everyone's tragic fate, which you caused.

"Rachel... she told me you weren't feeling exactly... peachy."

"Well, none of us are."

"She wants me to keep an eye on you. She thinks you're gonna do something stupid if you don't talk about what happened."

"Like what?"

"I don't know, you tell me... She wasn't talking about your little plan, that's for sure." Hinted the Price child.

"Am I getting grilled right now?" Grimaced the Blackwell student.

"Max, seriously. You better not abandon me again." Warned the blue-haired teen.

"Never. I told you Chloe, why would I come back all the way here if I was just going to... Whatever. You don't have to worry about this. She shouldn't have mentioned it."

"I'm glad she did. You certainly wouldn't have."

Max made big reproving eyes at her and she did the same. Joyce chose that moment to arrive with two fuming plates of food, setting Max's belgium waffle and Chloe's bacon and eggs on the clean table.

"Get that dumb thing off your head." Commissioned the matriarch, plucking the beanie from her daughter's head before letting it fall on the red bench, next to the teen.

"We're not in the military, mom. I swear Sergeant Pepper is rubbin' off on you." Complained her progeny.

"Call him David if you don't want to get grounded." The blond said with authority, hands on her hips.

"How? By stripping me from the freedoms I don't have?" Sassed Chloe, still anchored in her rebellious phase.
"Don't push me, Chloe." Cautioned the mother before returning behind her counter.

"You guys are still the same." Mused Max with lightness.

Her best friend looked down at her plate, licking her lips like a famished dog on the streets.

"Man, i'm hungry like the wolf!" She growled, dipping into her food enthusiastically.

"Clearly..."

"Let's talk about your master plan." Decided Miss Badass with her mouth full.

"..." Max paused, knife grating against her plate when she tried to cut her breakfast in half.

"Don't give me that face."

"What face?" she asked innocently.

"The "she's gonna ask questions i don't wanna answer" face." Chloe pitched, using an acute voice that was supposed to mimic hers.

"Believe me, you're gonna have an important part to play. But not right now."

"Oh, come on! Rachel was my friend! I want in. You don't have to reveal everything but there must be some things you can show me without taking risks, right?"

"...Alright..."

Her hand slipped in her jeans pockets to get her flashdrive out and placed it on the table to present it to her associate.

"I got surveillance footage that severely incriminates that dickhead this morning." She took a sip from her glass of water, staring at her friend through the object.

"Damn, good job detective! See? Not so hard, is it?" Said friend asseverated, going back to stabbing her bacon with her fork.

Max put the object back in its place and realized Kate still hadn't call her, like she had done in the past when she felt distressed about the situation. Did that mean she was okay and didn't feel the need to?

"So you have no idea why you got your powers, huh?" Her partner interrupted her train of thoughts.

"None at all."

"You're not even curious? Max, people don't get superpowers like that for no reason!"

"No shit, Sherlock. I tried sussing it out, you know! I think i'm supposed to do something specific but... i'm still waiting for a sign."

"I bet i could find the answer in my science books."

"You're cute but, i doubt that."

"Hippie!" she stuck out her tongue childishly.

The two girls finished their plates in silence, content with savoring the food Joyce had served them.
"Hey, i want to rebuild our pirate fort!" Max peeped.

"Like now?" The punk raised an eyebrow, frowning slightly.

"No, not now. My classes are gonna start soon." She pointed, sending a glance to her phone to look at the time.

"Okay boss, let's bail. I need a freakin' cigarette." Sighed her confidant, getting up and putting back her beanie to its original place after throwing a challenging glance to her mom, who was too busy working to give a shit.

"Are you gonna quit smoking one day? I'm all for personal freedom but, it's not just gross, it can kill you, you know."

"Are you planning to save me from cancer too, Max?"

"You're a bitch."

"That's why you love me." Proclaimed her sidekick, curling an arm around her shoulders as they walked outside.

"Maybe..." she let out playfully.

The weather was getting dreary. Her phone went off, breaking the moment.

Hey Mad Max! David's been following me around since yesterday. I think our little stunt got him suspicious...
10/08 10:33am

Sorry Warren. I'll see what i can do.
10/08 10:33am

No worries. It's not like i ever do anything bad... Just wanted to let you know so you don't play the Blackwell Thief with me around~
10/08 10:34am

"Who that?" Chloe peeked over her shoulder.

"Your stepfather is getting stalkerish on my friend Warren." She replied.

"Tss—! Doesn't surprise me. He's a complete paranoid tool."

Something far above them caught the freckled girl's attention.
"Chloe, look..." she required, touching her partner's back who in turn lifted her head to look at the sky.

A swarm of birds was forming the perfect replica of a human form, before the drawn black silhouette leaped down to the ground swiftly. The birds dispersed in the air once more after their disturbing little show.

"Max... What the fuck was that?!"

"I have a bad feeling for some reason..." mumbled Caulfield, the two girls sharing a troubled gaze.

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Rain was starting to pour on campus, drops bumping violently against Chloe's car and producing small thudding sounds. They felt safe inside the vehicle, protected from the soggy chaos unfurling on the poor students outside.

"I'm going, thanks for the ride. The breakfast was really nice."

"We're back in action baby!" The punk shouted as they fist bumped.

The photographer stepped into her school. Wells was surveying his domain like an owl on a branch. Too bad he never leaved his office when armed schoolboys roamed around... The guy sure had his priorities mixed-up.

"Hello Zach." Greeted Max as she bumped into the jock.

"Sup' Max. Weird to see you without your camera."

"I'm always taking pictures with my eyes." She joked.

"I bet. You... didn't talk to anyone about the drama yesterday, right?"

"I kinda forgot about it already. Just another Blackwell bullshit drama..."

"I hear you. Man, i just don't get Victoria. What does she want?"

"Probably for all of us to talk about her. Like now..." insinuated the mousy girl.

"Then let's not. You're pretty smart, Max." He chuckled. "See you at the game Friday."

Students were cramped against the walls, watching shitty teenager music videos, sound blasting from their phones.

*Never heard about headphones? Keep it to yourself, damn it.*

"Hey Courtney."

"Ciao Max. No photos please. I have to come up with a guest list for a Vortex Club soiree," she dilvuged, her index still scrolling the screen of her tablet absently.
"Really?"
"Like you care."

Oh, she did. She had to make sure nobody got drugged at that lame party, which required her name on that elitist's list.

"I'm sure the Vortex Club has a dress code... As you can see, i would need your advice on what to wear..." She flattered Courtney.

"Thanks Max! I didn't know you noticed high fashion. And you do seem more fashionable today than usual." Conceded the girl, sweeping an interested glance over her figure. Max had put on a white shirt, dark jeans supported by a black belt and a pair of black boots this morning. "Tell you what, i'll put you on the guest list and before the party, i can give you some tips."

"Cool. Thanks Courtney."

"I'll send you the party info later. Back to the list!"

Caulfield rounded the corner, just to be stopped by a downcast David Madsen.

"Max, can we talk?"

"What is it, David?"

"You talked to Chloe yesterday, right? My gun mysteriously reappeared last night. You wouldn't know anything about this?" He arched an eyebrow suspiciously.

"I told her to put it back in place." She admitted without problem.

"Well at least she listens to someone..." he grumbled in his mustache.

"That's because i know how to talk to her. Like a teenager. Not a war threat. And please, leave Warren alone. He's the most innocent person you could find on campus." She expanded, already slipping away before he could reply.

With a bad feeling clutching at her guts, the brunette dialed her favorite nerd's number. That nagging sensation wouldn't leave her alone.

"Hey Warren. No potassium or sodium. Add chlorine."

"Wow Max! Are you a psychic or something?!"

"Just do it. And it's doctor Caulfield now."

"Alright boss!"

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Ed_XZATwIc ]

The girl stopped dead in her tracks, the smile gracing her face disappearing just as quickly. Right in front of her, Kate Marsh and Mark Jefferson were having a rather heated conversation. And the poor teenage sweetheart looked absolutely distressed about it.
"Hey, it worked! Good job miss scientist." Congratulated her friend's voice over the phone.

The teacher displayed a condescending expression as his interlocutor was already tearing up. Max couldn't believe she was dumb enough to think she had fixed anything! Of course that maniac had to ruin her hard work!

"Shit! That bastard's going to fuck everything up..."

"Huh?"

"Sorry Warren i have to bail!" She cut the conversation, hanging up abruptly.

Samuel was at her side, a mop in hand though motionless, staring at her like he knew something was up. When did he not?

"Wish me luck," she pled before running precipitately towards the exit.

You can do this Max. You've done it once. You can do it again.

"Do you think Max will be pissed that we're sitting at her desk?"

"Oh i'm sure she'll report us to the principal~. Like i give a flying fuck," the Prescott heir playfully bumped his elbow into his friend's sides.

Nathan looked more relax than usual this morning. Maybe he took his meds correctly for once. Anyway, Victoria was happy to chat casually with her friend. They both had their ass stick to Caulfield's desk, the boy resting his feet on her chair like he owned it. He probably did anyway.

"Or she'll run to Mr. Jefferson... like he gives a shit."

Warren Graham was now sneaking his head into the classroom looking for a certain someone.

"Like anybody does. Max is such a little—"

"Alyssa!" Calls the annoying dork, treading until he reached the girl.

"And here comes the Blackwell alpha nerd..." Nathan sighs.

"Have you seen Max?"

"Huh, she's right there," the purple haired girl points a finger outside the window.

The rich kids duo's attention follows, ever so curious. Caulfield is looking over her shoulder like she's seen a ghost, and glances at what seems to be her phone from where they are.

"She looks fucking intense." Comments Alyssa to Warren.

Max suddenly dashes in the dorms direction while throwing her bag to the side as if it was trash, her
reddish sweater flying behind her like a cape.

"What's with her?"

"I don't know she gave me a weird ass phone call just now. I got worried." Explained the geek.

Victoria glances at Nathan and rolls her eyes.

"Oh, there's Kate now. Seems like she's in a rush too."

"Something's wrong," Warren's fingers brushed against Alyssa's shoulder in a comforting manner that was probably more reassuring to himself than to her, "I better go."

Once the irritating teenager is out of their sight, Victoria leans against her friend to talk to him in a more private manner.

"Max is so quirky. I saw her and a punk bitch come to the dorms yesterday night. They were hauling weird shit, looking around like they were trespassers and didn't want to get caught."

"What were they carrying?" inquired Nathan, his brows furrowing.

"Her friend had a giant board and Max had all kinds of folders and files in her arms. I bet they're causing trouble. Caulfield is a real drama queen this week."

"Tell me about it." Mutters the boy under his breath.

"Okay, i know you love me, but if you're not in this class, beat it." Demanded Jefferson as we walked inside the room, modest as always.

Victoria watched the Prescott heir swagger out of the classroom without looking back.

"I see all the usual suspects here," the teacher's gaze roams over the classroom. "Anybody's seen Kate Marsh? ...Or, Max?"

"I think everybody has seen Kate Marsh by now." Jests the fancy blonde.

"She's not feeling good," Alyssa interrupted. "And Max was running like the breeze towards the dorms a minute ago."

"Sounds like you're giggling about a video gone viral..." began their professor with a lecturing tone.

"What are you doing here, Max? Stop! Don't come near me!"

She had never felt so grateful for her intuition. She couldn't imagine the disaster that could have ensued if she hadn't been able to wait for Kate on this blasted roof.

"Max, seriously, don't come near me. I will jump." Kate guaranteed, retracting further backward.
"I'm not moving. I'm right here. Kate, please..." begged Maxine, her hands held up to show her cooperation.

"Oh Max, i know you want to help me... I love that you stepped up for me, but it doesn't matter now. Nothing matters."

"You matter. And not just to me. Think about your father Kate! And your sisters. Do you really think they care about a stupid video? Your death would crush them! They all love you so much..."

"Dad does care... He's the only one who believes in me. And i would hate to see Lynn sad..."

"See? I know what drove you up here. Jefferson said mean things to you, right? Who cares about his opinion? He's a prick. He doesn't even know what he's talking about!"

"How do you know about that? And... how did you know to wait for me here?"

"Because i know you so well. You're important to me. I knew something was off..."

"I did feel better talking to you this morning. I always feel like you really listen."

"I do. And we can get through this together... Let me help!"

"Max, i'm in a nightmare and i can't wake up... unless i put myself to sleep." Weeped the suicidal girl desperately.

The blond turned around to glimpse at the gathered crowd beneath her feet.

"And now they're all looking at us down there. Like they're waiting for it... Then everybody at Blackwell can post pics of my body... I'm already on the internet forever. No wonder they call it a web—" she stopped shortly to take a shaky breath, "nothing can ever get out. Like my video..."

"I convinced Victoria to erase the video this morning. No one will be able to watch it anymore. And for those who already did, they'll forget all about it after seeing you on this roof today. Nobody wants to see you jump Kate, not even the people who bullied you in the first place. They're just stupid teenagers who don't realize that cruel words actually have the power to kill..." she spelled out with grand gestures.

"You're such a good person, Max. Even if you're full of crap." Snorted her friend.

"You were drugged that night Kate, i know it. I'm gathering proof to help you. I'm so close to catching the people who hurt you, i just need more time and then you'll be able to get justice. We'll make them pay!"

"You sound so persuasive, Max... if only..." hoped the tormented girl.

"Kate, i believe you." She avouched, a hand on her heart for emphasis. "Will you believe me?" Max queried, stretching her hand to the other teen in invitation.

"..."
Neither of them could hear the round of applause that greets them when they appear at the white door, both of their minds miles away from all the commotion and their head racing with thoughts full of worry and relief. They walked to the awaiting ambulance, Kate's arm locked around Max's shoulders for support, and her face in her hand to hide her shame from the world. The girls could do nothing but embrace each other lovingly in front of the vehicle. Clearly, none of them were ready to say goodbye.

"I'm so sorry Max... I'm getting your shirt all wet."

"Nonsense. And in case you didn't notice, it's kinda raining like crazy, so i don't think it makes much difference." The brunette laughed affectionately at the oblivious girl while she took off her red sweater to put it on the frail and shivering shoulders of the blonde.

"Oh... Oh yes, it's raining..." Kate lifted her head to observe the sky for an instant, which seemed to shake her out of her dozing state.

"You're so cute Kate," Caulfield gently held her friend's face between her hands and dried her tears with the help of her thumbs, "Take care, alright? I'm coming to see you as soon as i can. You're not getting rid of me."

"Why would i want to?" she questioned after tightening her embrace around the freckled girl.

For a mysterious reason, Max never wanted to let go of her friend, even though she knew she would be in good care at the hospital. Kate had this way of pulling on every single protective instincts she possessed as if they were strings. But she knew she had to let go, so she did. Only when out of Kate's wet but warm hug, did she become aware of the freezing temperatures. It was pretty normal when you were soaked and standing around in just a shirt though.

"See you soon." She promised with the kindest of smiles.

The blonde nodded and let the emergency caretakers ease her into the ambulance. It finally gave Max a minute to get a grip. Her gaze swept across her crowded surroundings.

*I can't believe it.*

Some of these idiots had their phone out, recording the scene with apparently no care in the world for the grave circumstances they just witnessed. She scoffed angrily as she glared at them. She was emotionally exhausted, the last thing she needed was people acting dumb after all that happened. She lunged at one of the student holding a cellphone in the air—a tall guy with long blond hair partially hidden by a beanie, and that she didn't know—to snap the offending object out of his hand.

"Don't you have any shame? Are you fucking stupid or do you just completely lack common sense?! You have nothing better to do than grab your phone while a girl tries to kill herself?! This is exactly the kind of behavior that drives people up rooftops! Did you get a good picture out of it? I hope it was worth it." She sneered at the mass of guilty faces before walking away in an furious step.
Max wished she could go to sleep right now. Slump down in bed, fall asleep and forget the world around her. This sad shitty world. But Max knew she wouldn't be able to drift away for a greatly deserved dreamless rest. No. There were the nightmares. The constant torture her subconscious forced her through everytime she dared to close her eyes. She stayed strong for Kate today. She had to. But seeing her friend try to jump off a roof again was no pleasant experience, even if she was there in time to stop any more drama from occuring, like last time. The freckled girl lurched forward to hurl out the content of her stomach, gagging sounds resounding in the bathroom, her hands pressed on each side of the cubicle to steady herself. This is what she was reduced to, bending over a toilet, staring at the watery fluorescent colored substance. Bile. With no food in sight and no unpleasant odor. Good. It meant she had already digest her breakfast.

That's one that won't go to waste at least.

This was the aftermath of the stress that had turned her inside out at the idea of her friend dying again. She already knew who hurt Kate and was undoubtedly going to avenge the girl in the near future. Her death would have been meaningless when they were so close to busting Jefferson's ass. What if she hadn't been able to stop her? God! Max staggered out of her stall after flushing, a hand on her mouth as a curvy silhouette entered through the door. Dana.

Someone had to see my meltdown.

"Max? Are you okay? You're really pale..." indicated the cheerleader, throwing a wary glance at the toilet behind her before the door could completely close, then darting her eyes back to her colorless face.

"I'm fine," she affirmed, pursuing her route to the sinks.

"Did you throw up? It doesn't smell..."

"It's just water. It's alright." She explained while rinsing her mouth with the trickle of water streaming from the tap.

"You sure?" she insisted, ever so supportive, her fingers clasping Max's elbow to turn her around and examine her thoroughly.

"Yeah..." she exhaled, utterly knackered, wiping her forehead with the back of her hand. "I'll survive."

"We're all in the cafeteria, wanna eat with us?"

Yeah, happy lunch time Max.

"I just threw up Dana, it's not really appetizing." Pointed out Max, tugging her hair behind her ear.

"Oh, yes... sorry. But, you can still stay with us," she suggested, joining her hands behind her back. "I'm with Trevor and his friends. Just snooze on the table girl, i'm not leaving you alone in your state." She clarified, reaching an arm around the camera girl's shoulders to guide her out of the room and straight to their buzzing table.

"Check out the Max!" Acclaimed Justin. "How's the superhero doing? Came to chill with us humble mortals?" he teased, making some place for her to sit down next to him.
"Max is going to rest for a bit, she's tired." Explained Dana, returning to Trevor's side.

The merry band went back to their idle chatting, Max sprawling herself on the table, trying to relax as much as possible. At least Jefferson's class had been canceled. She wouldn't have to see more of him for the day. Good riddance. The skin of her arms was cold from staying bare all this time.

*First Nathan, now Kate... At this rate, i'll have given all of my clothes before the end of the week.*

A dozen minutes passed, the protagonist getting even more drowsy than before, until she saw her principal striding in her direction.

"Hello Max," he began with a cautious tone, "i have to ask you to come to my office once classes end. To... talk about what happened this morning."

"Yeah." She let out wearily.

"You can skip your afternoon classes if you don't feel well enough. I wouldn't hold it against you." He suggested, a firm hand patting her shoulder.

She'd like to see him try. He retreated from their table with a guilty expression glued to his face.

*That airhead is gonna stay in his office all day to repair the damage. No hunt for your little Kelly today, Storm Bringer.*

The bitch was right. She wouldn't be able to break into Wells office today. It would have to wait tomorrow. Her head fell back down on the table.

*This fucking day never ends.*

Ruffling noises arised next to her and she understood that Justin had just got up from the bench. He undoubtedly wouldn't be capable to stomach more of Dana and Trevor's flirting. Poor guy. Fingers squeezed her nape softly as he passed behind her.

"It's gonna be alright, Champ'." He reassured gently, disappearing soon after.

Max angled her head on the side to look at the giant windows on her right. It was still raining outside. She spotted Samuel with a rake, cleaning the autumn leaves from the ground with a hooded black raincoat for sole protection. She smiled weakly, saying goodbye to her comrades before standing up to join the school custodian.

*Samuel might need a hand.*

"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." Proudly declared the man standing by his office's window, his hands clasped behind his back.

*Yeah, you obviously did a lot...*
"Of course, you're quite the hero for getting Kate to come down, Max." He added.

"As if." She scoffed, rolling her eyes.

"She's modest. Like a real hero." Commented Jefferson next to her.

*Oh for fuck's sake, shut up!*

"As principal of Blackwell Academy, I take my duties seriously. I take the well-being of every student more seriously. What happened today should never happen in a hall of wisdom and knowledge."

The man finally turned away from his outside view to look at them.

"Mr. Madsen, as our head of security here, those roof doors should always be locked. That's just standard procedure. They were not. And that is indeed your responsibility."

Max stealthily sneaked glances between Jefferson and Nathan. The two were nearly glowering at each other, the teen hunched over in his chair and the teacher clenching one of his fists. They didn't catch her looking at their discreet little exchange.

"Mr. Jefferson, I know you can't be expected to know what your students are going through, but Kate has assisted you in class, so you should have noticed something was amiss."

The only girl of the room was staring at her professor, scrutinizing his body language, searching for any signs of stress or anxiety.

*Not scared yet, huh? That means you have no idea what's coming for you. As clueless as ever.*

"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."

"What about you and your responsibilities?" Maxine cut him off.

"Excuse-me?" he blinked, visibly agitated.

"Drinking whisky in your office all day long isn't what I'd call taking anything seriously. You can't possibly notice anything wrong with your students if you're drunk all the time." She scolded, arms crossed over her chest.

"Miss Caulfield, I have no idea what you're talking about and I do not appreciate your tone—" He reprimanded sternly.

"Yeah, maybe you should repeat that after you've closed the cabinet behind you. Your *empty* bottle is in plain sight, sir." She deadpanned, slumping into her seat, her right leg crossing over the other one.

An embarrassed silence filled the room. Nathan's snarky laughter echoed throughout the office at the sight of the principal's obvious abashment. The boy's eyes turned in her direction and she read a barely audible *"you savage"* on his lips.

"You want to know what I know, right?" Max began again. "Kate was at a Vortex Club party and got drugged by somebody. Against her will. She was messed up because of it and kissed some boys on a viral video without clue."

"Drugged?" He burst out laughing. "Without a clue? Have you seen the video? Whatever." He
mocked, his left hand gripping the armrest of his seat.

"No need, thanks." She declined with a frown.

"Kate was loaded and playing the field—" Nathan started once more, facing the principal this time.

"You're a liar. You know she wasn't feeling alright. You told her you took her to the emergency room!"

"I said i was going to take her to the ER. She sobered up eventually."

"Bullshit! Something happened to her and you know it. Something fucked up. But i don't need to give you the details, do i?" She implied saucily.

"Are you insinuating something Caulfield? Watch your mouth! I could sue you and this school so fast! I already have a personal lawyer..."

"What's his name?" she questioned.

"What?" It was the boy's turn to blink in astonishment.

"Your lawyer... What's his name?" She pried repeatedly.

"Why would i tell you, snoop?" He blustered, glaring holes into her.

"Why not? Maybe you're just lying? Maybe you have no one to defend you when you're in big trouble—"

"Scott Sherman! Look it up Caulfield, so you can know who is going to destroy you when i drag you to court." He shrilled aggressively.

Oh, i will Nathan. I will.

"Careful Mr. Prescott. I—"

"Everyone has responsibility in this," interjected Caulfield before he could throw accusations at the rich teen, "blaming and punishing one person in particular would be completely hypocritical and unfair. All of us could have done something to prevent this from happening. No one did. As usual. The shock from today's events will be enough to make everyone realize their mistakes and think about their behavior."

She needed Nathan at school for her plan to go smoothly. Suspending him would only bring more difficulties to her little investigation, and she had more than enough already.

"Excuse-me," interrupted the art teacher, "i think Max and Nathan need a break before we grill them further. A friend and fellow student just tried to kill herself... They don't need this forum right now."

"Yes, i'm kinda devastated right now. I'd like to be with my family."

"Well i think we know less now than when we started." Wells admitted, standing up from his cozy chair, as Chloe would say. "We'll be assisting the police with further inquiries."

She glimpsed at Prescott who avoided her eyes and blankly fixed an invisible point ahead of him.

"I know this has been a stressful day... I wish i had the power to change it all for the better..."
Believe me, you have no idea what you're saying.

"So thank you, for coming in."

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QohZXA8wvIA ]

Next to a towering lighthouse, a teenage girl sitting on the edge of a wooden bench was inspecting the magnificent horizon, her hand squeezing a black little gadget nervously. The orange sun was reflecting sharply against the bullets of her improvised necklace. As she took a drag of it, the tip of her cigarette lightened up temporarily.

"Good job Hero," she murmured lowly to herself.

These photographs mean nothing
To the poison that they take
Before a moment's glory
The light begins to fade

Max was staring closely at the sky in a diligent wait for a sign from the weather to tell her if she had accomplished her trials of the day, the wind brushing her hair delicately. Admittedly, bathing in the heavenly golden hour was worth all the stress. Her phone rang two times, forcing her out of her contemplation.

No eclipse.
10/08 6:52pm

I think you did it Max.
10/08 6:52pm

A familiar blue bird came flapping his wings by her side to land gracefully on her shoulder with something carefully clutched in his beak. Max tugged gently on the sheet and proceeded to unfold it. It was a poster stating "Join the peaceful protest at the Pan Estate HQ", accompanied by a date in
red bold letters. She peeked at the bird, still resting on her body, and saw that his attention was fixated above them. Her eyes followed curiously.

A flock of starlings were forming a strange spiral in the sky, making her frown.

The awful cost of all we lost  
As we looked the other way  
We've paid the price of this cruel device  
Till we've nothing left to pay

"I never thought it would come to that..." confessed a short-haired blond, her face burried in her hands desperately.

"Shh," shushed her friend while stroking her back soothingly.

The descending sun was casting massive shadows on the both of them through her bedroom's window.

"I feel so shitty. What if Max hadn't been there? She would have jumped."

"She's alive Vic, nothing happened." Assured the male teenager.

"I nearly killed someone Nate..." realized the girl, voice full of anguish.

"Bullshit."

The river goes where the current flows  
The light we must destroy  
Events conspire to set afire  
The methods we employ

"That white trash has some nerves! Our own lands! Just wait until i get my shotgun and blast his brains out on his office's walls!" Hollered a pacing young man in his early twenties.

An old woman was sitting alone at the large table, a fuming cup of tea in front of her. Three men were standing across her, arms crossed, except for the enraged one. All of them had fair long dark hair.

"A hot temper won't get you anywhere." Proclaimed the composed lady.

"You don't even care! You left the reserve! You gave up on us!" He reprimanded, his index finger pointing at her as he bend over the table for a moment.

"You wouldn't be in my house if that was the case, child." Contradicted the woman, spinning her
spoon inside her mug nonchalantly.

"Well, what do we do then? Stand by until our people get kicked out by that arrogant prick?!

"We protest peacefully, and we wait. The problem will resolve by itself, without our interference." She claimed assertively.

"Again with your nonsense? We don't have time for your fantasies, Chu'mana!"

"Hania! Have some respect for your elders." Interjected one of the men in the room.

"Be patient, boy." She counselled. "The children will be their loss."

Said boy's nostrils flared madly in response.

These dead men walk on water
Cold blood runs through their veins
The angry river rises
As we step into the rain

Kilometers away from here, below an old rusty farmhouse, a man was watching multiple videos depicting the turbulence of the early morning. Two young women were sharing an hopeful embrace and loving smiles until only one of them remained, the suicidal teenager being lured away in a white vehicle. Sweet Maxine was then marching toward the dazed crowd, more resolved than he ever had the pleasure of witnessing, to tear asunder the phone of a student from his hand. The girl didn't look happy. Moist chestnut colored bangs were falling charmingly on barely discernible eyebrows, sparkling eyes full of indignation, irises brimming with wisdom, plump lips dancing together to express righteous words. She looked so small and breakable under the pouring rain, her thin uncovered arms shuddering from contact with the cold air. Quite a radical contrast to her spunky behavior. He smirked, captivated by the scene, contemplating the unpredictable turn of events this week had took. And it was only the beginning. There was something singular about his little student. Something new and refreshing, that he hadn't seen in ages. The man raised his glass of whiskey, taking a savory sip of the beverage, throwing a glance at the opened red binder on his desk. He had the drastic impression that life would become fairly interesting in the following days. Illustrious school teacher could turn into an incredibly boring role sometimes... Maybe the budding photographer was going to change that.

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KMUWX7hoETY ]
Otherworldly voices begin to rise around her. They whisper things she cannot understand, yet it bewitches her like a beacon in the dark. Her body is on autopilot and not hers to control anymore. Harsh sickening pants reverberate against her ears. This can't be a dream. She doesn't remember falling asleep. Everything is pitch black, except for the end of the corridor. She has to get there for some reason, she can feel it in her bones. There is nothing more important right now than walking. She suddenly finds herself in front of a polished wooden door. She grabs the handle and steps through the entrance.

*Max... Look...*

The asexual voices finally start to make sense. Lights brutally switched on in a thundering noise to reveal a room full of paintings and high quality photographs. The decor looks way too fancy for the place to be from an average household. The art mostly represented women bound in all kinds of means. One of them in particular reminded her of what she'd seen on Nathan's bedroom wall. What the hell was she doing here? This was too fucking creepy for her likings.

*Listen...*

*You have to listen...*

Listen to what, for God's sake? She wants to scream her displeasure but she can't. A haunting melodic sound arises from somewhere distant, making her jump in panic. Another door had materialize on her left. Max approaches carefully. A curious ear pressed against it, she recognizes classical music and discerns a manly voice from among the ruckus.

"I know you're a professional, which is why i trust you."

"..." Another voice was coming from what sounded like a phone but she couldn't comprehend anything of what it was saying, the music was too loud.

"I don't care about your class, they can wait!"

"..."

"Prepare copies, pronto."

"..."

"You know we can't afford to wait forever. This has to be done before shit starts to get out of hands."

"..."

"This bullshit stories already reached my ears more than once, i can't imagine what it's like in the rest of the town."

Everything blurred out in an instant and the girl came back to reality in a flash. The Tobanga was standing in front of her. What the fuck was that? Did she walk outside without realizing it? She fell on her knees, her bare skin brushing the dirt harshly. She was so afraid. She felt like an invisible hand had a vicious grip on her heart, her windpipe constricting by itself and a stabbing pain arising in her chest. A million thoughts began to race through her mind, dark overwhelming thoughts that rendered her a shuddering mess on the ground.
Nathan stepped out of the dorms, his pricey camera hanging around his neck, and a pack of cigarettes in hand. A series of weird breathy sounds twisted his attention toward the old wooden statue standing in the grass. Caulfield, of course, was having a fit all by herself and trembling like a madwoman. The twee hipster was usually discreet and quiet. He never thought she was even capable of acting hysterical. She was quaking so much that the Tobanga was slightly shaking to the rhythm of her tremors. Nathan didn't have to observe the scene too long to notice that they weren't caused by the cold. Those were nervous spasms. The kind caused by a panic attack, or a breakdown. He knew, he had the same before. Multiple times. She was only clad in black pajama shorts and a long sleeved white shirt that was a bit too large for her frame, hanging low on her naked shoulders.

"Caulfield?" he approached her with wariness, suddenly not sure for his own safety.

What if the bitch was crazy? Or dangerous. Her little whines redoubled. She looked terrified. But of what? Her state was ominously familiar to him.

"Yo, snap out of it!" he snarled next to her ear so she would hear him.

And she did. Her unfocused stare bore into him as her head hastily went up to see what had disturbed her fit. She sniffed, trying to steady her breathing and failing miserably.

"What the fuck are you doing? You've gone nuts?!"

"It's nothing." She blew softly, pushing her hair out of her face, slowly getting back to her bearings.

"Yeah, clearly looks like nothing," he snorted. "Are you planning to dance around the totem in your pajamas, hippie?" He taunted.

"I had a nightmare." She lied blatantly.

"Everybody does. That's called dreaming dumbass."

No response. Maybe insulting her wasn't the best approach.

"So you got so scared that you left your dorm half naked? What a fucking crybaby." He scoffed meanfully.

"Why do you care?" She grumbled aggressively, which was out of character for her.

"I don't! Your fat ass is in my spot!" He complained childishly.

"Well i'm not moving. Guess that means you'll have to share your precious spot." She dared to spit at him.

"Whatever bitch!" He spun around to leave.

Way to go Max...
"Nathan, wait! Please..." she pleaded, seeing him comply seconds later, which was unexpected.

He wanted to hear her sad excuses. This demented pixie skank had no respect for him whatsoever. She should wash her mouth with soap for all the outrageous shit she gave him.

"I'm sorry... for acting like a bitch. You don't have to go. I know you don't like me, but... i don't want to fight with you." She confessed, her head hanging low as she glowered at the ground.

The moonlight shined along her pale legs, her skin in general glowing brightly under the white star. The raging teen removed a cigarette from his pack and Maxine heard the faint noise of a lighter being used. Did he ever breathe anything else than his cancer sticks?

*Like pure air for exemple...*

"This isn't fun at all. I was supposed to rage at you the next time we met, not put up with you breaking down like a weakling." He thought loudly.

She didn't comment, letting the nocturnal sounds of nature pacify her.

"Seriously, this is getting pathetic..." he breathed, sitting down on the opposite side of the totem so he had his back to the hipster. "You saved her. Why are you even crying? You're the fucking hero of the day!" he hailed sarcastically.

She realized he was right behind her. He clearly had no idea of what was happening if he thought this was about Kate.

"Where's your blockhead nerd wannabe boyfriend? Bet he'd kill for a chance to comfort you right now..." he suspected, snickering.

The girl finally looked at him, wiping away her tears with the help of her sleeve.

"Are you alright? Do you... feel guilty?"

"Why would i, i did nothing wrong! Tch—! Stop playing mother hen with everyone Caulfield, you're the one who's whining right now."

"You're still your grumpy self... guess that means you're alright." Her face turned his way, eyes closed and a sincere, amused smile grazing her lips.

"Tch—you're such a weirdo."

Blue glazed eyes opened to stare at him in a grateful manner that made him uneasy. Her smile widened and never before had he witnessed such a cheerful expression being so fucking depressing.

"What about the punk-ass dyke you're always around? Where is she when *you* need her, huh? Damn, your friends suck Caulfield!"

"I don't need friends right now, Nathan. There's nothing they can do for me."

Why did her eyes have to be so wide? It was disturbing. Time seemed to fly by quickly as they observed the moon, each of them lost in their own preoccupations.

"Get up." He ordered unceremoniously, having done so himself previously after throwing his cigarette butt away.

He strolled lazily toward the dorms, stopping once he noticed she wasn't following him.
"Move your ass Caulfield! I don't have all night." He barked.

"Would you stop yelling already? You want people to find us?" she hissed rationally.

"I wouldn't have to yell if you got over here already!"

"Okay, okay!" She exhaled in frustration. "You're such a bossy dickhead."

"Shut your trap, cunt."

They ended up in front of her bedroom door.

"How do you know where I sleep?" She already knew he did but she was curious of the how.

"What do you think? Victoria rambles about you all day long. She told me. I didn't ask though."

*Because you don't give a shit. I get it. You're trying way too hard.*

The bully placed his camera on her nightstand as they invaded the room. He nodded in her bed's direction, indicating her to lay down. She did.

"Just close your eyes Caulfield." He commanded while fighting with her dysfunctional door's handle, trying to close the damn stubborn thing.

"It's no use Nathan." She drawled. He didn't seem to know if she was talking about his request or the door. "Just slam it," she clarified.

It worked. She prayed his violent movement hadn't stirred the rest of the dormitory.

"Remember that crackhead speech you gave me last night?" He asked, walking up to her. "Practice what you preach, bitch."

"Even if I manage to fall asleep, the nightmares will wake me up."

"Stop whining, god! How can you be sure if you don't even try?!" Admonished the rich kid.

"I tried, okay? I'm just... scared. You should get it more than anybody else."

"Fuck's that supposed to mean?"

"Forget it," she sighed, visibly losing grasp on her legendary patience.

Nathan suddenly forced something really fluffy in the girl's face, which she grabbed under the assault, withdrawing it from her head so she could probe at it.

*...My teddy-bear?*

"Use that! Aren't those supposed to comfort you or something? Perfect for big babies like you."

The two teenagers stared into each other's eyes for a few moments, trying to decipher what the other was thinking, no doubt. Then Prescott boy hissed something vulgar between his teeth before getting rid of his fabled red jacket and blue cardigan. Max was too lost in thought and busy asking herself what he was doing to monitor every step of his stripping but her brain registered more ruffling sounds until, finally, Nathan was in his black shirt and brown pants and slipping under her covers.

The more she spent time in his company, the more he reminded her of a bad-tempered stray cat.
guessed she should make the most of his provisional "kindness". After all, she was going to have a little discussion with him about very upsetting things tomorrow. He would have no choice but to hear her. She anticipated the chaotic development her admissions would lead to.

"Now go to sleep Caulfield. Before this gets even more embarrassing..."

She kept her eyes on him for just a second before doing as told. She didn't want to make him uncomfortable since he was doing her a favor. His presence was obviously meant to keep her horrifying dreams at bay. Or at least, to get her to relax. She was grateful. A little voice in her head whispered that the boy was probably blushing right now, though she chose to ignore it. Maybe he was doing this so he wouldn't have to feel indebted to her anymore. He didn't seem like the type who liked to be beholden.

"Nathan..."

"..."

"Thank you..."

A deathly quiet moment passed between them.

"Caulfield..."

"..."

"If you molest me in my sleep, i'll butcher you." He promised, and he could practically hear her rolling her eyes before they fluttered close again.

That night, the tired girl didn't notice how Nathan used the opportunity of her temporary blindness to examine her gentle features. How he took the time to memorize the way her dark lashes fell against her cheeks, the way her soft brown hair framed her immaculate face, the small number of barely visible freckles that dusted the bridge of her nose... And how tightly she cuddled the little stuffed bear against her cleavage.

That night, somewhere in between his detailed inspection, Nathan Prescott joined his sleepover companion into a warm cozy sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Big thanks to everyone who left kudos or comments!
Wednesday, October 09

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0-rouE01wdI ]

Light flashed annoyingly behind his eyelids, forcing him to wake up. He turned over, trying to escape the infuriating brightness that had disturbed his peaceful sleep. He could feel soft material against his skin and smell a pleasant scent all around him. The boy opened his eyes slowly, marveling in the sensation of being properly rested. The night had been good. Again. A ray of sunlight filtered by the windows blinds was illuminating the slim face of the girl next to him. She was breathing steadily through her button nose, completely cramped against her wall and curled-up like a small animal in its burrow, inches away from him. As if she was used to not taking a lot of space. Her arms were still holding her stuffed bear, albeit her grasp seemed weaker than the previous night. He was relieved of not finding himself entangled with the nymph after rousing. In fact, there was no contact whatsoever between the two of them. With an arm lazily draped over his eyes, he started to ponder about yesterday's events. He knew his presence in her bed was solely due to the girl's anxiety attack. When he found her half-naked on the grass, shaking like an earthquake was currently occurring, her eyes hagard and terrified, he saw himself. His mind had filled with flashbacks of every single psychotic episodes that had forced him to the ground in a crying mess. He had wondered why someone like Caulfield would ever experience this sort of things. It didn't make sense. She was just a little prude hipster, right? What could she possibly have had to undergo in her life to cause her trauma? He had thought the reason had maybe something to do with Kate's suicide attempt, but the more he reflected on it, the less likely it seemed. The teenager pushed the white and pink covers away to get up from the comfortable bed.

Since the nosy little twee was still asleep, he could use it to his advantage to take a look around the room. See if Max Caulfield was really the perfect image of the bland and boring student that she was always so keen on displaying, or if the girl had her secrets, like everybody else. He had to admit that the colorful polaroids wall enhanced by her chinese paper lights was a pretty cool sight. A lot of things in this room seemed to be about either photography, video games or music. An acoustic guitar was leaning against her sofa. He couldn't recall ever seeing any kind of instrument in Victoria's room. Her desk was a mess of sticky notes and papers that didn't look like homework, which tempted him to rummage through it, but he finally decided against it. Knowing his luck, he didn't have a lot of time before the little bitch woke up, so he stucked to the most interesting and quick to access things he could find. Like her computer.

Nathan barely contained a cackle when he discovered her camera porn site.

What a fucking hipster man!

The girl had numerous emails from all kinds of student from the school, all of them really pleasant, but what got his curiosity tickled was a bunch of pages talking about federal laws and crime sentences. He highly doubted that the girl was interested in becoming a lawyer, so what was that about? His pensive gaze fell on a book that had been vandalized and thrown into the trash, he
couldn't hold his amusement when he realized it was one of Jefferson's. Why would one of his photo-groupie do that? Maybe not every one of his female students loved him that much after all.

If he knew...

Which reminded him, he'd seen the girl leave the old creeper's car yesterday morning. What were they doing together outside of school? Had he done something to upset her? A sheet of paper left alone on the sofa—right below an enormous board smeared with childish drawings—captured his attention. He grabbed it and began his lecture. A myriad of questions was spread across the page. A quiz maybe? A bunch of them in particular retained his attention.

Have you experienced or witnessed a life-threatening event that caused intense fear, helplessness, or horror?

Yes. Death death death death death.

Do you re-experience the event in repeated, distressing memories, or dreams?

Fuck Yes.

Acting or feeling as if the event were happening again?

Yes.

Do you feel intense physical or emotional distress when you are exposed to things that remind you of the event?

Yes.

Are you avoiding thoughts, feelings, or conversations about it?

Yes.

Are you avoiding activities and places or people who remind you of it?

No. As if i could.

Losing interest in significant activities of your life?

Picking up this fucking camera every morning is turning into a burden...

Are you troubled by sleeping problem?

Euphemism.

Do you often feel "on guard", even without a particular reason?

I better or we're all gonna die.

More days than not, do you feel worthless or guilty?

Yes. How surprising for a failure.

The last part was about drugs and alcohol consumption and was entirely crossed out. Of course! As if Caulfield was that kind of girl...

A fucking PTSD test...

That sure would explain her recent erratic behavior. Dropping the paper back to its place, he strolled to the wall next to her desk, the one displaying various photographs of the girl in different places of Seattle. One was with two of her friends, one with her father—which made him realize she didn't hang any pictures of her mother—and another one represented her at a hockey match, a shit eating grin swallowing her face.
Caulfield's into sport? I like that team too.

He didn't know why but, the last one really caught his eye for some reason. Who knew digging into the hipster's shit would be so much fun? Although he didn't appreciate Marsh's rabbit eyeing him continuously as he did so...

*Just gnaw on your shitty carrot!*

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LOIVEW9vlng&index=5 ]

The coffee table was a mess of cookies and magazines, with one bottle of wine and two big glasses standing proudly among the chaos. Soft sounds of a ticking clock echoed in the nearly silent living room. Two young teenagers were sitting on the floor, back supported by a white couch filled with motifs.

"Why is it so hard to open a stupid bottle?" Huffed the one named Chloe, battling with the corkscrew and bottle in her hands.

"Be careful!" Warned her friend Max.

"I'm trying!" Exclaimed the blonde.

*POP!*

"Ahhhh!!" The preteens shrieked in sync, immediately protecting their heads with their arms.

The cork went flying in the air abruptly and ended up tearing a hole in the small blue table lamp standing on the cabinet not far from them.

"Oops." Let out the tallest one, a false air of innocence on her face as she observed the damage they had caused.

"We're in trouble." Informed the other casually.

The two girls shared a conniving look, hunched over and burst out laughing.

"Let's make the most of it and taste it anyway." Proposed Chloe, already seizing their glasses.

"I agree. We're definitely getting busted, so..." shrugged the brunette.

*Bzz Bzz Bzz*

Max opened her eyes lazily, her heart skipping a beat from getting interrupted in the middle of a nice dream. Somebody was calling her. That was the source of the emergent disturbance. She turned,
barely taking notice of a missing Nathan at her side, before grasping her phone with difficulty and swiping her thumb across the screen.

"Hello?" She tried, drowsy.

"Mornin' Super-Max! Don't tell me you were still sleeping?!" The lively voice of Chloe attacked her tender ears.

"You're awfully frisky today..." she remarked, lifting herself from the bed and rubbing her hand against her sleepy eyes.

"The joy of waking and baking!"

"You're incorrigible." Her sheets felt so nice and warm against her legs, she didn't want to leave her bed.

"You know it, Sista! So what are we doing today?"

"Uh..."

Her attention was lured to a paper discarded on her grey carpet. She stretched forward to grip it with her free hand. It was a drawing, supposedly from Nathan. Her head was drawn over the body of a toddler wearing a diaper, a big "Feminazis are big babies!" written above it. Max couldn't contain a genuine laugh at the boy's artsy doodle.

"What? What's so funny?" asked her best friend over the line.

"Nothing, it's just... nothing." She smiled, shaking her head slightly.

*He's so stupid!*

"So, today i need your help during lunch time." Max started again.

"What for?"

"We have to infiltrate the principal's office." She notified in an offhand manner.

"Damn! You're on a roll MaxGyver!" Praised her partner in crime.

"Yeah, another thing to add to my budding criminal record. Warren will play sentinel for us while we're busy inside."

She did discuss the matter with the nerd yesterday evening. Poor Warren was getting involved in all sorts of bad things because of her.

"Great! I can't wait!"

*I bet. You're a magnet for trouble.*

"Chloe... Thank you for calling me yesterday, after what happened with Kate..."

"It was normal, dude. Don't turn mellow on me." Interrupted the blue-haired girl with humor.

"I'll try but, no promise." The brunette smiled gently at her friend's evident uneasiness.

"Hey, i think step-dildo is feeling bad about your friend..." She decided to change the subject. "He
looked all torn-up last night. And he didn't give me shit when he got home, for once."

"He did look weird when he left the school... David isn't that bad. He saved me remember?"

"Yeah... I still have a hard time picturing him rescuing anyone." Conceded the punk.

"Well, he looked pretty cool. If he's trying to make some efforts, please do the same." Max encouraged.

"Slow down on the family fantasies, sister. I think we'll never be anything more than pleasant to each other." She confessed. Max didn't have the time to reply because she was already speaking again. "Breakfast's waiting. Gotta bail before mom rages and turns into The Grudge! See you at noon, Maximus."

The freckled teen stood from her bed after dropping her phone on it. Walking up to her desk, she picked up the poster that azure bird gave to her on the previous day.

Noon, Saturday, October 12.

She supposed it was a sign from Arcadia that she needed to be present at the manifestation. But for what purpose? The girl would have to talk to Chloe about this. She glanced at the pink sticky note stuck on the desk buried under all of her mess. She had found Nathan's psychiatrist on the net yesterday and called to get an appointment. She'd be able to meet this Dr. Jacoby on Monday. Maxine tred to the bathroom to take a quick refreshing shower before returning to her room to dress herself up. Gathering her required school supplies for the day to put it in her bag, she was instantly reminded of the butterfly picture she had brought over from her preceding timeline. Max had caught no sight of the thing since the beginning of the week. She started to freak out and began to turn her room upside down to retrieve the blasted photograph. In vain.

Shit! It must be in Jefferson's class! I'm pretty sure i dropped it in my haste to get to Chloe and Nathan...
Glad i'm so funny!

"What are you doing?" inquired her teacher, an eyebrow arched in interest.

"I'm... looking for something." She admitted, still assiduously working on her search.

"Mmm, it must be really important to have you crawl all over the floor." He assumed in a playful tone.

"Sorry if i'm being a nuisance, but i really need it!"

"Could the object of your worries possibly be a certain picture?"

That finally made her look at him. With quite the inquisitive gaze and a small tilt of her head. If she was a cat, he was almost sure her ears would have perked up. Cute.

"You've seen it?" she asked in a hopeful manner.

"I found it next to your chair last monday. I kept it on my desk, just in case," he started to walk towards said desk.

Maxine breathed a huge sigh of relief and quickly stood up to follow him.

One less thing to worry about.

"It's a really interesting shot..."

He was facing her now, his left hand against his hip and her picture in his right one. Seems like he was waiting for her to comment, which she did not, and opened her small fist in an inviting gesture so he would just give it to her already. The old Max would have surely felt disconcerted and ashamed by the idea of being caught by her favorite teacher in such a predicament, and would have probably flushed like a tomato under the scrutiny of his gaze... But Max could now see through all his bullshit and she wasn't impressed anymore.

"Are you okay? You seem stressed out." He felt the need to point out.

You're the one stressing me out fucktard.

Jefferson couldn't seem to spend one day without asking her if she was alright.

Him and his fake ass concern.

"I'll be fine now that i have my photo." She replied a little sternly.

No reaction still. What was the crackpot planning?

"Well, if you give it to me that is..." she implied, desperate for the situation to end. She needed to ride the bus to the diner. Nathan was supposed to be there. Not that she was impatient to fight with the boy but, it had to be done.

"I'm sorry. Here." He apologized, finally giving her the object of her worries back.

"Thanks." She mumbled, her eyes landing on one of the classroom's desks to fall on what she remembered as Victoria's cigarettes pack.

Fuck! She came here last night! I hope she didn't try to blackmail him this time...
"Are you... holding up alright?" He was peering at her behind his glasses as if she was a poor fragile little thing.

"It doesn't matter."

"It does." He contradicted. "Listen, i'm truly sorry for Kate and that you all had to see that. If you want, there are counselors available."

"There's no need. Really."

"I just want to remind you how proud we all are of you for helping her."

"I didn't do much. She just needed somebody with her."

"You are truly modest Max."

"No, i'm realistic. Please, i already get that hero crap from the students. I don't need my teachers to take part in it."

"Yeah, it's kind of hard to miss all the drawings and notes of "Super-Max" around campus. You shouldn't feel embarrassed, you deserve it."

"I'm no hero. All those praises make me feel like a sham... I feel bad about what happened in the principal's office yesterday. I was really... spiteful."

"You were in shock. And a lot of it was simply the truth. Which is not always pleasant to hear for everyone."

"David looked distressed when he left campus. I don't know why i feel so weird about it..."

"Because you have a good heart Max, nothing to feel guilty about! But don't waste that feeling on Madsen... and pardon my french, but he's a fucking asshole."

Look who's talking...

He let out a snort, proud of his own joke. His head tilted a bit to the side, his dark orbs contemplating her.

"Don't let him scare you," he cooed, his hand delicately clenching her arm while his thumb very briefly stroked the flannel of her shirt.

She tensed. The softness in his gaze made her heart skip a beat and was actually what really scared her. She very slowly removed her arm from his grip and moved a little closer to his side so they weren't face to face anymore. She could look around the room while talking to him. It would help her focus. Still, she couldn't shake away the nauseating feeling that clutched at her guts. She still remembered the feeling of his hands when he moved her around to take his fucking pictures.

"David doesn't scare me. He's acting like a jerk and he's too forceful with people but, at least, he's trying to do the right thing. He's the only one..."

"You always see the good in people Max." He remarked, a sort of reserved awe echoing in his voice. "By the way, i nearly have all the entries for the contest! Not trying to get your hopes up but, your work is really standing out." The maniac complimented.

I could have taken a picture of a toilet and you'd still pretend to like it anyway.
"The deadline is Tuesday anyway..." she pointed out.

"I'm proud of you for overcoming your fears and taking your chance. This could be a great start to your future in photography."

Here goes the daydreaming again... Seriously, what do you want with me, man?

"Thanks Mr. Jefferson, but my career in photography seems as far away now as San Francisco. I'm just not confident." She shrugged impassively.

"Well i hope that's not a fatal character flaw... wouldn't want to deprive the art world of your vision."

He actually got her to snort at this.

"What vision? Oh you mean my silly retro selfies? Huh. The art world would only laugh..."

He chuckled bluntly.

"Aside from the selfies... but give yourself some credit." He solicited, then paused, starting again in an almost timid way. "There is something i wanted to ask you..."

Oh-oh...

"Ask away."

"Since Kate is hospitalized, i don't have anyone to help me after class anymore. I'm sure you'd prefer to rest and stay away from school for a bit but—"

"Actually, i'm not planning on skipping class at all."

"Oh... as brave as always i see. In this case, would you—"

"But, i'm not sure if i'm up for this."

Do it, moron! This is perfect!

"I can assure you this is fairly simple. Kate may have mentionned to you what she did for me over the past few weeks, since you two are pretty close."

You can basically monitor him! And you may get a chance to go through his shit!

Or i could let him ask somebody else.

Yes! Like Victoria... so he can hurt her without any problem.

Shit—

"Yes, but that's not... I have a lot of shi—things to take care of this week, especially after school. Will i be released before night falls?"

"Of course. You don't have to worry about homeworaks or extracurricular activities. I don't want to pressure you in any way, Max. It would be nice to have some extra help."

What are you getting yourself into Max...

A good fucking opportunity. Now stop being so chicken shit.
"Alright. Count me in."

Maybe being his assistant would give her the possibility to keep a closer eye on him. To make sure he didn't go around hurting anybody. Plus, it was a school environment, he couldn't afford to do anything shady here.

"Fantastic. I'll see you in class. And after that. Thank you Max."

She arrived at the Two Whales with no complications, her eyes scanning the area to check if her purple-haired friend was on the sidewalk. No one.

*No saving Alyssa from the evil water puddle today. I guess i can rest my cape.*

She spotted a familiar fisherman in a green sweater, too busy staring down at his phone to notice her. He seemed more than agitated.

"Hi sir, could i get one of your flyers?" She requested, the man gladly complying to her demand after saying hello.

As their hands brushed against each other, everything around her shifted. She was suddenly sitting in a small boat, in the middle of the ocean, serene water rocking the skiff lightly. A man looking like a fisherman was in front of her, gaping at something beside them. Max turned her gaze to the object of his attention and found dozens of fish floating in a circle around the boat. They were all clearly dead.

Somebody snapped their fingers in her front of her, bringing her back to reality.

"You okay, kiddo? Your eyes rolled backward for a second." He indicated, sincere concern written on his features.

Had she just accessed somebody's memories? This was undoubtedly not a vision.

*Are my powers growing again? ...Don't resort to panic, Max. Breathe.*

"I... Is something wrong with the fish around here?" she questioned, a bit distraught.

"There's no fish in Arcadia Bay, kid. They either migrate, or they die. Even the clams are... I've seen some freaky shit in my life but this..." his mind appeared miles away from here.

"How could something like this happen?" She investigated, intrigued.

Why would she see that? And why this memory precisely?

"The Prescotts are discharging their toxic wastes in the sea. And now, i heard they're turning the forest into a graveyard. All for their stupid Pan Estates crap. The man explained with a scowl. "Sorry, this shit's freaking me out... I don't want to talk about it anymore."

Maxine chose to respect his wishes, turning toward the diner instead to get back to her original quest.
She didn't have time to ponder on the disturbing event, she had to speak to Nathan.

_I have to tell Chloe about it. She'll be all over this..._

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HWF5_wdqQj0&time=0m35s]

Pushing the door of the establishment open, she stepped inside, her gaze sweeping across the place in search of the Prescott boy. She found him at the same table Chloe and her had occupied the day before, sipping on his soda without a care in the world. His knees were slowly crashing against one another in a tranquil and stable rhythm. He wasn't jerking his long limbs all over the place, for once. Max followed the way to the teen’s table, halting next to the concerned party. His camera was placed carefully on the metallic furniture. He didn't seem to go anywhere without the object.

_Like me... Well, before all that shit caught up with us._

A disheveled strand of chesnut hair was falling on his forehead. The view weirdly reminded her of the fact that they had spent the night together. In her bed.

_Wow! You turn into a pervert pretty quickly..._

_Shut up!_

"Holy shit! I hope you're not following me..." He finally noticed her approaching.

"I am." She answered honestly.

"Just because i stayed with you last night doesn't mean we're best buds now." He clarified, the corner of his lips curling in distaste at the idea.

"Did you sleep well? My bed must be uncomfortable compared to yours." She commented.

"How would you know, did you test it?" He questionned with a snide snigger.

Her stomach growled loudly out of the blue, giving her pause.

"Don't tell me you're here to bag some food out of me. You're a real peasant Caulfield." He scoffed, his aristocratic nose rising in the air, giving him the superior air he was so keen on displaying.

She sat across him, not caring to ask for permission. She already knew the kind of crude answer he'd give her.

"I have something important to tell you."

"Then spit it out and leave me the fuck alone!" He ordered, his elbows set on the table, hands joined directly before his mouth.

"...Those visions of the storm... they're real. I had them too."

"I knew it. You're batshit crazy." He concluded, his hawkish stare leering at her calmly.

A waitress interrupted the exchange, serving him his plate of waffle. When the employee retreated back to her counter, the teenage boy tossed his two side toasts at Maxine.
"Eat that. Your intestines are grossing me out." He disclosed in a disgruntled tone.

_He looks alright... I don't want to upset him... But i don't have a choice._

She didn't realize she was staring outside the window before a sudden flash of light blinded her. The girl blinked, scanning the area with her cerulean orbs before settling back on Nathan who had the face of a child caught doing something he shouldn't have. His camera had slightly moved to the right.

"Did you see that?" she queried.

"See what?" He denied bluntly.

"Some kind of flash..."

"Nothing happened, Caulfield." He snapped tersely, indicating it was time to change the subject.

"If you say so..." she dropped the matter. "...I know why you drugged Chloe. I know what you were planning to do." She blurted frankly.

"Pff—" he snorted, choking a bit on his food.

"I know that you also drugged Kate."

"You are so stupid, Max! You think you're so goddamn smart too! Don't push me girl, you don't want me for an enemy, understand? Do you?!"

"You need help, Nathan. And certainly not from your family."

"You don't know shit about my father, or me! Nobody here does!" He frowned.

"Oh, like the fact that he used to beat you when you were a kid?" Her eyebrows raised to her hairline, clearly not convinced by his statement.

"HOW—" he shouted, stopping himself when he remembered they were in a diner full of people. "How do you know that?" he settled for growling instead.

"Because i know things. I have visions, remember? And i can help you."

"I don't need you for anything, except to stay out of my fucking business, understand? Now get out of my face."

"Oh, it's not just your business anymore, Nathan. After all, it's always been Jefferson's business first. And Rachel's too, since she's burried in the junkyard because of you."

All colors left his face, transforming him into an unresponsive ghost, eyes widened in stupefaction.

_I have to keep going before he panics._

"Yeah, i know all about that fucking creep. Like the fact that he's been using you for his little perverted business in his fucked up dark room."

He appeared more afraid than angry. His anxiety was going to climb up like crazy in the course of their discussion. She knew she didn't have much time before he'd start feeling like he was getting grilled and try to escape her clutches. The boy wasn't going to see reason straightaway, but she had to give him enough material for him to think about her words after he'd bail out of the diner in one of his legendary hissy fits.
"Let me guess... he always wears gloves when he goes down there but doesn't instruct you to do the same. You know why? Because he doesn't want his precious DNA all over the place in case something happens and he gets busted. But he has no problem with yours being spread all over, on the contrary, it helps his case. Oh, and let's talk about that little incident with Rachel. I can just imagine... he gets rid of the body and cleans up everything so you never get caught. But when he's done, he gives you a little gift for you to remember her by. To "remember how you fucked up that day"... Franck's bracelet. The one Rachel wore around her wrist. Do you really think that's it? If the cops get on your trail, who do you think will take the blame? That son of a bitch, who has nothing to incriminate him by? Or you? The little boy who takes meds for mental illness, has the bracelet of a missing girl in his bedroom, who has a secret bunker constructed under his name by his dear father and who left fingerprints on every possible furniture of this fucking room?"

"Shut up! Just shut your mouth Max, or you'll regret it!" He snarled his warning, a vicious finger aimed at her.

"What are you going to do, Nathan? Sell me out to Jefferson?" She taunted, her face moving closer to his so they could speak more privately without attracting too much attention.

"Oh you'll find out, when you least expect it. Seriously, that's it! We're done talking camera girl." He ruled, banging his hand against the table.

"You won't. Because you know he'll kill me if you do. And he'll probably murder you too once he's done. Because he can't take any risks."

His nostrils were flaring in fury.

"He's using you Nathan, but i think you already know that deep down. It's just too difficult to admit because it hurts like hell. Because once again, somebody is using you to satisfy their own means. Once again, another important adult figure in your life is manipulating you and trying to make you do what they want. Like a puppet. And you're sick of it, aren't you? I sure would be."

Thank God they were in a public place. She speculated he'd probably try to kill her if it wasn't the case.

"You're his scapegoat. He needs the Prescott fortune to be able to do his sick little photo sessions. He doesn't have the money for all this equipment, or the drugs. And that fucker made sure that the last picture he ever took of Rachel included you. Not him. Please... you can't trust that monster." She beseeched rationally.

He blew up at last, lunging to the exit after grabbing his stuff, leaving his hot breakfast behind him. Armed with a legendary strength of will, Max pursued the boy to the parking lot without hesitation.

"Get off my crack Caulfield!" He snarled, progressing to his car rapidly.

"Nathan... You don't have to go through all this shit alone." She assured in a nearly motherly voice.

He paused, causing her to bump into his back promptly, until he shifted to face her, expression full of unmasked rage.

"Stop with the fucking heroic speeches already! Stop shoving your stupid nose in other people's life!" He bade in a biting tone.

"You're a human being! And people just keep taking advantage of you, manipulate you for their own... purposes. Just because you have a mental illness doesn't mean you're a monster, or that you don't deserve great things. You weren't born like this. It's all the suffering you had to go through that
"You read that in a book, Dr. Cockfield?! Should I pay you for your amazing analysis?!” He mocked, snatching a couple bills from his jacket's pockets to fling them in her face like she was one of his servants.

He opened his car's door angrily, retrieving something inside before throwing it in her face.

My hoodie...

"Now take back your stupid clothes and go fuck yourself!!" He pressed on the insult in particular, retracting back to his red truck.

"You'll never forget, but you can heal. The only thing you have to do is to stay with people who love you, who care for you. Like Victoria. Like your sister... People do care Nathan. Everybody doesn't hate you. That's not true."

"Eat shit and die, Caulfield." The Prescott spat venomously.

"I'm gonna help you Nathan, whether you want it or not. I want to. And don't mistake this for pity, cause it's not."

He had climbed into the vehicle by now, pulling off hurriedly from the parking and driving out of here without looking back. Well, she did everything she could. Now, she just had to wait. At least there was some food waiting for her back at their table... even if her stomach was tied up in an asphyxiating knot.

Max was emptying the content of her bag in her locker amidst the school's busy halls. She hated going through her things when there were curious people around to watch, but she had more important things on her mind at the moment. Even the bedlam around her couldn't seem to get her out of her thoughts. She closed her locker's door, turning around to catch her photography teacher passing by, smiling enticingly at her.

Creep.

"Well, you must be everyone's favorite. I never saw Jefferson smile at anybody like this." Assumed a masculine voice on her left.

"Hi Luke." She greeted the boy, twisting around to face him.

He was staring down at her, his gaze shaded by his cap.

"So, how's Blackwell's new superhero doing? Feels good to be one of the good guys?" He claimed, slanting against the red and blue metallic furnitures.

"Yeah, makes me feel totally heroic being drawn next to the toilets." She jested, Luke laughing genuinely at her sarcastic answer.
"Keep going like this and maybe you'll get an upgrade next to the parking dumpers." He bantered right back.

"Ah, such dreams..." she whispered languidly, her eyes to the ceiling.

"You're such a smartass." He chuckled, a hand on his hip. "Hey, i wanted to ask, we got World History together now, do you mind if i sit with you?"

"Aren't you normally next to Brooke?"

"Yes, that's the problem! If i hear her talk about quantum physics one more time, i fear for my sanity..." he complained lowly.

Always the anti-social...

"You're a lot quieter than the others so, i think you're a better choice for my ears." He decided, gesturing to said part of his head with a finger.

"Alright, Luke. I'll sacrifice some of my space to keep you sane." She agreed wittily.

"Thanks Max. Peace out." The boy scarcely waved his hand, disappearing among the plethora of students roaming the corridors.

Rounding the corner, she stumbled upon her favorite custodian.

"Hi Samuel." She greeted lightly. "Thank you for getting my bag back yesterday."

"Well, thank you for helping me cleaning the leaves, young Max. Especially under that rain." He returned nicely.

"I don't mind rain. Plus, i think we looked pretty badass with those raincoats and big ass hoods." She grinned maliciously.

"Ms. Caulfield, can you come over here a moment?" Disturbed a rough voice from behind the girl.

Principal Wells...

"Talk to you later, Samuel." She said, turning to stride toward the authority figure that called her earlier.

He gestured to the interior of his office, waiting for her to enter before closing the door behind them.

"I... wanted to speak with you about yesterday." He began, almost shyly.

"Is this about what i said in your office? About your drinking problem?" Max presumed.

"Yes. I assume you realize your behavior was inappropriate. I let it go because there were more pressing matters at hand, and also because i understood the situation. You were angry and in shock, which i can easily conceive, but this cannot happen again." He reprimanded mildly.

"I'm sure it wouldn't be a problem if i was Nathan Prescott. Are you going to suspend me for being honest?" Her arms were crossed over her chest.

"I—"

"Let me ask you something, what did i ever do for you to be so suspicious of me? I'm not talking
about yesterday. Since i enrolled, you keep treating me differently than the others. Why?"

"Your conduct doesn't exactly inspire trust, Max."

"My conduct? Listen, i'm beginning to think the Prescotts have replaced the real principal with some kind of formatted academic drone. Where is the man i met when we had our first meeting in your office? The nice guy who made me feel welcome and like i actually belonged in this school? You even managed to make me believe in myself that day. You were such a cool authority figure. And now, you're just... you're nothing like it anymore."

"I appreciate the acknowledgement, but it doesn't give you the right to say such things, especially in front of other members of this faculty. You're discrediting my work, Max."

"Because there's something to credit in the first place? If Kate had gone to you and told you she believed someone had slipped something into her drink to do what they wanted with her... Would you have given her the benefit of the doubt? Would you have even investigated?"

"Of course. But i can't take drastic measures based on accusations. I need proof. You know how it works, Max. You wouldn't be here if you were stupid."

"You know what she told me after i said i believed her and that i'd do what i can to help? She said "they'll have to take us seriously now". I think Kate already tried to talk with the faculty, but whatever she said was debunked. I'm sorry for hurting your pride Principal, but i'm not standing by while everybody hurts my friend. I know where to hit for it to hurt, and i won't hesitate to use it. So if i have to bring your alcohol issues forward for you to get a grip, i'll gladly do it."

He sighed, swinging his head from side to side, as if in denial. He looked drained from their conversation.

"I know you're not a bad man. I know the Prescotts are giving you trouble everytime you try to make a good decision that doesn't satisfy their corrupted little family. Hell, maybe i'd be tempted to drink too if i was principal of Blackwell! But you have to realize that the lives of all those kids are in your hands. You're responsible for them." She stressed adamantly.

"I already know this, Max."

"Do you? Because you use a lot of fancy words but your actions never live up to them." She delivered the final blow, watching his up till now concealed guilt surface on his features. "I'll stop being a self-righteous little pest now, since it's bothering you. But please, i'm not asking you for the world. All i want is for you to make this school what it was supposed to be when i got here. The next time one of us comes to you for help, i hope you'll give it. Sincerely..." she confessed dolefully.

"Have a good day, Principal Wells." She bade politely, shutting the door behind her.

After the eighteen years old's departure, Wells retrieved the filled bottle from his cabinet, before dumping it in the trashcan after a long moment of hesitance.

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2gFKfxIBrKA ]
Stay cool! Stay cool! Stay cool!

How the fuck did she learn everything? Her so-called visions?

"Nathan." Called a sinister voice from his radio station. "It's me Nathan. I know you fucked up."

He opened his glove box brutally, searching for his cigarettes.

"How did little Max found out? You must have done something wrong..."

It wasn't there. Where were they? He needed something to relieve the stress, urgently!

"I'm going to enjoy her before i take care of the matter."

He swore loudly, fists collapsing against the steering wheel, his painful knuckles gripping his door handle so he could exit the damn vehicle.

"Oh, those fucking blue eyes... I can't wait! You saw her in my car, right? What did you think i was doing?"

He slammed the door of his red truck shut, his hands clenching the camera hanging loosely around his neck. He was going to take pictures. Everything would be alright. The radio was in his car so he wouldn't have to hear Jefferson's voice coming out of it now that he was far. Right? He had to regulate his breathing.

Just focus.

A little boy was wobbling along the beach innocently. Nathan crouched down on one knee, proceeding to frame the child correctly before snapping a picture. Glancing down at his expensive device, he witnessed the child's head was turned in the lens direction, a grim toothy smile on his face.

It's not real. You're having an episode.

His trembling worsened, panic creeping up on him cruelly, breathing erratic between his parted lips.


Calm the fuck down.

She was going to tell everybody about what he did. The cops wouldn't have the time to arrest him, Jefferson would blow his brains out before they could get to him. Images of Caulfield and her thin vulnerable wrists bound by duct tape assailed his mind. She was going to end up in a fucking binder, then in a dirty body bag. Maybe he'd bury the both of them together. He had a sick sense of humor after all.

I need to see Frank.

His stupid phone started vibrating.

Don't get high... It won't solve anything.

10/09 9:55am
For a moment, he wondered if Max had super powers or if she really knew him that well.

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FuPEbUiGXwk ]

Her second period, Algebra, should have been with Nathan, she wasn't surprised to not find him there however. She thought he would skip class, at least for the morning.

*Guess i was right.*

Kate had sent her a message this morning, thanking her profusely for her support, telling her how she would always be in her and her father's prayers. Max promised to visit the sweet girl as soon as she could. Her phone buzzed, pulling her out of her daydreaming. It was a text from Warren stating "The way is clear", along with a picture of principal Wells eating lunch with Miss Grant in the cafeteria.

*This is the signal. Gotta inform Chloe. Let's pray she's on time for the first time in her life.*

You there?
10/09 12:05pm

I'm in front of the office. Now get your boney white ass over here fast before Step-fuhrer sees me!
10/09 12:05pm

She found Chloe right where she was supposed to be. This must have been a miracle. Maybe luck was finally on her side. Or maybe it was just a lure to get her hopes up because the rest of their little operation would be a complete catastrophe. As she strode toward her friend, she couldn't help but remark how much Chloe stood out in the school hallway's, especially since it was so empty of students. These were too busy searching for food to roam the corridors when lunch time came. They either squatted the cafeteria or went out to eat with their friends.

"Alright Sherlock! I already tried the door, it's not locked."
"Thank god. I was concerned i'd have to ask Warren to play pickpocket with me again."

"Again?"

"How did you think i got David's keys? Not with magic."

"Well, you do have powers."

"Not those where i can make objects fly right into my hands." She clarified while wiggling her fingers.

Not yet.

"You mean telekinesis." Specified the punk.

"I know what it's called, i just wanted to image it for you."

"Because you think i'm a stupid school drop-out." She bantered.

"Don't worry, i know how much of a nerd you actually are, even if you try to hide it behind your mosh pit appearance."

"Eat me." She retorted, pushing the door to the office open.

"Now, let's find what we want and beat it. We have to make this quick."

"Man, look at all this fancy faux-art crap! He must want everybody to know he has money, but nooo taste."

"The files of the students who are still studying here are all in this bookcase. The ones of those who are no longer here are in this cabinet."

"That means mine too, right?"

"Your logic will never fail to impress me." Chloe stuck out her tongue at her in retaliation. "You take care of the present, i'll take care of the past."

"At your orders, detective Caulfield. The past is more of your thing now anyway."

"Clearly. Look for any Kelly and put anything you find on the desk behind you. Oh, and grab Nathan's folder if you see it."

"Ohhh! I like it when you get bossy!"

The girls went to work. The tension the fear of getting caught provided was pretty exciting but, looking through so many folders was really a boring activity. Especially when your brain decided to pick up on everything except what you were looking for.

It must be the thirtieth folder i'm seeing and still nothing!

She glanced at her associate who already had some documents stuck under her armpit.

At least Chloe's finding some shit.

Said punk grabbed her precious finds and tossed them carelessly on Wells desk to free her limbs in her search for more.
"That Prescott dick is not even from here. What's "Fort Lauderdale"?"

"It's in Florida." Caulfield answered academically.

"Duh! It's written on the paper, Genius! I mean what kind of place has such a stupid name? Sounds like barracks to me... Maybe we should send David over there."

"I think i heard it's some sort of american Venice." She recalled her mom saying she longed to visit that location in the past.

"I knew it. Some rich bitch kids paradise. Perfect for Nathan."

*Finally! One fucking Kelly!*

Max hastily snatched the folder from its cabinet to put it on the desk behind her. She kept snooping around for approximately three more minutes, realizing she wouldn't find anything else.

"I'm done!" She stated, pivoting to face the desk again.

"Me too!" Informed her friend.

"How many did you find?"


"Only one. Kelly Davis," Told Max in a disappointed tone.

"Let's take a look."

The two law breakers rummaged through Chloe's files first, finding nothing out of the ordinary. All those girls had spotless records, were still attending Blackwell, and had no signs of uncanny events happening in their life.

"Okay, nada. Let's dip into yours," proposed the punk in a professional tone.

*She's really into this...*

"Chloe, look... There's an update ticket..."

"Kelly has been showing signs of emotional distress for weeks." Began to narrate Chloe. "The school nurse has informed the faculty that she categorically refuses to talk about the reasons of her depressive state to anyone, even school counsellors."

"There's another one right below..." noted the brunette.

"Principal Wells has met Kelly in his office to discuss the matter after her classmates informed their teachers that her strange uncharacteristically introverted behavior began after a party hosted by Vortex Club members. Kelly became virulent when the principal mentioned the party and threatened to transfer to a new school if people didn't stop bothering her with those issues."

"It says she's studying near Portland now..."

"That's not that far. I think we got your girl, Max. This really sounds like Kate's case."

"Yes. Let's hope Kelly didn't change her phone number."
"I'm sure we can track her down even if she did. We're the dream team! Badass Punk and Time Warrior are in the place, baby!"

"You're cute... even when you're silly." Teased the smaller teen.

"Suck it," was her sidekick's pleasant response. "So, we get out of here now?"

"Gotta print some shit out. Play watch dog for me?" Max batted her lashes for good measure and took on an impish expression.


"You wish i would."

"Wow, slow down on the self-esteem Caulfield!" She advised, getting out of the room to guard the office.

Maxine still had to print all of Nathan's nasty drawings. Maybe she could show them to his psychiatrist... if he hadn't already done so himself. Max stumbled once more upon the reports of David and the boy accusing Rachel of being a drug mule. Nathan was in love with Rachel, right? Why would he snitch on the girl he liked? With Madsen moreover. He'd been Jefferson's puppet for months now, so he must have known his substitute father and Rachel had a bizarro relationship and that she'd let him take pictures of her. Was it why Nathan had tried to photograph the girl on his own? Perhaps he thought what he did was okay since she gave permission to Jefferson...

With all the needed documents in hands, the hipster joined her best friend outside. She still had to tell her about what occured this morning.

"Chloe, i think my powers are still growing..."

"What do you mean? Don't tell me you trifled with time..."

"No, no. I... kinda accessed somebody's memories this morning."

"Really?! No shit?! Dude, this is awesome! You think you can control it?"

"No. It's still fresh. I have no idea why it even happened."

"We'll look into that later. Call your Kelly while i go back to Joyce. She's been blowing up my phone for the last ten minutes."

"Okay. See you later."

"Later, Max Power!"

Max arrived in the bathroom urgently, checking every stalls to make sure no indiscreet ears were hanging about, before gripping her phone and dialing the number written on Kelly's file. By some kind of miracle, it picked up.

"Kelly Davis?"

"Who is this?" Demanded the feminine voice over the line.

"I'm Max Caulfield. I'm a student from Blackwell."

"..."
The sound of someone hanging up the phone met Max's ears, and she glimpsed at her screen to discover that it was the case. She reiterated her call insistently and the mysterious girl picked up once more, no doubt in frustration.

"Don't hang up! Please... This is important." Implored Maxine.

"...What do you want?" The voice sounded strained.

"I need your help."

"For what? I don't even know you!" Denounced her interlocutor.

"I know what happened to you." She blabbed curtly.

"...I have no idea what you're talking about." Lied the unfamiliar teenager.

"The same thing happened to me."

A taunt silence invaded the bathroom.

"...Listen, if you're not lying, then i'm sorry you had to go through all this. But there's nothing i can do for you." Cleared up the girl.

"There's a big difference between the two of us though. I remember everything. But you don't, am i right?" She presumed correctly.

"Please, just leave me alone. I put all of this behind me long ago."

"I doubt that. You see, i can't forget, and yet i can recall exactly what occured. So i can't imagine what it must be for you, who's completely ignorant of what took place that night. You must have so much questions." Max didn't like to resort to this kind of manipulative methods, yet she had no other choice in her current situation. She had to see that girl. She may be able to testify at the trial. Perhaps she possessed more crucial information than Kate or Max herself.

"You're asking me to destroy every single effort i had to make to get better and forget." Accused Davis.

"Can you honestly tell me that you forgot all this? That you don't think about it to this day? You never wonder, really?"

"..."

"I can give you answers, Kelly. I think it's more than anybody from this school has ever done for you..."

What seemed like an eternity passed by with no words exchanged between the two of them.

"I suppose you live in Arcadia Bay." Assumed Kelly.

"Yes."

"Let's meet at the Two Whales on saturday. I'll text you about the time later."

"Thank you Kelly." She breathed in relief.

"It'd better be worth my time." Warned the perplexed adolescent.
Max didn’t get to reply as her interlocutor immediately hanged up. She decided to send a message to Warren to let him know their little operation had run smoothly.

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EBAzINJonO8 ]

This fucking forest. It kept calling to him for some reason. He found himself coming here more and more as days passed. Just last week, he had visited it three times. He had this strange sensation whenever he was in those woods, like he was meant to be there. This place whispered things to him. Since he was a child. Sadly, he never understood what it was trying to say. And he often saw it in the visions the Tobanga gave him. But that blasted thing didn't seem to work anymore, and the numerous dreams of apocalyptic chaos, storm and tornado he used to experience had stopped altogether.

An impressive cry spread throughout the sky, making him stop his staggering to take a look. His eyes caught the sight of a giant whale swimming in the air, far above the trees. It was... one of the most beautiful things he had ever witnessed. The animal was gracefully looping among the clouds in a playful behavior, singing loud and clear in rhythms that sent shivers down his spine. When he tore his gaze from the marvellous show, he spotted a girl further ahead of him, along the dirty muddy path he walked on. She had her back to him, and a brownish bob cut that reminded him of Caulfield. But, there was something weird on her head. A few more steps closer and he realized it was antlers. She was dressed exactly like the previous night, when he found her sitting against the Tobanga. An owl was staring them down from a tree, meters away from them. He had the odd impression of knowing the animal from somewhere.

_Maybe that fucking barn._

"Max?" he called out hesitantly, not quite finding his voice.

She faced him slowly, her hollow eyes boring into his. Her nose was bleeding profusely, creating a pool of red liquid at her feet. Well, until said blood began to form a spiral around her that called to mind the Vortex Club symbol.

_What the fuck?_

The owl came to perch itself on the girl's bare shoulder without her batting an eye.

"Are you going to let him kill me, Nathan?" she inquired in a disappointed tone.

The bird's talons were clutching at her flesh, piercing into her skin.

"Are you going to play your part?"

All the trees started to crash loudly on the ground one after the other like dominos. Soon, the entire woods were ravaged, the wildlife previously hiding inside it running amok, not knowing what to do
"They're not going down without a fight, Nathan." The girl cautioned with a disturbing grin, pointing to something behind him.

He flipped around to behold the view of an onyx snake slithering toward him on the ground amid other wild creatures, and a dark crow gliding effortlessly in his direction until it crashed on his face.

"Nathan." Called Caulfield once more, her voice distant and otherworldly.

"Nathan!" A strong pair of hands was shaking him. "Wake up for fuck's sake!"

The boy bolted upright. Frank's concerned face was the first thing he recognized, followed by the interior of the guy's dirty RV.

"Wh—What happened? What am i doing here?" he asked, trembling madly, his heart refusing to chill out.

"I found you convulsing on the beach. You looked like you were hallucinating. I gave you some pills to calm you down." Recounted the hick guy.

"I—" he stuttered. "...Thanks, man."

"Withdrawal?" Guessed the drug dealer.

"N—No, just... Just bad news."

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cQvGlXl95n4 ]

Max was waiting for Jefferson in an empty art classroom, the man gone to fetch something minutes ago. He said their little session wouldn't last more than a half hour, to her alleviation. She was pacing back and forth across the room, gnawing on her bottom lip anxiously. Nathan didn't attend any of his classes today. She had literally no idea where he was hiding, if he was safe or what kind of state the troubled adolescent was in. He didn't even send her any threatening text. That was abnormal.

Daniel appeared at the entrance out of nowhere, forcing her out of her worried thoughts. The boy marched up to her, a gentle smile on his face.

"I hope you like the sketch i did of you the other day..." Jefferson emerged into the room at the end of his sentence.

"Love it!" She acknowledged.

"Excellent. I got tons of likes on FB! Ah! Made you blush~" Teased the spanish guy.
"Shut up!" Max giggled, truly embarrassed.

Her teacher's gaze was traveling between his two students as he set down a pile of folders on his desk.

"Someday your portrait may hang in the Daniel DaCosta wing of the Louvre." Daniel foretold, adding an opened gesture to his daydreaming tone.

"I'm sure you'll have plenty more interesting drawings to hang in there." Asserted the chesnut-haired girl.

"But what could be more interesting than the face of the artist's muse?" he challenged, drawing the older man's eyes to his person.

_I bet you wholeheartedly agree, freak._

"Ah, i have to go. I'll see you later, Max." He suggested, abandoning her to her sad fate by stepping into the corridor.

She ambulated toward Jefferson who was patiently standing behind her.

"Can you sort this out for me, Max? I need the colored and monochrome pictures separated." He instructed smoothly.

"Yeah." She acquiesced.

Fifteen minutes passed by, during which the both of them were working quietly on their respective tasks, until a delighted Dana Ward decided to come in and join them.

"Hey Mad Max!" Exclaimed the cheerleader, sitting on the corer of the desk Max was classifying the photographs on. "Alyssa, Stella and me went to see Kate at the hospital this morning!" she revealed enthusiastically.

"That's great Dana. I'm glad to see everybody has her back." Smiled Maxine sincerely.

"How is Kate doing?" Intervened the art teacher.

_He really has some nerves. I wish i could headbutt him right now._

"Fine, she's a lot better than yesterday already." Replied Dana with optimism.

Said girl considered Max with an awkward stare for an instant, before opening her mouth again.

"Max... Kate told us you were already waiting for her when she got on the roof. As if you already knew what was going to happen..."

Caulfield stayed composed and betrayed nothing of her internal turmoil at her friend's suggestion.

"I'm close to Kate. I just knew something was off, you know... A bad feeling." She lied skillfully.

"That's exactly what i told Kate but, then she raised an interesting question... How did you know exactly what day and what time Kate was going to try to kill herself? Do you have super-powers? Can you see the future?" Joked the cheerleader, a curious air on her pretty face.

Max stopped what she was currently doing, snapping the folder between her hands sharply while Jefferson eyed the two of them attentively. She faced Dana with a very serious expression and took a
"All this crap already happened, that's why I knew what Kate was going to do and could stop it in time. I have time-travelling powers. Oh, but I can't use them anymore because last time I did, a giant tornado destroyed Arcadia Bay and everyone died because of me. So I got back to before all this mess started and, here I am..."

Dana looked stunned for a moment, then burst out laughing, her head bending backward from her hilarity.

"You're so funny, Max!" She shouted, patting her shoulder and getting an amused smirk from the novice photographer.

"Do you realize how ridiculous all your speculations sound now?" Asked the latter, a hand on her left hip for emphasis.

"Yeah, I guess you're right. We're getting paranoid with all the weird things happening at Blackwell." Granted her brunette friend. "I have to meet with Trevor so," she started to back away from the busy teacher and student, halting near the room's exit one final time. "Max... You've got a great imagination."

The young woman didn't comment on the statement, observing her dorm roommate vanish to retrieve her lover. She found Jefferson leering at her enigmatically.

"What?"

"You seem to hide many secrets Miss Caulfield," he remarked playfully.

You don't know the half of it.

"Don't we all?" she retorted cleverly.

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5-UWjFGWn4 ]

The dream team as the blue-haired punk liked to call them, was circling the famous Blackwell totem like they were looking for something specific. Birds were flocking around them, seemingly interested in their business, chirping encouragingly. It created a nice background for the two teenagers, even more so with the bright sun agreeably warming their back. Farther away, Zachary and Logan were busy playing football, shouting stupidly at each other.

Guys.

"The Tobanga is perhaps Arcadia Bay's oldest original totem." Narrated Chloe, her eyes fixated on her phone.
"Yeah, i knew that already." Max rolled her eyes, impatient for more. Or perhaps simply something useful. For a change...

"Despite controversy, no tribe has claimed... has claimed ownership of the Tobanga." Continued to read her partner, scrolling further down the web page she was perusing.

"Isn't that odd? They lost so much over the years, you'd think they'd fight tooth and nail to get back what's theirs, right?" Interrogated the time-traveling girl, running her hand through her bangs. No response. "Chloe... Are you listening to me?" She glowered at the revelation that her best friend wasn't paying her any attention.

"Sorry Max but this is really interesting... Plus, i love saying Tobanga... Tobanga..." the tattoed rebel soughed mysteriously.

"What are you two doing?" Interrupted someone approaching their rather small group.

"Oh, hey Juliet. We're... trying to learn some things about the school's totem." Divulged Maxine.

"Well then, you'd be better off trying to get an interview from the CIA." Hinted the blonde, one of her feet playing with a patch of grass absentmindedly.

"What do you mean?" Pried Chloe, finally lifting her nose from her electronic gadget.

"I tried doing a paper on this thing once. The school's newspaper is called "The Blackwell Totem", after all. A real pain in the ass. Since nobody around campus knew anything about it apart from its name, i decided to hit up with the native tribes who live nearby... let's just say they were pretty hospitable people, until i mentioned that shitty wood toy." She sighed at the recollection.

"Weird. What happened?" The brunette encouraged her to develop further. "You sure you didn't say anything offensive? No offense but, you can come off as pretty snappy when you don't get what you want."

"None taken. I know my character. And no, i didn't have the time to speak about anything else anyway. They shared strange looks between them and then they asked me to leave. One of the youngest guy nearly spat in my face and told me to mind my own white ass business. He reminded me of Nathan in some ways." She explained, fiddling nervously with the colorful necklace falling onto her cleavage.

"Don't let one rotten apple spoil the bunch." The hipster advised wisely.

"I know. Don't worry, i'm not that resentful. The leader was the nicest, he apologized before i left and said not to take it to heart."

"Thank you for the info, Juliet. This was more helpful than anything we found on the internet... which says a lot." She groused, reminding herself of an old woman.

"You're welcome, girls. And Max, don't you even think about doing your own investigation without my help! You can't keep secrets from ace reporter Juliet Watson!" Alerted the journalist in the making.

"It wouldn't cross my mind. See you later, Juliet."

"Text me if you need any more info. Bye bye."

Finally alone, Max Caulfield turned to her sidekick, taking something out of her jeans pockets.
"I think there's something else we should check out." She pointed out, the punk snatching the paper from her hand excitedly.

"What's this?"

"The bird we saved the other day, it gave me this."

"A bird gave you that poster?" Blinked the Price teen.

"I know, it sounds crazy, but..."

"Max, you have time-travel powers." She nagged. "This is actually the most normal thing i've heard from you since we're back together."

"This is all so surreal... Do you think it has a meaning?"

"Definitely. We're hella going, Max." She resolved, delivering a friendly slap to the shorter girl's back.

"Alright boss." Agreed the latter.

It was Chloe's turn to pull out something out of her clothes this time.

"Here. Take this." It was the polaroid of Max and Rachel's ghost Chloe took in the junkyard. "It's been bringing me luck since i have it and, i think you need it more than me at the moment. Plus, i'm always scared David is going to go through my shit when i'm not at home and find it. There's no way i can explain this to him."

"Thank you, Chloe. Once everything is settled, i promise to give it back."

"I'll hold you to that." She whispered. "Wanna eat at my place after you're done with your boring duties?"

"You mean homework... Yes, why not! I could never refuse Joyce's cooking."

*Plus, i ate absolutely nothing today. Again.*

"Okay, Super-Max! Imma pick you up later!"

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HWF5_wdqQj0&t=0m35s ]

"Warren told me he wanted to ask you to the drive-in but, he thought you would say no because you're already all over the place." Informed Brooke, butt leaning against one of the washing machines of the girls laundry room.

"And you didn't jump on the occasion? Are you coming down with something Brooke?" teased
Max, extracting some clothes from the drier to drop them in a plain red basket.

"Ah ah. I'm not okay with settling for crumbs. I do have some pride, you know." Revealed the spectacled geek.

"Good to know. Warren's not blind you know. If you feel like he treats you like a third wheel, you should set things straight between you. He's a boy, he can be a bit dumb. That's how they work..."

"Yep', no science needed to grasp that." Jested the dark-haired Scott.

Max smiled sweetly at the girl. "Here." She extended the basket containing their garments to Brooke. "Thanks Max. I'll drop yours in your room on my way."

Some minutes later, as soon as she stepped out of the narrow place, she sighted Nathan coming from Victoria's room. They peered at each other for some time, until Nathan charged head on in her direction. She found herself backing up into the laundry area once more, the boy hot on her heels. The tiny room was barely illuminated but still enough for her to highlight his features with her gaze.

"Are you alright?" He just kept staring at her strangely. "I didn't see you at all at school today." She continued, her concern reemerging briskly.

His fist was simultaneously clenching and unclenching. He prowled toward her once more, halting a little too close than personal space would normally allow.

"Stop pretending Caulfield."

"Pretend what, damn it?" She was getting worked up.

"That you care!" He growled lowly, seizing her cerulean orbs with his steely blue ones.

"We talked about this already. You just refuse to listen." She concluded exasperately. "Are you going to start a war with me? Take his side? You know what's probably going to happen in the near future, Nathan? When he doesn't have anything satisfying enough to get his teeth into anymore? Victoria will be next. Your fucking best friend could end up in that room. Are you going to stand by or do something about it?"

"You don't know what you're talking about!" He clashed, as stubborn as ever.

"Oh, i do! I think i made that pretty clear by now!" She scolded back.

The slender girl retrieved a certain polaroid on her person, slapping it violently against his chest.

"You have no idea what i'm capable of. I can make all of this shit right again. Well, insofar as possible."

His eyes widened like saucers when he saw the transparent figure of the Amber girl next to Caulfield on the photograph.

"What the..." he breathed, voice barely audible.

"Think about this Nathan... If i didn't care about you, don't you think i would already have gone to the cops? I have enough to get you and Jefferson investigated. One word, and you'd both be send to jail. You'd both get punished for your actions while the rest of us could move on with our lives. Instead, i'm working my ass off to find you a better option." They stared straight into each other's eyes, the boy seemingly reflecting on her admission. "But i'm just a nosy bitch, right? I'm only
pretending to help you so i can use you and screw you over, right? Stop being such a coward!
You're so *blinded* by your own fears and insecurities, Nathan. You lick the hand that beats you and
bite the one that pets you."

She took a step forward, compelling him to back off.

"I can't do anything for you without your cooperation." She stated matter-of-factly. "You can get
help, or you can go to prison. It's your choice. Not mine."

*But please let me help you.*

She slammed the door behind her furiously.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lt31xoOq00g ]

With the moonlight shining dully onto American Rust, a certain Prescott heir was standing on a patch
of grass, the sound of his barely audible cries resounding into the night.

"I'm so sorry..." he wept pitifully, staring at the ground.

"I never wanted it to go this way."

"I thought you wouldn't mind since you let him do it. You weren't supposed to die..."

"I didn't want to hurt anybody." He confessed, voice full of remorse.

Unknown to the young man, a translucent doe was observing him from afar, listening intently to his
sad monologue.

*There's something in the look you give*
*I can't help myself I fall*
*I can't help myself at all*

None of them could remember the stars looking so heavenly since they were kids. That beach hold
so many precious memories for them. The two girls clothes were dripping wet from playing so close
to the waves. Maybe the fact that the punk had mercilessly pushed her friend into the cold water had
played a role too. Now, the duo had their back resting against a battered truck's hood, observing the
sky attentively.
"I'm completely drenched because of you..." complained the smaller teen, not sounding like she really minded.

"Doesn't matter. You're crashing at my place tonight." Ruled the blue-haired one.

"Do i even have a choice?"

"Nope."

"So, you're basically kidnapping me?"

"You bet your ass i am!"

Max put her head on her friend's shoulder, their hands joined warmly in mutual comfort.


Are you somewhere waiting for me
I don't wanna think about it now
Is there something you said
All these secrets that you keep

"I weaved it for you, nan." A young woman extended a patterned basket to the old woman sitting in a wooden chair.

"It's beautiful, child." Thanked the latter, inspecting the object thoroughly with a smile, before putting it in her plaid covered lap.

The colorful tattoo of a hummingbird on the girl's lower back revealed itself when she crouched down aside her grand-mother, causing her black tank top to lift up.

"Hania wants to reclaim the Tobanga..." she informed, going back to braiding the lady's long dark hair.

"That boy wants a lot of things, especially when they cannot be achieved."

"You said we could take it back one day, when i was younger..." She recalled.

"Of course, child. But not right now. It has to stay in its place. You know that."

"Nan... I got this weird impression this week... Like..." the young girl couldn't seem to find her words.

"You're stuck in a loop? Reliving things over and over?" Suggested the oldest one.

"Yes! Is it...?"

"Yes... Things are set in motion." Her wrinkled hand placed itself on the child's cheek. "It's going to be alright this time." The younger woman smiled in a relieved manner, leaning into her grand-mother's hand.
An attractive man in his forties was lightheartedly humming along the classy jazz music echoing throughout his decorated house. Various newspapers depicting the disparition and attempted suicide of young girls were spread on the only table of his dining room. Along with a folder holding multiple pictures submitted for a particular contest. His hands grasped one of them, displaying a girl facing a wall of polaroids. His smoldering eyes gazed longingly at the photo for several minutes.

"I don't give a shit. If you need a permit to kill them then find one. If you can't even manage something so simple, then dispose of them discreetly. This project isn't going to fall apart just because of a bunch of retarded critters!" Proclaimed a fancy looking man before hanging up, putting his phone back in his pants pockets.

He twisted around at the sound of a door creaking open.

"Nate... Come over here, son." Beckoned the man with his hand, his progeny obeying with a flagrant lack of interest.

The Prescott patriarch curled an arm around the child's shoulders, refocusing his attention to the huge portrait hanging above their fireplace. His son's gaze followed.

"All this will be yours to own one day. You just have to let me guide you. If you'd only listen Nate, you'd make your forefathers proud."

"I'm going to bed." Announced the boy, glaring feebly at his father.

He retired to his room. The night was long, nothing like what he experienced this last two days. Plagued with insomnia, dark twisted images filling his mind and torturing him without mercy, he kept rolling around under his covers, unable to get a grip on the peaceful sensation of rest he so dearly longed for.
Thanks again for the feedback guys! You're awesome!

Next chapter, Max and Nathan slightly begin to look at each other in a more... hormonal way.
The rain was hitting her skin so violently, the sensation was borderline painful. She could feel goosebumps spreading all over her quaking body. Her wrists were bound together behind her back by duct tape. She knew. She didn't need to see it, the familiar feeling was enough to give it away. Her soaked bangs stuck to her face irritatingly, forcing her to jerk around to see what was going on. She could hear digging noises, something sharp cutting repeatedly through the dirt she was laying upon. She felt so cold, which compelled her to realize she was only clad in a baby pink shirt and her underwear. The puddle in front of her reflected her shivering image very clearly. A shadow loomed over her, blocking what little light she had from the dreary sky. Jefferson.

"Look at you, Max... Even in this state, you're still the most beautiful thing i've ever laid eyes on."

She felt frigid fingers stroke her cheek as her eyes met the crouched man's awed and somewhat lustful stare. Not this again. She'd take any guilt-tripping over this. She already had to tolerate him everyday, why would she want the guy to haunt her nights too?

"I'm sorry. I feel bad about having to put something as precious as you in the ground. You should be exposed, not hidden. So everybody can look at you."

A dark silhouette stalked up to her teacher, halting behind him, and a silvery object was raised to the back of his head. Max understood too late that the item was a gun, a loud bang detonating in the air as a bullet pierced through her professor's head, his brains blasting off in a hundred pieces right above her. The girl shrieked at the awareness of the man's blood splattering on her face brutally. She didn't want any part of the creep on her person, and certainly not his insides.

"Stop screaming. Jesus..." complained her own voice, oddly not coming from her own mouth.

Lifting her head once more, the sight of her evil double greeted her.

"What? No thanks? How ungrateful."

Hands gripped her arms firmly and steadied her until she was capable of standing on her own two feet without further help.

"Aww, are you crying? Poor Max." The mean version of herself noted sarcastically. "Nice shot, huh?" She winked cruelly, rising the gun to Max's eye level and swinging it playfully in her palm. "I could have never done it without you! All these hours at the shooting range served a purpose after all."

"I can't wait to get rid of you." Max seethed between her chattering teeth.
"Getting tired of me?" She asked with false innocence. "I don't care. I don't care what you want. I don't care how you feel. I don't give a shit about you, Max. I'm just like you. Who don't give a shit about anyone else."

Her doppelganger gave her a push on the back, urging her to turn around. Her gaze roamed across the sea of rotting corpses filling the muddy area, that she easily identified as her friends. She was definitely gonna throw up.

"Look at that, Max..." invited the girl with a wide gesture, making her realize they were standing in front of the old barn concealing Jefferson's dark room. "Just because you got back in time to undo your mistakes, it doesn't mean they never happened. Look at Chloe, that bullet is still lodged in her forehead. And Warren is still crushed under all that rubble because of that storm you created. Oh, check Nathan and Victoria! They're still getting eaten by maggots since Jefferson killed them. How nasty."

The vision of multiple larvae falling out of their open and lifeless eyes drove her to turn her head away. She prayed she wasn't screaming or trashing in her sleep to the point of waking up Chloe. The other Maxine took a step forward, invading her space like the entitled little bitch she was.

"Even if you manage to fix your precious friends lives, i'll be here. Waiting for you in your dreams. Or in reality, every single time you'll take a look in the mirror. That's how fucked up you are, Max. Seeing things that aren't there is usually not a good sign, you know. Are you turning insane? And you dare talk about Nathan! Maybe you should see a psychiatrist."

Maybe she did need to see one. Perhaps her mental health would never get better on it's own. Her days were so busy lately, she didn't really have the time to think about her constant internal discomfort during the day. But at night, when everything was calm and she was left alone to battle with her inner demons, those dark things that lurked inside her mind, she was vulnerable once more. And her tormented psyche perfectly knew how to take advantage.

"You don't need a storm or a gun to hurt anybody. You've already done so in the past. What makes you think it's going to change? You're the real murderer."

Max's eyelids snapped open, her pupils instantly focusing on the ambient darkness of her friend's room before the girl lunged toward the adjacent bathroom to empty her stomach's content in the toilets, Chloe hot on her trail despite her unawareness. She felt cool hands drawing her hair backward so she could puke without making a mess of herself, the knowledge that her partner was witnessing her pitiful state making her even more miserable.

"Here goes mom's salmon..." jested the blue-haired teen, trying to lighten the mood a little bit, or at least to steal a tiny smile from her unfortunate best friend.

The sick photographer's gaze dropped down to her right arm, attracted by an itching sensation that was starting to burn her tender skin. Angry red scratches were spread all over her forearm.

"Let's brush your teeth and go back to bed..." murmured Chloe, curling an arm around the shorter girl's middle to support her during the short lasting journey back to her bedroom.
The dark room... What was he doing here? He could hear noises coming from the other side of the curtain. Small steps and little clicks that reminded him of the sound cameras produce when you take a picture. Jefferson's voice becomes audible as he stealthily advances.

"Oh Max..." his whisper full of disturbing wonder.

When Nathan passes through and gets to the other side, the first thing he remarks is the girl on the ground, laying on her side, her wrists bound in a fashion he knew all to well. The teacher is hovering above her, camera in hand, praising her for her face, her eyes, her purity. She doesn't look ready to cooperate with the psychopath though, if the way she kicks the trail he bought closer is of any indication. His vial containing a familiar drug breaks and its content smears all over, making him angry. He shouts, throws insults at her, threaten to dose her once more, but she doesn't seem to care or to be smart enough to be afraid. Her brows furrow and she sends her former teacher a look of pure hatred. Even in her condition, something about the way she holds herself and stares at the twisted man forces Nathan to think maybe she still has the upper hand, for some strange reason.

"God damn, you are a fighter, Max! I've had my eye on you, and i've noticed that you've been more... fearless, this week than maybe your whole life." The older guy's reflects as he crouches down to her level.

"Lunatics don't scare me." Retorts the crazy young woman.

Because you have to be insane to talk back to someone like Jefferson. The hipster had no sense of self-preservation whatsoever.

"When did you became so brave, i wonder..."

Nathan did too. The environment shifts suddenly. Same place as before, with the same protagonists, but the teenage photographer is bound to a chair this time, and the light has changed to a mixed red and purple color. The boy realizes that the two of them cannot see him, which is weird, because he's getting pretty close at the moment. He wants to intervene, but fear has such a nasty grip on him, clawing at his insides and rendering him useless. This is one of the situations he feared since he met Caulfield. He had the sick feeling she would end up in here if she didn't learn to shut her big mouth. He didn't want this to happen, but it was, right before his very eyes.

"I'm sick? Do you look at the world? Your school?! Your FRIENDS ? FUCK THAT! I only see the beauty of youth. Of dreams before they become regrets." Rambles the art professor.

"Yes. You're a psychopath. And this is your last session."

The threat gives him pause, and for an instant, he looks like he's taken aback by her boldness.

"Au contraire Max, i'm so sane that nobody knows what's happening to you right now." He notes casually.

The shifting comes back, and Jefferson is now standing a few feet from Max, a black thick diary in hands.

"How can i not read it now? Schoolgirl prose are so... naive. I bet you even have a crush on a certain art teacher!"

The bound girl snorts out loud, and Nathan is confused at how she was capable of laughing in this circumstances.
"Don't flatter yourself. You'd be surprised what i actually think about you. What a pretentious piece of shit you are."

The Prescott wants to tell her to shut up. To stop being so fucking brave, because it would only lead her to being murdered. He doesn't want anyone else to experience what he had to witness so many times before. He has no desire for Max to end up like Rachel, or Kate, whatever rivalry there was between them.

"I'm getting some spectacular images here, Max. Yes, Victoria would kill to be in your place but, she doesn't understand our... connexion." Explains the teacher, motioning to his blond friend who magically appeared on the couch.

"Spoiled slut actually tried to blackmail me into picking her photo for the Everyday Hero's contest!" He spats in distaste.

What was Victoria doing here? She was completely out of it, asleep and unaware of her surroundings. A vicious wave of nausea swarms over him, tears welling up mercilessly.

"As you can see, sleeping beauty here is too harsh for my gentle lens. And don't get me started on your late partner! I had enough of those faux-punk sluts in my Seattle days."

When he tries to touch his female best friend, his hand goes right through the girl. He gapes at his palm in horror. He couldn't do anything.

"Go to Hell, you will for everybody you've hurt!"

If only.

"You're the winner, Max. I choose you. Your portrait." The psycho declares proudly, no doubt thinking he was making her a favor.

"Fuck you."

Nope. Caulfield was definitely not the type to take shit from people. The background changes again, as little as the previous time.

"Oh those chemicals are hard to get and expensive, Max. I don't have a trustfund. And Blackwell doesn't pay shit! That was Nathan's role."

"You brainwashed him!"

"I prefer the term "manipulated"... like with an image. Nathan was easy to twist around."

"You're evil."

"Oh i see! You're good, because you stopped your friend from beating Nathan up..."

What the fuck was he talking about? They didn't make any sense.

"I cared more about Nathan than you did."

"No you didn't!" He replies angrily.

The teenage boy wanted out. Why was he seeing this? Another nightmare coming to torment him after the horrible day he just had? The scenery kept changing over and other to different bits and pieces of the teacher and student conversation. He felt like the torture would never end.
"Do you finally get it now, Max? I can't compromise my vision, with amateurs..."

"You are an amateur. Look at the trail of death you left behind! You can't blame all this on Nathan," she giggled at his stupidity, "I don't care what you do to me. You're gonna die motherfucker! For Chloe, and Rachel, and everybody else." Affirmed the freckled teen with disdain.

"I do love your spirit Max, but you brought yourself here. By your own choice." He muttered lowly as he approached her, two of his fingers lifting her delicate chin to stare more closely into her cerulean orbs.

"Yeah... you obviously have a problem with the concept of consent." She snorted, twisting around harshly to get his touch off her face.

The guy was now at his desk, perusing his pictures on his computer.

"God... I wish you had been around back in my day." He daydreamed openly.

"You will not get away with this! I want you to know that." She called out from her chair.

Mark was back in front of her in a second, engrossed in a monologue Caulfield didn't seem to care about enough to even listen.

"Miss Caulfield, i asked you a question. ANSWER! Or get hurt."

"Eat shit and die."

The art teacher chuckled with mirth.

"That's the first time one of my models down here, hasn't shed a tear." He confessed, gloating.

"I'm not Victoria, or Nathan. You can't control me. I can see right through your bullshit Jefferson. Everybody else will too." Max promised, fervently believing in her words.

Jefferson was soon standing upright and holding a processing tray in his right hand. The smell of charred paper assaulted Nathan's nose.

"Sorry... i burned all your stuff. I got a little carried away." He conceded sadly. "You know, i always believed in your vision..." The man's tone turned into something tender.

"Bet you said the same bullshit to Nathan. See where that got him..."

"Not really, Max. I wasn't lying when i said you have a gift."

The scene froze completely and everything became unnervingly silent. Chills traveled down his spine and a prickling feeling sparkled along his nape. He felt a dark presence lingering behind him and a cool breath colliding with his skin, his hair raising on the back of his neck. His body twisted around quickly.

"Rachel..." He paled at the sight of his former friend. "How..."

She looked exactly as he remembered. Her clothes were the same ones she wore the day of her tragic overdose, her long blond hair always so flawless, her hazel eyes penetrating deep into his steely ones. Her face appeared deathly serious, hinting her displeasure as she stared up at him.

"You killed me, remember?" she recalled impassively.
"I... I'm sorry! I didn't want to, i swear!"

"Hmm..." she hummed pensively, a defined eyebrow arching up. "Wanna make it up to me?" she extended in a placid tone, arms crossing over her chest.

"Y-y-yes!" he stuttered, trembling in fear.

"Help Max."

"W-what? How?"

"Everything you've seen in this room really happened."

"T-that's impossible."

"You think?" her voice turned acerbic, her face darting toward his brutally. "Max has gone through gruesome things, and still, she tries to save all of your ungrateful asses." She scolded, and he knew her bitter stare would haunt him forever.

"I'm s-sorry..." he apologized, frightened by the surreal situation he was in.

"If you really are, prove it. Are you going to help Max?"

"Y-yeah... I'll do anything, please!" The boy implored. He wanted this nightmare to end.

"You better." Rachel advised, taking a step closer to his cowering form. "I swear to you Nathan, if you don't get a grip and things turn bad because of you, i will haunt you until the day you die." Guaranteed the deceased beauty. "Do i make myself clear?" She inquired, head slightly tilted to the side, gaze intense and dangerous.

The boy nodded frantically in response, incapable of uttering any more words.

"Remember this promise." Her voice turned ethereal, the rest of her following suit, and a severe dizziness took hold of him before his dreadful surroundings began to spiral into nothingness.

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W5nrAHk_x8M ]

The american flag hanging next to her head was drifting with the wind coming from the ajar window, barks echoing throughout the neighbourhood. Max squinted under the powerful ray of sunlight caressing her features, rolling around to catch a glimpse of her unconscious friend.

She looks a lot more angelic than when she's awake.

The freckled girl stretched leisurely, crossing her right leg over the left one and swinging them in a peaceful rhythm. She wondered what time it was, but was way too lethargic to look at her phone at
the moment. This awakening was far more enjoyable than the first one. She ran a hand over her stomach, the white cotton shirt her friend had lent her soft under her fingers. A pink and blue skull was sewn in the center, adding a bit of colors to the simple cloth.

"I missed this." Breathed a voice beside her.

Maxine shot a glance at the sleepy individual beside her. "Me too," she admitted freely.

"You okay, vomit girl?" questionned her faithful associate.

"Ugh, i prefered when you called me a hipster." She winced.

"Seriously, you're not going to be sick again, right?" The punk stroke her arm sluggishly in concern, the gesture somehow comforting.

"No, don't worry. I feel better." She wasn't lying, for once.

*I can't stay traumatized all my life anyway, right? I'm sure it will pass. I just need... time.*

"Good." Answered the other girl, placing her arms under her head to eye the ceiling more comfortably. "Do you think the principal is going to notice somebody went through his shit?" she wondered.

"No... He would have already. And we didn't leave any trace behind so..." concluded the novice photographer.

"Yep! We're the real ninjas." Crooned Chloe, gripping her remote control to turn on the music.

The teen stayed immobile for a few minutes, making the most of their time together. Max was trying to count how many particles of dust she could witness flying above them thanks to the exceptionally bright lighting the sun afforded. Fatigue had the peculiar tendency of impelling her to act like she was stoned. Who said you needed alcohol or drugs to turn into a dumb version of yourself? Just stop sleeping altogether and you'll be good.

"I'm so wiped out from yesterday." Sighed the Price girl. "But it was awesome! I feel like a real detective."

"A corrupted one then, with all the illegal shit we keep doing." Corrected Caulfield.

"It's not like we blew up the school, you know." She could practically hear the blue-haired rebel rolling her eyes.

*We nearly did once. But i'm not telling you that. I don't want to give you ideas...*

"Unless you have other things in mind..." suggested Chloe.

"Not really. I don't think a lot is going to happen before Saturday. There'll be the protest, and Kelly..." listed Max. "Though in the meantime, i'd still like to know more about the Tobanga."

"Did it give you another vision?" The price heir turned to face her, her head supported by her hand, elbow sank in the plaid mattress.

"No but, i have the strange feeling this is not the last i hear from that thing."

"Man, so many paranormal bullshit is going down in this town! You said it was a rich guy's house, huh? There's not a lot of rich people in town..."
"Nope. And all of their kids are attending Blackwell." Rasped Max, arising from the bed with difficulty with one last glance at her friend's blue painted toenails. "I bet it was Nathan's house. There's something ominous about his father."

"That Prescott prick? Everybody hates him, so there must be a good reason... Hey! Speaking of Blackwell, you never told me if you have... you know. You keep mentioning that Warren guy, is he your soon to be boyfriend?"

"Ugh, no. Warren is just a good friend." She rebutted, treading to the chair her clothes were drying on.

**Clearly. He doesn't get the privilege of sharing your bed at night. Unlike Nathan. I wonder what Chloe would think about that...**

"Why are you rolling your eyes?" Remarked her best friend.

"Nothing. I was in my head." She dismissed with a nonchalant wave of her hand.

"When are you not, Super-Max?" Mused the punk, spinning the terrestrial globe on the shelf next to her bed blithely.

The Blackwell student paused when she picked up her shirt and jeans, giving it a hard once over, brow furrowed in disapproval.

"What's wrong?" Demanded the sprawled girl.

"My stupid clothes are still wet." Max griped, throwing the useless things back to their original position.

"Well, you did rinse them pretty late last night..."

"Like i had a choice! I can't let them soak in salted water, it would ruin them."

"Just leave them here and help yourself in my fashion hole, drama queen."

Caulfield caught the ashtray full of cigarette butts on Chloe's desk and emptied it in the trashcan hastily, the sight greatly nagging at the maniac side of her she didn't knew she possessed, before shifting around to march up to her sidekick's closet. A familiar outfit greeted her.

"There you go! Rachel left a bunch of her clothes with me... She's your size." She disclosed, springing up to join her side.

"I don't know... I'm sure it looked good on Rachel but on me, it's another story." She already knew the result to be honest. And she didn't want to offend Chloe, even if she grasped that the Amber girl probably didn't care about her borrowing her former clothes.

"Stop second-guessing yourself, Max! Put this on and let your inner punk-rock girl come out!" encouraged her ally.

Super-Max sighed. This was a lost battle anyway.

"Alright! I'm going to change in the bathroom." Informed the chesnut-haired girl.

"Why? Scared i'll steal a peek?" teased Chloe, a cheeky grin traveling all the way up to her ears.

"Oh, i know you will."
"Tss—Whatevs! You're not that hot, Caulfield." Tried to deceive the tough chick.

Without any warning, Chloe found herself on her back, a very mischievous looking Maxine atop her.

"I'm not? You sure?" Mocked the bold photographer, trapping her friend under her body with her legs.

"Uh..." blurted her baffled companion, ogling the brunette's really close features.

"My, my... Cat got your tongue? ...Who's second-guessing now?" Max blinked at her playfully, finally rising up from the bed to get on her way. She had to dress up if she planned on attending any of her classes.

She perfectly knew how to get back at her perverted partner. The teen had posters of girls cleavage on her walls, after all. Chloe Price stared at the disappearing girl with an utterly lost expression on her face for quite some time.

"Damn Max, that was hella sexy!" She shouted all of a sudden.

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GxC4f3G8iRw ]

Chloe possessed this magical way to appease her no matter what. She was banging her hands on the steering wheel in rhythm to the beat of the music resounding in the car. Singing out of tune on purpose to amuse her comrade, her temporarily high-pitched voice straining Max's poor eardrums. But she laughed, joining her friend happily in her foolish demeanor. The punk's dashboard bobblehead banging it's little head in mimicry to the two girls currently going bonkers. Blackwell quickly came into view, the punk-rock teen pulling up in the school's parking lot. They exited the vehicle and began to march toward the building, their arms curled around one another.

Hayden, Luke and Justin were sitting on the fountain's edge, chatting casually, Justin's board at his feet. Hayden didn't have his usual harem following him around for once. As the girls got closer, the soothing sound of the running water reached their ears. Max noticed that the clear water of the fountain reflected dazzlingly against the bricks of the pillar supporting Blackwell Academy's statue. The miriad of rippling green coins inside it was a very nice touch.

"Yo yo yo Maximus! Lookin' sick today!" Praised Justin with a grin.

"Right?" It seemed to be Chloe's turn to rave about Max's new style. "A couple tats, some piercings and we'll make a thrasher out of her yet." She complimented, reinforcing her grip on Caulfield.

Guess it's my time to shine...

"Ready for the mosh pit, shaka brah!" Declared the young photographer while doing weird hand signs.
"........." The group's silence was deafening.

"Maybe not." The blue-haired chick corrected herself, looking quite perplexed.

Everyone suddenly burst out laughing, even Max.

"You crack me up Max!" Hayden told her genuinely. "Are you going to the party tonight?"

"You bet your ass she'll be there! I'll be her date!" Announced Chloe proudly, squeezing the shorter girl against her possessively.

"Damn! Didn't even get the chance to ask and you already crush my heart Max," he joked.

"Back off dude. If someone's gonna pop Max's little cherry, it's gonna be me," the punk pointed to herself with her thumb and a satisfied smile.

"You're not popping any cherry of mine. Ever." Deadpanned Caulfield impassively.

"Awww, not even one of the two?" Wondered her partner in crime.

"What two?" The brunette eyebrows were arranged in a weird pattern due to her confusion.

"Well you know... there's the front door and there's... like, the back door." Hinted Chloe with an up to no good expression, her hand moving around during her explanations.

... 

"Ew!!" Max extracted herself from her ally's embrace after her outrageous sentence. "You're GROSS! You always take things too far Chloe!"

"Aww look at Maxi-Pad getting all blushy! How cute." She mocked, wiggling her fingers in her face and flicking her button nose.

Caulfield groaned and stormed off angrily, completely red in the face, the sound of the boys guffawing loudly echoing behind her.

"She's gonna be pissed." Predicted Luke who was busy watching her retreating form.

"She deserved it. Payback, bitches!" Affirmed Chloe, hands on her hips and body straight as an arrow.

"What did she do?" Questionned Hayden.

"It's a secret, but Max is a naughty little hipster." She divulged in a mysterious tone.

"She must have learned from the Master..." commented the only skater of the merry band.

"You wanna die, Justin?" The punk suggested, frowning playfully at her victim.

The skater held out his hands in passive surrender.
Science class. Max liked the subject, but it undoubtedly wasn't her forte, and her grades served as a good reminder. Not that it was catastrophic, she was just very average, and that was thanks to Miss Grant who was a patient and passionate teacher. Things would be worse with another professor, she was fairly sure. The muffin standing on her desk looked positively yummy. Especially since Maxine's guts kept squirming grossly every two minutes. At least they did so silently. Max didn't want her classmates hearing her intestines protesting for the rest of the hour. It was her body's own fault anyway. It didn't have to make her puke. Serves it right! Her phone kept vibrating against her thigh, distracting her annoyingly. She never glimpsed at her phone in class, she didn't want to take the risk of it being confiscated. Miss Grant cut herself in the middle of her speech, telling everyone to behave while she went fetching some material. As soon as the woman exited the room, something relatively light hit the back of her head before falling onto the seat next to her. She unfolded the piece of paper.

"You're sleeping in my room tonight"

Max looked over her shoulder to see Nathan's stormy orbs glaring holes into her. The Prescott didn't like being ordered around but he sure had no problem doing it to others.

"What?" she mouthed to the boy.

"Look at your fucking phone, dumbass!" was his hissed response.

His left leg was bouncing nervously under his table. Max frowned, choosing to ignore him and settling for staring at the aquarium on her right instead. Another ball of paper collided with her hair, and she decided to take a look at her cellphone just so he would leave her alone.

We need to talk.
10/10 11:35am

Wait for me after class.
10/10 11:36am

Look at ur phone bitch!
10/10 11:38am

She sincerely hoped this was about their little conversation of the previous day. He may have slept on it. Well, if his night had been anything like hers, he probably didn't get any sleep. It was completely absurd! She spent the night with Chloe, her best friend, the very person for whom she sacrificed so much, so sleeping with her should have been helpful. Oh but no, let's give Max a shitty nightmare and keep her from falling asleep for hours! While slumbering next to Nathan had provide her with the most peaceful dream she had in ages. And she had actually feel rested when she
awakened. How logical! Perhaps she unconsciously felt safer with the Prescott since he obviously knew the struggle. Max didn't have to fake being alright, or even sane, and she had no reason to be ashamed if he witnessed her crazed state. Unlike Chloe, whom she wanted to protect from her mental instabilities. Deep inside, she was also conscious that the fact she was the only one of them to remember everything that went down during her previous timeline weighted like a heavy burden on her shoulders. It sure didn't help at all. She wanted to confide in Chloe, but how could she? The punk wouldn't be able to relate anymore, even if she was amazingly supportive. Maxine recalled the note Nathan had thrown at her a bit earlier. He wanted to sleep with her tonight. Why? Did her presence also made things easier for him? That would be pretty ironic...

"Max?" Called out someone in front of her. "Are you alright?"

That thrust her out of her musing. She realized she had been fiddling with the sand hourglass on her table absentmindedly, her index finger placed on top of it. She looked at the individual who had perturbed her daydreaming to see it was Stella. The girl was staring at her from behind her glasses, clearly weirded out by her behavior. Max let go of the object.

"Um, yeah. Just lost in thought."

"You sure? You've been looking really pale for a while now..." inquired Hills, her hand coming to rest gently on top of hers.

The same feeling she experienced with the fisherman yesterday surged back up. Flashes of a woman's face that acutely resembled Stella assaulted her mind mercilessly.

"You really think you have a chance? Don't make me laugh. You've never been anything more than a good for nothing little brat since we had you!"

"You better pray that stupid school takes you because your father and i aren't paying shit for your ridiculous fantasies."

"You know what? Maybe this is a good idea! If you get accepted, that means we won't have to provide for your useless ass anymore. And i won't have to watch you roam around the house all day, daydreaming about scholarship instead of finding a real job!"

"Beating your sorry ass all these years wasn't good enough apparently. I wish you were never born."

Max could feel the poor adolescent's pain and anguish through her mother's cruel monologue. And the rage. So much rage, bottled up carefully for such a long, long time. It was coursing through her blood, liquid fire setting her very own veins ablaze.

"Max!" Stella's voice drove her back to reality and she caught the nervous look the girl was sending to something beside her.

Caulfield shifted around to see the hourglass hovering in the air next to her face. She didn't get enough time to understand what was going on though, because the device exploded brutally, forcing her to cover her head with her arms for protection.

"What happened?" she interrogated her comrade, who had witnessed the scene.

"I don't know! I-i touched you and your eyes rolled back and then you were breathing hard and that thing took off by itself."

Fuck!
"Do you want me to take you to the infirmary?" proposed the golden-skinned girl sweetly.

"N-No, it's okay." Max swept a glance over the classroom, suddenly aware of her classmates attention focused on her person. "I just need some air." She said, picking up her stuff and shoving it inside her bag, already planning her escape.

"Go, i'll find something to explain to Miss Grant."

"Thank you, Stella."

In a flash, the freckled teenager was out of there, rushing outside of the school building, her fingers furiously scratching at the grating itch still present on her arm.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=scd-uNNxgrU]

Lunch time. Finally. Max took a deep refreshing breath as she hoarded her bag inside her locker hastily. Just as she shut the thing close, a pair of hands slammed against it aggressively, cornering her against the furniture. She managed to twist around despite the intrusive body almost glued to her back.

_Nathan. Should have known._

"What was that shit you pulled with the timer?" He snarled, brows knitted together.

"What?!" she exclaimed, accidently catching a whiff of his minty breath.

"I saw it floating in the air by itself! It was you, right?" He suspected, inspecting her like she was a witch during the McCarthyism period.

"Don't you have more important things to talk to me about?" she tried to divert the conversation to another direction.

"The fuck i do! You have plenty to explain Caulfield."

A tall silhouette rounded the corner, just to halt at the sight of them. Warren. He blinked rapidly, apparently opting to glare at Nathan for looming so close over his female friend.

"Get away from her, dude." He ordered as he approached them.

She knew it was in the nerd’s genes to play white knight whenever injustice crossed his path, but she could really do without his interference right now. He was going to upset the enraged boy even further. The two guys seemed to despise each other dearly for a reason she never grasped. It's not like they were chatting each other up frequently and they could easily avoid one another, so what was their problem? Nathan was a dick to everyone, and nearly the entire school couldn't stand him, but Warren wasn't the type to hate somebody to this extend groundlessly.
"This doesn't concern you, fag. Go play with your balls and let the grown-ups talk." The Prescott retorted, giving a little push on the boy's chest to keep him away.

Max knew that look. The future scientist was ready to jump in, with his fists.

"Warren, let it go." She intervened, holding her hand up in a sign of peace. "I can defend myself, thank you."

"But he's harassing you and you're not reacting!" He remarked, dumbfounded.

"He's no threat. I'm okay. We're just talking, nothing more. Warren... Please..." she pleaded, praying for him to stomp away from the awkward situation.

"Yeah, get lost loser."

Nathan certainly wasn't arranging things by standing so fucking close to her while glowering at the brown-haired boy. With one last nasty look in the rich kid's direction, Warren nodded slightly before retiring with difficulty, his mind probably nagging him to meddle in their affairs. Tired of these interruptions, Nathan grabbed her hand and led her somewhere more private. Like the storage room. Narrow spaced, barely lighted storage room. Great.

"Did he touch you?" He pried with a scowl.

"What are you talking about?"

"You know, stop playing dumb Caulfield!" he seethed impatiently.

"I'm not, you're not making any sense!" She could shout too, God dammit!

"Jefferson! Did he fucking hurt you, Max?!"

How the hell did he learn about that? That threw her off instantly.

"I-i..." she faltered stupidly.

"Fuck!" His fist collided with the shelves next to them, bottles of bleach and other cleaning products shaking under the blow. "It was real... i can't believe it was real..." he mumbled madly.

"What was real, Nathan?"

"I dreamed about Rachel, she... she threatened me! And you were in the dark room with that creep! She told me to listen to you." His index finger pointing at her accusatively.

"Oh..." she breathed in realization.

Rachel had attempted to save her skin once more. Or at least, to make things easier for Max. Even dead, this girl was a gift from the heavens.

"What are you hiding, huh? Tell me stat Caulfield!"

"Calm down, Jesus..." Maxine bade, exasperated.

"Why should i?! Do you even realize what's happening? There's so many weird shit revolving around you Max, and you never explain anything!" He reproached in a huff.

Well, he was pretty right on this point.
"What do you want to know? I promise I'll be honest, but you might not believe me." She warned with a mellow voice.

"How did you escape Jefferson? You knew what he was doing, there's no way he'd let you live!" He assumed correctly.

_Here it comes, Max. Time to sound like a perfect loony._

"I... have... um, abilities." She exhaled loudly. "How can I possibly explain this to you...?" Her right hand ran through her bangs, the girl sweeping her gaze around the tiny room like she would find the answer there. "You remember what you told me about your visions of the storm? I told you I had them too, right? I... I was the one who caused it."

"I can manipulate time as I please..." She began tentatively. "This week already happened, Nathan. That day I jumped you in the bathroom, I knew what was going to happen if you and Chloe met..."

Her eyes closed for a short moment at the recollection. "You shot her in the stomach by accident, and she died on the floor, you were panicking... so I went back. And I kept doing it a lot after this. That's what caused the storm. But I found a way back here, and as long as I'm not using my rewind power, nothing bad should happen."

He peered at her, stunned and hesitant at the same time.

"...Do you realize what kind of crazy shit you're blabbering, Caulfield?" He scoffed.

"I know it sounds insane but... Can you give me another plausible explanation? How else would I know all of this? Jefferson, the dark room, Rachel's death, her relationship with Frank, and Jefferson... Your father beating you... How did you think I was able to save Kate? I was waiting for her on that roof. Because she already tried to kill herself in the past."

"Why would you have powers? Why you?"

_Good fucking question._

"I don't know! I'm trying to find out. Don't look at me like that, I'm just as lost as you are!" He averted his gaze. "Listen, that dream you had, it was real. Rachel contacted Chloe in her dreams before, so I know she can do this sort of things. She's trying to help me make things right again..."

"She hates my guts... she's dead, all because of me..." he held his head between his hands like the realisation had just hit him. "I'm sorry..." his strangled voice blurted a minute later, and her eyes were immediately drawn to the little droplets that were starting to fall on the ground. "I know I treat everybody like shit..."

The boy stepped back, giving her space, fingers concealing his face as he turned away from her.

"You don't know how to deal with people Nathan, because no one ever taught you how to do it properly..." she indicated in her usual soft tone. "Your father always responded to you with violence and anger, so you do the same with everyone else. That's all you've ever known..." she indicated, striding closer to him. "You have to free yourself of your father's influence, so you can start over..."

"Yeah, like I could!" he sneered, face contorted with anger and frustration. The teen plopped on the ground in dejection, "I'm completely fucked up... There's nothing for me anymore."

"That's not true." Max contradicted. "Let me help, Nathan. I can make him pay for what he did to all those girls... and for taking advantage of you."
She observed the way his eyes had glazed over, a sign that he was trapped in painful memories and miles away from the narrow room they were currently in.

"H-he said she wouldn't remember." He confessed, his tone brittle. "He f-fucking lied. He always s-said nobody would get h-hurt. It was s-supposed to be like nothing ever happened f-for her..." his tears wouldn't stop cascading down his cheeks.

"Who? ...Kate?"

"I'm so fucking stupid, man..." the Prescott wheezed. "I swallowed all his bullshit like a moron!"

"Nathan..." She frowned, chest tightening compassionately.

"I thought... that someone really liked me, for once... Even my family, they despise m-me. I see the way they look at me. Like a f-fucking f-freak..."

There was simply nothing she could say that would make him feel better. But perhaps she could give him a reason to fight against all the people that had persecuted him, a reason to go on. To find peace with himself, at last. If it was possible. She crouched in front of him slowly, studying the little stains his cries had left on the ground.

"Don't you wonder why you were able to see the storm? It should have only concerned me, right? But you saw it too... I think maybe... Maybe you're here for a reason, Nathan. You may have a purpose that you don't know about yet..."

He didn't answer, but she knew he could hear her. He seemed to be thinking about what she told him. Max tried to touch Nathan's shoulder cautiously.

"Don't touch me," he croaked, slapping her reaching hand away.

"...I'm not leaving you alone." She announced seriously, leaving no place for disagreement.

"...Just don't touch me..."

Maxine assessed him a few more seconds, finally deciding to kneel down behind the boy, sitting back to back with him. It was the only efficient thing she could think of to make him feel her presence and give him privacy at the same time. Seeing all the guilt and hopelessness in his eyes revived horrible things inside her that she tried to bury a little deeper with each passing day, so maybe it was better to stay like this anyway. Would any of them survive all the fucked up shit they had to go through? Between Chloe, Nathan, Kate and her... Even Rachel when she was still alive... Were there still any kids that weren't traumatized in this messed up school?

Her eyelids closed under the weight of forming tears, and she let them fall silently as she listened to the tormented boy's muffled cries.

"Nathan... I'm trying to get better... I have... no idea if... if it's even going to work, but... i'd like to think that... there's still hope for kids like us in this world... Trying... is the only thing left to do, anyway... I just have to believe that things will work out... for everybody... So maybe... maybe you could try too... with me..."
Max Caulfield was roaming the corridors, on her way to her photography class, stopping at the sight of a distressed friend. Daniel DaCosta was leaning against his locker, staring down at his feet in a downhearted manner.

"Hey Daniel, you look bummed out... Is Logan bothering you again? Do you want me to headbutt him?" Threatened the mousy girl, arms crossed over her chest.

He chuckled lightly. "No, Max. But thanks for the offer. I just... figured out that my photos basically suck. Photography seems way out of my league..."

"Well, you're not here for that. You're here to share your wonderful drawing talent with all of us. Look at that sketch you did of me... That's your gift." Reassured the novice photographer.

"Thanks, Max. You're a good talker." He seemed to sincerely appreciate her efforts.

"Are you going to the party tonight?" She asked curiously.

He snorted. "Yeah, right. People here push me into lockers, not dance floors..."

"Fuck them. Daniel, if you want to go, then just go. I'll be there tonight. It would be cool to see you."

"I guess if you put it like that... Alright! I'll see you there then, Max." He waved at her as he journeyed to his next class period.

Max observed him go with a tiny smile on her face. She hoped he felt a bit better.

"YA!" Something jumped on her out of nowhere.

"AH!" she yelled in shock. "Oh, fuck. Warren!" She reprimanded.

"Sorry," the culprit apologized, rubbing his hand against the back of his head. "Couldn't resist. I need a drink, you coming with me?"

"Sure, just give me some time to pull myself together after my heart attack."

"Man, you're so witty Max. Me likey~." He elbowed her in the ribs.

Caulfield growled dejectedly as they neared one of the school's vending machines, the girl taking vengeance by smacking him in the back.

"So, what was that shit with Nathan earlier?" He questioned, slipping a coin inside the machine.

"Nothing worth mentioning. You have no reason to worry about Nathan, seriously." She dismissed him, staring at his fingers tapping against the buttons.

"Then why was he in your face like that?" He insisted stubbornly, retrieving his treat through the thin hatch.

"I said forget it, Warren. Can't you drink something else?" She changed the subject by nodding at his soda can.

"What do you mean?"
"Everytime i see you, you always have a soda in hand. I never see you drink anything else."

"Well, i'm thirsty, oh great diet guru, and they put a dispenser here for a reason." He looked at her like she was dumb, mentioning to the dispenser.

"Yes, your money! You know this is just a sugar machine right?"

"Sooo?"

"You're gonna end up with diabetes. There's nothing wrong with having it every once in a while, but you drink that shit everyday. I want my friends to have a long healthy life with no illnesses, so we can keep each other company for yeaaaaaaaars!"

"What am i supposed to drink then?" his question compelled her to snatch something out of her bag. A water bottle.

"Why not start with water? I swear it's not poisonous~" she taunted, her lighthearted gruff voice oddly ressembling Gollum's.

He accepted the offering, eyeing the object like it transported many diseases all at once, before taking a sip under Max's scrutinizing gaze.

"It's... not that bad."

"See?"

"Just a bit boring." He detailed, sending nervous glances behind her as he extended her bottle back to her. "Is he in a sour mood?" He asked out of the blue.

"Huh?"

"Your teacher, um, Jefferson? He keeps giving me dirty looks..." Poor Warren looked really uncomfortable.

"What?" she breathed, her eyebrows furrowing at this information.

She was about to turn around but Warren's hands rapidly gripped her shoulders to keep her in place.

"No no no, don't look at him, he's gonna know we're talking about him." The boy panicked anxiously.

"Who cares?" Max shrugged. "Don't tell me you're scared of him..."

"Well, no but... he never glared at me like this before." He confessed.

Max couldn't see her teacher's face but she could imagine it. She witnessed the man's displeased expression first hand, when she kept moving around too much while he was taking his sick pictures of her. She didn't know why he was acting like a dick to her friend but she could subtly try to find out...

"Warren, i'm going to hug you now, don't avert your eyes from his ok?" she instructed, getting closer to her friend.

"Uh, why?" Who seemed completely lost at the mention of hugging.

"Just do it. Or no hug for you!" She teased.
"Damn, you drive a hard bargain Max... Alright," he finally agreed, opening his arms to welcome her greedily.

The soft-featured girl took her friend in a firm embrace, lifting herself on the tip of her toes so she could easily lock her arms around his neck.

"Still staring?" She inquired.

"Yep'! He looked like he wanted to destroy me when you hugged me..."

"Just ignore him."

"Easy to say when you're not being murdered by a glare..."

Maxine chuckled.

"Must be because i have class with him now. He must not approve tardiness."

"Then why glare at me? Why not glare at you?"

"Because he's a dickhead." She answered in a singsong voice. "I'll see you later, wuss!" She threw a last blow right into the teenage boy's ego as she started to walk to her class.

"Heeey!" Warren protested from afar.

Jefferson was waiting in front of the entrance, arms crossed, staring down at his student when she arrived at his level.

"Max." The freak greeted, no doubt a little more tensely than he would have wanted.

"Mr. Jefferson." She returned, the both of them peering strangely at each other before she entered the classroom.

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lVS6kOiErRU ]

Max was rubbing her fingers against her palms, looking down at her hands with disgruntlement. She hated wearing gloves, the lack of skin contact against what she was holding gave her the impression that she was going to drop it. Plus, Jefferson's white gloves provided her a fair share of bad memories.

"Can you hold the funnel for me, Max?" Requested her teacher, awaiting to pour his stop bath back into the big plastic bottle standing on the table in front of them.

The girl swiftly assisted him, watching the liquid cascade carefully into the recipient, the safelight casting a reddish hue on everything it touched. It was nearly hypnotizing, and Maxine could have
sincerely enjoy the atmosphere if it wasn't for the older man's presence.

"Alright. It was the last chemical." He indicated. "Your class will be doing this again next week."

"The pictures are great." She noted, glancing at the hanged photographs at the other side of the room. His lips formed into a thin smile. She grabbed the now empty processing trays and tongs and brought them over to the sink to rinse them rapidly.

"When did you knew you wanted to be a photographer?" He inquired in an honeyed voice.

"Um, tough question... The first time i touched a camera i suppose. That means i was way too young to completely remember." She answered honestly, shrugging and drying her hands with a towel.

"Hmm, life vocation, huh?" he mused, his arms crossed over his chest as he watched her walk back to him.

"What about you? What got you obsessed?" She internally congratulated herself for the clever word play.

He chuckled candidly, a brow rising up to his hairline. "Obsessed? I guess the term is appropriate..." he considered before he could further disclose on the subject.

"Ain't it?"

"Well," he started again, eyeing the floor passively, "since i was a child, i always wanted to capture every beautiful and interesting thing that crossed my path... And the only way to do it correctly was through photography."

Or drugging them.

"I see. There's something i always found weird..." she queried, hands on her hips. "What drove you to come to a remote little town to share your vast wisdom with us Blackwell newbies?"

A pleased smirk took possession of his face. "Miss Caulfield, are you resorting to flattery?" he jested, leering down at her smaller form.

I think i just stroked his enormous ego.

If the man was a cat, she was certain he would have already rolled over.

"No way. I'm way too bad at kissing ass, pardon my language. It's just... with the career you've had, things could have easily lasted a few more years. But you're here instead." She pinpointed smartly.

Jefferson's head leaned a bit to the left. "You've always been quite the curious soul, Max." He commented thoughtfully. "Well, simply put, i've had my moment in the camera eye and, i think everybody should have that chance." He explained in a modulated voice.

"That's all?" She feigned surprise.

He let out a fruity laugh. "Were you hoping for a different answer?"

"I don't know. Perhaps i thought i'd get a tragic story time."

There must be a reason behind your twisted sanity.
"Well, sorry to disappoint." He bantered.

"I can't imagine what it must feel like to be put on a pedestal by people, just to fall from it just as suddenly when they end up forgetting about you. It seems to be how the artistic world works nowadays..." she hinted softly, fishing for more information about her teacher's awry psyche.

Was the gradual loss of fame and interest from the public eye what turned him into this well disguised monster?

"This photographic world is definitely not for everybody. It's more tough for some than others. Everybody has a breaking point, after all."

"That's not true." She declared, her head tilting to the side innocently.

His dark gaze latched onto her fragile neck as one of his hands briefly caressed his own in an absent manner. The guy had this habit of always letting the first two buttons of his shirt open, showing some of his collar bones and the subtle beginning of his chest.

"Oh, really?" He appealed, waiting for her to develop her point.

"Yeah. Not me. I'm unbreakable." She affirmed matter-of-factly.

"That's quite the bold statement. You may be a bit too young to be so sure of that yet." He seemed doubtful about her assertion.

"Believe me, I know. I'm more than ready for whatever life has in store for me." She stared straight into his eyes significantly, no doubt arousing his deviant instincts to prove her wrong.

" Majority of the time, people are the ones who seek to harm, not life." He corrected in a wise tone.

*You would know.*

"Well, I'd like to see them try." The corner of her lips raised subtly in defiance.

*I'd like to see you try.*

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bz-F-R1TfO0&index=51]

She pushed the door open and the first thing she spotted was the cute girl in her pajamas sitting cross-legged on her chair. A beaming smile spread on the blond's face before she jumped out of her seat to embrace Max fondly.

"Max!" she exclaimed cheerfully.

"Oh, Kate!" returned the mousy girl.
"I thought i'd never see you again. I feel so ridiculous... I'm so sorry for putting you through this. It must have been as scary and stressful as it was for me."

"Kate, you have nothing to feel sorry about. Other people do. You have no idea how happy i am to see you... You look awesome!" she stated, skimming her eyes over her friend appreciatively. "Dana told me you were doing great."

"I'm doing even better now that you're here." The religious girl admitted, holding Max's hands in hers. "I'm so grateful for everything you've done. And thanks for taking care of my bunny."

"Alice misses you, like the rest of us." Disclosed the brunette, smiling and putting a strand of blond hair back in place behind her friend's ear.

"I missed you too. I thought about you a lot while i was here, among everything... Oh, i got your hoodie over there!" Kate walked up to a blue worn out chair, picking up the red cloth to give it back to her owner.

Caulfield stuffed it back into her bag, not really caring about it's fate, before turning her attention towards the small table at the end of the hospital bed. A familiar postcard was laying there, displaying a bouquet of flowers on one side, while she slowly remembered what was written on it's opposite.

"It's from Victoria," informed Marsh, plopping back down on her chair with her notebook on her lap.

I know Kate...

Max took out her phone for a second. She always got in Victoria's face when the rich girl did a bad thing, so it was only right to do the same when she performed good deeds.

Good job on the card Victoria! Kate appreciates it.
10/10 16:45pm

I don't need your praises Max.
10/10 16:45pm

"How did your mother react?" she inquired, sitting on the seat opposite to her friend and attempting to feel cozy for her conversation with the blond.

"Better than i expected. She's actually being supportive for once. I was really surprised..." confessed the faithful teen.

"No matter what divergences there are between the two of you, the thought of losing a child is horrible for everyone." Reasoned Maxine.

"I guess. This is the first time i see her cry in years." Kate got back to scribbling things on her sheet of paper.

"Are you drawing again?"

"Yes. Inspiration came back to me out of the blue! I know my illustrations went kind of dark there for a while, but i got an idea for a new children's book about bullying. I'd like to put some of your
photographs in there too..."

"Of course. I'd be honored."

That sweet smile would be the death of her. "I saw the drawing Daniel did of you. It's really good." Appraised Kate.

"He sketched you too. It's hanged up next to his bedroom door, with prayers for you to feel better again."

"That's so nice. You should see all the letters and postcards I received. It's incredible."

"I told you people would feel stupid about their behavior after what happened."

"And you were right, as always." Recognized the blond.

Maxine's phone buzzed once more.

Thanks for telling me anyway.
10/10 16:50pm

Victoria being cute... How unusual. I bet she had a grumpy face while typing this.

"It feels so good hanging out with you again..." Sighed Caulfield with relief.

"I know! We missed our tea session this week."

"Urg, not cool. We have to correct that. We need to plan, like, a tea shop tour of Portland."

"Oh, yes! And, you could bring Warren too..."

"No boys allowed!" She strictly prohibited, her index finger high up in the air.

"You're funny, Max. And right. Again."

"How do you feel about Victoria's change of attitude?"

"Max, I know she can be a... a... not nice." The sweet teenager even had a hard time cursing apparently. Cute. "But I do believe in forgiveness and redemption."

Would it still be the case during the future trial they'd all have to go through?

"That's my Kate alright. Victoria is mean because of her own insecurities. If you find a way to sneak past them, she can be a pretty nice person."

"You seem to know her pretty good. I thought you two were rivals or something... I'm glad everyone is getting along. So... What else is happening at Blackwell? What about Nathan?"

The freckled girl squinted as she stared at her classmate, the light coming from the windows blinding her left eye unpleasantly.

"Kate, I think somebody is using him to do heinous things. You remember that soft voice you heard along Nathan's that night? Somebody else was there too. Do you have an idea of who it could be?"
She seemed to ponder on it for a moment.

"Do you... think it could be someone from his family? I don't like saying things like that but, Max, there's something evil about the Prescott. They have something to do with death."

Death?

"What makes you say that?"

"I don't know... They're driving people out of town by destroying resources, jobs and wildlife... I've heard nasty things about them. It's like they bring death and destruction everywhere they go. I have this feeling that, something worse than what we could possibly think is related to them. I don't know how to explain it..."

"It's okay, Kate. I think i know what you mean."

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=scd-uNNxgrU ]

Dry retching sounds resonated in the empty girls bathroom of Blackwell Academy. A young woman, responsible for the worrying noises, exited one of the five cubicles. She walked up to the sinks, catching a glimpse of herself in the reflecting device before her. Her left hand raised up to touch one of her cheeks tentatively, her reflection never mirroring the gesture, choosing to peer haughtily at her instead, a brow arched in contempt. Max exhaled shakily before storming out of the room with a scowl on her pretty face.

*I've been cold, I've been merciless
But the blood on my hands scares me to death
Maybe I'm waking up today*

An adolescent was concealed discreetly behind a tree, hands firmly gripping onto some kind of flat object as he eavesdropped on the discussion of two young men of the same age. He seemed nervous, cramped uncomfortably against the wooden trunk.

"Just leave it here, man!"

"Last time i left my bag alone, somebody stole my tablet."

"Urrrg, don't worry! You'll find it, i told you already. Come on dude, let's go play!"

The Prescott boy came out of his hiding place after watching the two retreating forms slowly
disappear from afar. He carefully placed the tablet and paper he had in hands in the abandoned bag, contemplating his decision one last time with his hands deep into his jacket's pockets. Big feats started with small deeds, right?

I'll be good, I'll be good
And I'll love the world, like I should
I'll be good, I'll be good
I'll be good, I'll be good

Chloe Price was standing in the middle of the junkyard, her past home away from hell, back to the bright and warm sun that she didn't seem capable of enjoying at the moment. The star's burning light reflected itself in the crystal drops falling down her face languidly.

"I... miss you like crazy." She admitted with a humorless laugh ending her sentence.

"It's pretty fucking sad that i have to lose a friend to get the other one back, isn't it?"

"I'm not going to fuck this up. I just wanted to let you know..."

"I hope you'll be proud of me, Rachel..."

"I didn't get the time to tell you last time, but... Thank you for everything..."

"You'll warn me if Max is getting worse, right?" She wondered, swallowing the big lump that was stuck in her throat.

For all of the light that I shut out
For all of the innocent things that I've doubt
For all of the bruises that I've caused and the tears
For all of the things that I've done all these years
Yeah, for all of the sparks that I've stomped out
For all of the perfect things that I doubt

The girl was hunched forward, ass firmly planted on the ground, forehead glued to her knees and hands wrapped around them. A little squirrel strode in her direction, something he couldn't yet identify stuck between his teeth. It stopped at the hipster's feet, taking hold of what he finally recognized as a nut and stretching it toward her. Max lifted her face up when she heard the creature's small squeaks, smiling cutely at its courteous offer despite her wistful gaze, before accepting the treat gratefully. Nathan snorted lightly, musing over the strange scene, laughing at the idea that Caulfield could easily pass as a modern version of Snow White because of her tendency to meddle with the critters. However, he found the sight of a familiar imposing black crow—that nasty thing that crashed into his head in his weird dream the previous day—observing her from atop a street light far less amusing.
Courtney, Taylor and Dana had helped Max prepare for the party while Chloe watched her getting tortured with all sorts of makeup and girly contraptions. She didn't lift a finger while the three girls had turned her into their very own life-size doll. Courtney had literally pushed her into the black little dress she had worn at Chloe's funerals, Taylor painting her eyelids with colors while saying that pink was perfect for blue eyes, and Dana had smeared her lips with one of her red lipsticks. Okay, the result was pretty great, but still. Did no one care about her freedom of speech? Her so-called best friend had a lot of fun mocking her at least. The two of them were walking outside, on their way to the party. A glance at the sky confirmed that no twin moons would show up that night. She glimpsed at Chloe who was busy doing the same until now, the rebel winking at her in victory. The path to the pool building entrance was smeared with red cups, toilet paper and a whole other bunch of crap that smashed students had discarded carelessly.

A frustrated looking Stella greeted them when they stepped inside.

"Hey Max, welcome to the end of the world! Do you want me to check anything in?"

Maxine gestured to her friend to go on without her. "Uh, no thanks Stella. You didn't see anything weird going on, right?"

"Max, it's a Vortex Club party. It's full of weird people."

"Yeah, i guess. What are you doing here?"

"Mr. Jefferson offered me the job. He knows i don't have any money so... Anything that can help, i take!"

"Why would an art teacher attend a Vortex Club party? Isn't it weird?"

"It's not like it's the first time. You really are new to Blackwell, Max. Those parties need a chaperone, and Mr. Jefferson plays the part whenever he can. Students ask for him everytime since he's not a party pooper like some other teachers."

"I see."

"Hey, are you okay? I didn't see you after this morning..."

"Yeah, i'm alright. Don't worry Stella, and don't think too much about what happened today, okay? I have to go. Catch you later."

"Have a good time! You sure deserve it."

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c2EJMd7ZN7w&t=0m11s ]
Caulfield finally entered, the music was blasting madly, nearly hurting her sensible ears. She was going to spend the night yelling over all that noise if she wanted to have a conversation with her classmates. Why was everything so loud? Weren't young people supposed to have good hearing? Expensive projectors were casting massive white vortex symbols all over the walls. The floor was already an horrible mess. Students in swimsuits were dancing in the pool, which must be hard to do with half of their bodies emerged in water. Max clearly felt like she didn't belong here.

_I don't think i could ever thrive in this kind of environment..._

Chloe was sending curious looks at everything that moved, reminding her of a puppy discovering his new home for the first time. At least, _that_ made her want to smile. Unlike that lame fucking party.

"Max, this bar has no alcohol." Notified her associate, gesturing to said bar.

"No, i think it's reserved for Vortex Club members only."

"That makes less perimeter to cover!" She concluded cheerfully.

"Exactly."

"Great, because you owe me a dance Caulfield." She declared, grabbing the hipster's hand and dragging her to the dance floor.

"Chloe, you know i can't dance for shit." She protested.

"Of course you can hippie! I saw you bust a move multiple times when we were kids."

"But what if something happens while we're distracted?" Worried the young woman.

"Nothing will. It won't take long! Come on, Max! One dance! Just one. Then you can go back to chaperoning everybody." Convinced her companion with a pleading look.

_Erg... Not the puppy eyes..._

"How's it going Stella?"

"Good, Mr. Jefferson."

"Not too boring?"

"A bit to be honest, but i've got worse jobs than this one..."

"You're welcomed to take a break, if you want. Have you seen Max by any chance?"
"Uh, yeah. She came with a friend. A girl with blue hair, i never saw her at Blackwell before."

"Thank you, Stella. Be seeing you."

A few minutes later, the spectacled girl decided to take a well deserved break. It seemed like everybody was already inside anyway. She crossed the curtain separating her from the rest of her comrades. Caulfield and her punk friend were jumping up and down, hair flying around with their aggressive movements. They contrasted drastically with the girls dancing next to them, trying to look sexy and shaking their bits—especially their asses—around for everyone to see. Seriously, what was the problem with teenage girls and twerking these days? Stella always thought it looked stupid. She bet Max did too. The two girls seemed in their own little bubble despite the massive crowd encircling them. It also looked like they were part of the rare ones who weren't completely smashed. Way to show you could have fun without stuffing yourself with alcohol. She never saw the blue haired girl around campus before but Max and her sure seemed to like each other quite a lot. They shared knowing glances every once in a while and their hands would brush while high in the air. Only childhood friends or family members looked at each other like that. Anyway, it was nice to see her freckled classmate have a good time for once, especially after what she'd been through this week.

But Stella realized she wasn't the only one observing Caulfield. Mr. Jefferson, who finally appeared to have find Max, had his whole attention focused on the girl. He wasn't making any move towards her though. Maybe he didn't want to disturb them and prefered to wait patiently for them to be finished. From the other side of the room, a certain Prescott, slouched shamelessly in one of the many sofas, was staring intently at the poor oblivious ingenue. The boy had his camera secured between his hands, a deep concerned frown clouding his features. As the music switched to something a little less hardcore, Max whispered something to her friend and eclipsed herself away from the dancing floor. Stella's eyes went back to her teacher who was apparently still content to look from afar.

For now, Stella was too preoccupied with avoiding the loaded students projecting vomit everywhere. Life...

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j-J6CGfCtjc]

Max had talked with more people during this little soiree than during the entire month she had spend in this school. According to Luke, Sean Prescott could possibly make an appearance at the Bigfoots
game tomorrow. The girl could recognize a golden opportunity when she saw one. Perhaps she'd get the chance to use her abilities on the guy. She spotted Nathan all of a sudden, standing by himself in a dark corner. He didn't look as drunk as she expected to found him. The simple white button-down shirt and blue jeans he was wearing gave him a more serene aura than his usual red jacket. She caught Victoria staring at them from afar as Max approached the rich boy. The blond had been pretty pleasant tonight, and she even assisted the freckled girl in helping a wasted schoolgirl who was left unconscious on a sofa. They had a hard time waking her up, but they succeeded. Her current target turned around when he heard her soft footsteps coming toward him.

"Caulfield! Never thought i'd see you at one of our parties." He exclaimed, throwing his empty red cup in a trashcan nearby.

"Me neither." She admitted sarcastically, arching a delicate brow.

"Yeah, when are you ever any fun?" He rolled his eyes, stretching the collar of his shirt with his index finger due to the oppressive heat of the room.

"We have business to discuss." She pointed out, crossing her arms in a bossy manner. "I let you off the hook earlier, but don't think it's always going to happen."

"Holy shit, we're at a party!" He complained, rising his arms in the air in exasperation. "I don't want to talk about this now!"

"When then? Saturday?!" She ranted.

"You are not ruining my weekend, Caulfield." He forbade, like he was talking to a child.

"Then when are we supposed to talk about it?!" Max growled lowly.

"I don't know! Next week."

"Next week? What the—! Nathan, you know how serious this is! How can you be so indifferent?"

"I'm not! I just want to fucking enjoy myself for once, for fuck's sake!"

"But it's always like that when i see you!" She reproached.

"It's your own fucking fault! Okay? You take my mind off things. So stop yelling at me!"

"Oh..." she blurted, taken aback. "I'm sorry..."

He kept frowning at her, intent on letting her know that she ruined a perfect opportunity for him to relax, which drove her to sigh heavily.

"Nathan, listen, i'm not doing this to annoy you. The consequences could be bad for you, and i'm just trying to avoid that. I know i'm a nosy bitch and i can come on a bit too strongly sometimes, but it really is for the better. I have literally no other choice. You would never listen to me otherwise."

"..."

Yeah, you know i'm right Prescott.

"I don't want you to go to prison." She sincerely told him, as if she hadn't said it enough in the past already.

"There's one thing that makes no sense, Max. Why do you care?"
"Because! I don't know! Do i have to have a particular reason? Maybe i think it's a waste that someone like you has to be put away for his doings. Maybe i don't see you as just a rich prick who likes to bully people. And guess what? You take my mind off things too. I feel like you understand. I don't have to put up a front with you like with everyone else. Yes, you've done lousy things, things that i hate, and no, you're not perfect, nor a saint. But you're capable of remorse and you always feel bad for your actions. It's called being human. And when you're not busy being a dick to people, do you know what i see? A funny, simple guy who's actually nice to hang out with. So how could i possibly hate you, Nathan?"

The teenager looked torned between shock and sadness, trying hard to blink away what she suspected to be tears. Did she manage to break his defenses, at last? Would he be able to drop his guard more often around her?

"I know way too much for that." She added.

She felt a dire urge to hug him, but was way too anxious of his reaction to actually do it. What if he brutally pushed her away? Since when did she care about trivial things like rejection? It's part of life, it's meant to happen. She could understand the hurt if it happened with Chloe, her best friend, but with Nathan... Why was the idea of him turning her down suddenly so painful? Well, she must have really wanted that hug anyway, because next thing she knew, she was rising on the tip of her toes and throwing her arms around his back. She felt him stiffen as her head snuggled against the crook of his neck. After what seemed like an eternity, but was in reality a matter of seconds, the boy slid his arms around her to pull her closer. Relief submerged Max in a crushing wave and an intense feeling of security threatened to overwhelm her. Cold fingers tingled her delicate nape and the sensation was so soothing she couldn't help but melt in his embrace. They stayed like this for a few more minutes, forgetting about the busy world around them.

"We're still not friends." He felt the need to clear up, which made the girl break into a smile. The guy could be cute when he wanted. "By the way..."

He untangled himself from their embrace, his face very close to hers nonetheless, nose brushing furtively against her hair.

"Nice outfit." His hot breath whispered in her ear before he walked away, vanishing into the crowd of dancing students.

Max felt a scorching sensation traveling from her bust to her cheeks, the girl trying to ignore the feeling and convince herself that it hadn't been caused by Nathan, just the heat of the room. Yeah, right. She needed to get back to Chloe. Well, once her face was back to it's normal shade of color.

It was time to go to bed. Oh joy! Her favorite moment of the day. She was so damn exhausted. Her legs and back were killing her. Max was fighting with her pajama shirt when her phone started to go off. She groaned—she seemed to do that a lot today—and took a look at the electronic device after angrily tossing her annoying shirt to the ground.
Wat are U waiting 4? Get ur ass to my room!
10/10 00:22am

I will when you learn how to spell words properly. My eyes are burning.
10/10 00:23am

That's the purpose of texting bitch. Make things shorter. And put your PJ's on because i'm not lending you mine.
10/10 00:24am

So... Nathan, or the nightmares? The boy, or insomnia? Which one did she prefer? ...Nathan won hands down.

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=em0MknB6wFo ]

"You totally cheated!" Accused the soft-featured girl, dropping her gamepad in her lap in outrage.

"That's what sore losers say." Retorted the arrogant boy.

"Fuck no! If i can beat Warren at this, i can beat you too!"

"Hey! What are you implying? That that nerd's better than me?" He looked exceedingly insulted by the idea.

"Of course he is. It's Warren."

"You did not just say that." He seethed.

"I think i did." She said while standing up, not afraid of the repercussions one bit. "You spent the entire game covering my eyes, dickhead." She yawned, stretching her arms in the air.

Approaching the bed, her attention was drawn to the ajar wall. She recognized her younger face and the sweater of her favorite hockey team. Nathan was too busy turning off his expensive material to realize he had forget to dissimulate a certain photograph...

"Did you take a picture of one of my selfies?" Maxine asked, confused.
He stomped over to where she was standing, pulling the stupid thing away from the nosy girl before hurling it in his nightstand's drawer.

"Don't flatter yourself Caulfield." He grumbled, flustered.

"Freak," she muttered as they both installed themselves on his bed.

He snorted, his brows furrowing nonetheless at the insult. "Keep talking, bitch. I saw your "camera porn" site when i slept in your room," he mocked openly. "Fuckin' weirdo, man." He was shaking his head in consternation.

"Oh yes? Let's ask Crystal about weirdos!" She retorted wittily while grabbing the porn magazine hidden under his bed. "Or should i say Oregon's best boobs?"

He stopped laughing abruptly, paling comically as his eyes zeroed in on the object she was holding.

"Hey, leave that alone!" he ordered while making a move to snatch it away.

His attempt failed as she held it higher above her head. "You don't want me to touch it because the pages probably stick together," Max suggested as she laughed out loud.

"You little shit!"

The two adolescents wrestled and in barely a few seconds, Max somehow ended up on her back with the boy on top of her.

Nathan couldn't remember ever seeing her laugh or smile so genuinely. Yeah, she was a smartass and had this little satisfied smile when she threw a good gibe at you, but that was the most of it. In fact, Caulfield never really looked happy, especially at school. He didn't personally knew her prior to last Monday, but he recalled sending her glances from time to time whenever Victoria mentioned the hipster while she was in sight, before that crazy week began. He never got a close look at her face at that time, but her frail silhouette and the way she moved told him everything he needed to know. That girl didn't belong at Blackwell. She was far too innocent and gentle to fit in with the fucking sharks that roamed their campus. Yet that day she burst into the bathroom and locked them inside that stall, he saw something else. Something hidden. A kind of spiritual strength that drove her to get shit done when it was necessary, whatever the consequences may be for herself. Selflessness. She knew he had a gun and yet, she took the risk of getting involved to protect her punk dyke friend. Nathan didn't know if he would have been capable of the same with Victoria if she ever found herself in a dangerous situation. And that made him feel like shit. But he shouldn't be thinking about depressing things like this at the moment. He should just enjoy Caulfield's beaming smile, since it was such a rare occurence. Plus, it looked pretty good on her. Not that he'll ever admit it out loud. Her wide fucking blue orbs were sucking him in...

Max felt her grin slowly dissipate after some time. Nathan was ogling her but didn't seem conscious of that fact. Well, she couldn't really say anything since she was pretty much doing the same. The dark red lighting overlooking his bedroom was doing a fantastic job at highlighting his eyes. Or his features in general. His face wasn't exhibiting rage or anger for once, which suited him a lot better. They were nearly a breath away from each other and it wasn't in a threatening way for a change, staring at each other in complete silence in their awkward position. She swallowed audibly and felt a warm blush creep up to her cheeks. The second his gaze descended to her lips, his pupils dilated significantly. The girl may be innocent but she wasn't dumb. This was a natural reaction to desire. She heard the hand next to her head shifting discreetly until a thumb brushed her earlobe in a sensuous graze. A dizzy feeling submerged her at the distracting caress. Her own eyes stuck themselves onto his mouth, mouth that suddenly looked inviting for some mysterious reason. It
parted in perfect synchronicity with hers, making her realize that she had been holding her breath, heart hammering against her ribcage.

*What are you doing Max? This is Nathan Prescott!*

This wasn't part of the plan. Yes, she was supposed to help him emancipate himself from Jefferson's sharp claws and get the help he needed, and if she ended up befriending him on the way, it didn't particularly bother her. She didn't hate him after all... But this was a whole other matter. When did she started not minding the idea of kissing Nathan Prescott?

"I... I'm gonna turn on the whale sounds." She informed, getting up from the bed to switch his mp3 player on, her small body brushing against his in the process.

He couldn't believe it. The girl had parted her lips, a part of her front teeth showing themselves, his mind turning the vision into something more erotic than it should have been, and it had been the last straw for the poor guy. He had been one breath away from... from... making out with Max fucking Caulfield! He was partly relieved she had the common sense of snapping out of it and breaking the atmosphere, but another part of him was dammably frustrated to no end. Why did she escape his clutches anyway? He should have been the one to do it! So what if the retarded virgin was pretty? That didn't mean he had to want to mix saliva with her! He needed to get a grip, god dammit! He knew what the problem was, it was her stupid big doe eyes! Those were a giant dirty trap. If he just avoided staring into them, he would be fine, and this wouldn't happen again.

When Max spinned back around, the boy was already wrapped up in his covers, back facing her. She approached hastily, slipping under the sheets next to him. Oh, how right she had been in assuming his bed was more comfortable than hers. Even if it wasn't that large, there was enough space for them to sleep without annoyingly bumping against each other during the night. A paradise made of warm sheets, cozy pillows and a lingering boyish fragrance.

"Nathan?" She tried, eyes fixated on his nape, ready to catch on any physical reaction.

No response. He couldn't have fall asleep so fast. She had no doubt he was brooding.

"Nathan? Are you sulking?" She reiterated, delicately poking the young man in the ribs.

She felt muscles twitch at the contact of her probing finger.

*Is he ticklish?*

"Fuck's sake! Just go to sleep Max!" Growled the Prescott.

"...Okay..." she agreed, lips tightened in a coy smile. "Good night, Nathan... Don't sulk."

"*What the hell am i doing?*" was the last thought they shared.

Poor Nathan had a hard time falling asleep that night. Not because of the expected insomnia, or nightmares but... Let's just say, he was just a bit too excited.
Oh boy, Nathan...

To anyone who wants to read what's in Nathan's note to the cat pics guy, it's basically the one you find in Episode 5, here's a link in case you don't remember:

http://i.imgur.com/DHlmPdJ.png
This took more time to upload than it should have. Sorry guys! This is the longest chapter i have written at the moment so i hope it makes up for it. Lots of shit going down in this one.

I didn't have the courage to proofread everything so, if you find any errors or feel like some parts are possibly missing, don't hesitate to point it out.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2eDt5QJI7sU ]

Branches and leaves were swaying with the gentle night wind, twinkling stars coating the dark sky and guiding the lost souls inside those woods, moon casting a dim light across the forest. A sniffling white and grayish wolf was prowling the grounds, seemingly searching for something, twigs cracking under its paws. It halted near a dangerously serrated device, emitting a boisterous huff as some sort of specific signal. Rustling sounds emerged from the bushes nearby, a slender silhouette approaching the animal stealthily, skillful feet barely making any noise against the leaf-covered ground. It was a young woman clad in a khaki coat, a long dark braid falling onto her right shoulder, covering the strap holding the rifle on her back in place. She crouched down, brought out the flashlight stuck into her pants waistband before turning it on, and studied the trap for a second. Nothing had been caught in it, and it was way too clean to have been here a long time. The contraption had been freshly installed.

"Good job, Kweeuu." The girl stroked the beast's head rewardingly.

Her index and middle fingers went into her mouth to produce a faint whistling sound which lured another individual out of its natural hideout. It was a man this time, who looked her age and had a shotgun in his grasp.

"I told you they were up to no good." He whispered to his female companion, eyeing the hazardous object of their interest.

The wolf, who seemed to be the boy's pet, licked his master's hand gently, earning himself a brief caress before the animal decided to go back on the strangers tracks with the help of his expert nose.

"They shouldn't be too far. I heard voices a minute ago. We can flank them easily." She pointed out, just as softly.

"Take the right, i'll go left." He instructed. "Kweeuu will distract them in the mean time."
The two youngsters nodded at each other, quietly riding off in opposite directions, the girl extinguishing her source of light to avoid detection. As they gradually got closer to their objective, three different gruff voices resonated throughout the cool autumn air.

"Those things are fucking clever. They're avoiding the traps like they already know they're here." A tall redhead in his forties remarked, scratching his beard.

"This place is fuckin' cursed, i tell you. How can squirrels attack a guy out of nowhere?" quizzed another with dark blond hair and disturbingly light eyes that could look straight into your soul.

"They don't like us being here. This is a ruse to stop the construction." Speculated the third one, who kept sending anxious glances at the sky and the environs, his forehead wrinkling under all that pressure.

"You're high as fuck man. It's just vermin, they don't have the brains to plan shit like that." Corrected the second one.

"How do you explain it then? Coyotes or wolves, i can understand, even bears. But birds and squirrels turning savage? Even deers? This is batshit crazy." Argued the agitated brown-haired man.

"Maybe they got rabies." His interlocutor offered, rubbing his hands against his checkered green shirt to get the dirt off it.

"Maybe you should get checked for rabies, dumbass." Rasped the redhead, who had stayed quiet until now, engrossed in his work, and apparently leader of the modest group.

The men snickered greasy laughs, the tallest partially sprinkling suspicious little red seeds on the dirt.

"We're not going to catch anythin' ’round here. Why not extend our reach?" Questionned the blond, presumably the most curious soul of the team.

"The boss said to keep to the less frequented areas. We can't have people getting harmed by the traps, or some stupid kid eating rat poison because he thought it was just pretty berries." Was their supervisor's explanation.

Something stirred amid the shrubs, drawing their attention to the emerging animal. It glanced up at the three men confidently, sitting on his hinds, his long tongue hanging from his panting mouth.

"Oh, look what we got here! How convenient..." commented the blond, retrieving a large blade from his jacket.

He began to painstakingly advance toward the wolf, careful not to trigger the beast. There might be strength in numbers, but that thing had a powerful jaw and deadly sharp fangs.

"I wouldn't do that if i were you." Warned a masculine voice that did not belong to any of them.

They turned to their right to come face to face with a young and armed native american. A rustling noise to their left forced them to recheck the perimeter only to discover an equally equipped girl aiming right at them. The merry band was unmistakably surrounded.

"Check this out boys! Are we playing cowboys and indians? Sorry kids but, i left my colt at home." Mocked the redhead.

"I know you." Unveiled the dark-haired hillbilly with a nod in the boy's direction. "You're the ranger's boy. Came to do daddy's job?"
"You're trespassing on preserved territory." He mentioned matter-of-factly.

"And illegally slaughtering wildlife." Added the young woman.

"Our boss bought this lot, we have every right to be here."

"No, you've long overstepped the area your fucking despot has paid for." Snarled the native lad.

"I'm sure we can find a compromise ladies and gentlemen." Assured the hicks leader.

"The only thing you're going to find is your way out of this forest." Retorted the badass maiden.

"Keep your opinion to yourself redskin bitch!" Blew up the blond.

"Want to repeat that?" Seethed the younger man, thrusting his shotgun closer to the offensive man's face, his wolf girding itself, tail stiff and fangs apparent.

"Hania! Don't." Cautioned the girl, stalking over to her friend at a deliberately slow pace to place her feminine hand on the barrel, eyes still set on their foes.

The three guys peered at each other warily, finally stepping back, boots brushing the orange leaves on the ground.

"Relax kid, we're leaving." Yielded the redhead, hands held up next to his throat as a sign of surrender. "Now you can make a fire and braid each other's hair." He obviously couldn't resist the temptation of one final gibe as the intruders departed, laughing like the brainless idiots they were.

The two young adults shared astute looks before leaving in their turn, the beast following suit and trotting aside the juvenile beauty's feet.

"Fucking racist pigs!" Spat the only remaining man.

"I didn't think they were that foul." She said with a cringing expression.

"I wish we could've put them down like the rabid mutts they are."

"You have to let go of your rage." She clapsed his arm, putting their little forest stroll to a halt. "I know they're despicable but this isn't solving anything."

"You sound like Chu'mana. The hag's rubbin' off on you." He observed casually, glancing down at his pet.

"Hey! Don't talk about my grand-mother like that." She chided, slapping his arm with more strength than she appeared to possess.

"Easy, woman." He attempted to pacify his companion, stroking his throbbing limb. "I'm sorry, alright?" He relented at last under her intense glaring. "I just don't buy all the bullshit she keeps spewing about the town's fate." He pouted.

The girl held his face between her hands, forcing his gaze to penetrate hers. "Hania, we're both twenty-one. In all those years, my grandma has predicted many things, and she never has been wrong. Not once. We can trust her."

Hania's eyes fixed themselves on a tree in proximity to them, still looking dubious about his friend's claims, but the redness gradually swarming up his cheeks betrayed his charming discomfort under the woman's gaze. The latter smiled knowingly at the sight. She knew him like the back of her hand.
Something warm and soft is snuggling against him. In fact, it's clinging so firmly onto his body that it's quickly becoming suffocating. Even then, he can't help finding the feeling nice for some weird reason. His steely eyes blink open before considerably widening at the view that greets him. Max Caulfield is curled around him like gift wrapping on a present, and as the sight of the bit of bare cleavage would suggest, is altogether naked under his sheets. That made no sense, because he could clearly remember her falling asleep with her pajamas on. Had she undress during the night?

*What the hell??*

"Get off me Caulfield!" He snarls, trying to get away from the crazy broad just to grasp that she wasn't even sleeping when she instantly responded to his complaint.

"But i'm cooold." She whines vulnerably.

"Then put some fucking clothes on!" He cleverly advises.

"But you're warm." She pouts childishly.

"Why are you even naked, holy shit?!"

Her cerulean orbs open to stare into his own, her hand crawling shamelessly onto his chest to fondle his black shirt.

"I saw the way you looked at me last night." Her knee is sneaking between his legs to slyly rub against his crotch. "There's no need to pretend, really."

*Fuck!*

"Get—" he gasps at the sensation. The sweet, sweet sensation. *Get off me.* He groans, nearly pleading, his jaw tightly clenched.

Her smaller body fits so well against him, it's literally like her limbs were made to entangle with his. He swears he can feel her soft naked breasts against his arm, which he's using has some sort of barrier against his clothed chest like an alarmed virgin trying to protect her sacred chastity. And that's fucking ridiculous. He's a guy! He should be happy to have a pair of boobs so close to his person, but no! It's *Max* and he can't enjoy it for that fucking reason! No, scratch that, he *does* enjoy it, but he can't let himself enjoy it. That wouldn't be right. How did she even manage to reverse roles like that? *She* is supposed to be the shy virgin. Not him! One thing was certain, if she didn't stop all of that pleasurable friction between them right now, he would go insane.

"Don't you want to help me get warmer?" She asks, hot breath tickling his left ear, making him gulp. His own labored pants reach his ears at the suggestive invitation, until the minx decides that she also
wants a piece of his flesh and starts nipping at the masculine column of his neck. He needs to breathe, or else he's probably going to die of asphyxiation. And the heat spreading across his entire body is not helping.

*Stay strong, Nathan. You can do this. It's just hormones. You've fought with them since you were twelve, and you've always won. And that thing in your bed is just an insignificant debauched littlehipster.*

Gathering all of his forces, he successfully pushes the girl away, the motion forcing him to sit up himself, and the decor whirls away swiftly. His eyes open, for real this time, and he realizes he had been dreaming all this time. His torture had been authentic, but the cause of it was just sad fantasizing. The desire to bash his head into a wall viciously seizes him at this precise moment. Caulfield, that ever so oblivious bitch, is sleeping soundly next to him, completely unaware of the world surrounding her. She looks pretty much at peace actually, which is totally unfair and outraging. There's not even any contact between the two of them since the teenage girl is dangerously close to the bed's edge, apparently ready to fall. That drives him to wonder how his twisted brain even came up with this perverted idea of her suddenly coming onto him so strongly. Nathan wants to grab her frail shoulders and shake her violently to disturb her uneventful rest, just like she disturbed his by sneaking into his freaking mind to catch him off guard.

*Fucking shit! Ugh—*

The boy immediately looks down when he recognizes a familiar pressure straining against his pants. He couldn't believe it. He had a fucking boner. How embarrassing. He had to shower before the bitch woke up and noticed his hard-on. Maybe she was some kind of witch and put a spell on him. That's it, the hipster had bewitched him to get into his pants! What a perverted little freak!

*Ugh, get real Nate.*

So yeah, maybe this wasn't her fault and it was easier to blame it all on her. But still! The boy sighed and proceeded to the showers after grabbing some clean clothes, restraining himself from inventing more pathetic excuses for his new very internal and hormonal drama.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vg2IuNk28sI]

She dreams of vast luxuriant plains of grass, lush forests where the trees are abundant, animated rivers where the fish thrives and does not die by the poisonous hand of man. She dreams of children laughers and soft whispers of wisdom that she cannot understand for the language is unknown to her. They come from disembodied voices of people that do not appear to her. Yet she can feel their presence, a tingling sensation in her fingers telling her that she's always so close to touch those invisible beings. She recognizes Arcadia Bay, who looks so different yet still the same. The air filling her lungs is so rich, so pure, that she realizes breathing is supposed to be even more easier than what
she first thought, or ever experienced. She's standing on a cliff giving view to the clear blue sea and arising sun, her instincts driving her to believe that this is where the lighthouse is supposed to be. But it's not there. Because *it's not time thus far*, something murmurs softly in her ear. Sadly, she soon regains consciousness, her mind sharply tearing itself from the marvelous lands she's wandering, eyelids fluttering open. Her own face is hovering above her own, staring down at her with a wolfish grin and excited expression.

"Hellooooo," her annoying other self croons happily, utterly destroying her craving for a nice and peaceful, silent awakening.

She groans, her forearm slapping against her eyes to shield her from the obnoxious view. She manages to steal a peek on her right however, to discover that Nathan is already gone. The desire to blame him crosses her mind a second, though she knows the accusation is unfair, but she suspects that his presence could have kept the evil Max away. But he's not there, and *she* is.

"Did you sleep well? You're not drenched in sweat and breathing like an ox, for once... Don't tell me you're trying to avoid me by running into Prescott's arms..." she suggests in an accusing tone.

Max's arm fall back at her side and she glances at the perfect copy of herself who seems pretty comfortable, laying on her side next to her, her elbow sinking into a pillow and her hand supporting her head. They look at each other for a moment, Caulfield sighing heavily before turning her blue gaze back to the ceiling, who's way more interesting than this antipathetic bitch anyway.

"You're wasting your time. Your bullshit doesn't affect me anymore." She mumbles lazily, looking bored of her double's malice.

"But it used to though... Oh yes, you used to pay so much attention to me, Max. I really miss those times. Do you remember the fun we had? Well, *I had.*" She corrects with a snide laugh that suits her character oh so well. "You spending your days on the floor, staring up at the ceiling like a broken little thing... Incapable of eating, sleeping, talking. And those little fits of rage you had against me sometimes... Hmmm, the best of all." She recalls dreamily. "Like when you broke your mirror because of me. Did you really think you could hurt me? How silly~! Then again, you've never been very bright... Victoria's face was priceless when she saw your bloody fists. I thought I had finally done it and the girls were going to ask for you to be put away in a mental institution, for a moment. *But,*" she sighs in a depressed manner, "you evaded that too." 

"Since I'm not that entertaining anymore, why don't you go find someone else to bother?" The real Maxine offers.

"Aww, Max... I'm not giving up so easily. Nice try though. You can play tough all you want, I'm gonna stick around for a looooong time." She mutters unpleasantly into her sensitive ear.

The freckled girl rises up, rubbing her eyes and focusing on getting rid of her gogginess. "Where's Nathan?" she asks her unwanted company.

"How would I know?" She chuckles. "I'm just a projection of your twisted subconscious."

Max gets up, sweeping a look across the room, her eyes stopping on the bondage art piece hanging on the boy's wall. Was this just an artistic kink or something that the guy truly enjoyed in the intimacy of his bedroom whenever he brought girls here? Where did he even get it from? She remembers the vision the Tobanga gave her days ago... Nathan's art tastes could have a place in this fucking creepy room she "visited". Were those fantasies passed on in his family? She studies her surroundings further, especially the printed monochrome photographs she finds discarded here and there. She's surprised to find a feeling of jealousy pang at her chest when she realizes how passionate
he is about photography. She used to be the same. She knows it's still here deep down, but there's this dark veil enshrouding it and spoiling it. She wants things to go back to the way they were. She wants to take pictures and enjoy it once more, but she knows it won't come back by itself. She had to make some efforts. Perhaps she should force herself a bit more. Maxine decided that she would bring her camera along with her today, no matter what sad excuses she would probably try to find later to not do it. The rare silence of her doppelganger drives her to look back at the place she was last seen. No one.

Having a busy mind seems to make her vanish...

Feet avoiding the discarded clothes carelessly left on the floor, she spots the mystical polaroid of her and Rachel's spirit peeking through between a shirt and pair of jeans, bending over to salvage it and wedge it into her shorts elastic waistband.

Rachel looks so sad in this...

Max anticipated the kind of mood Nathan would be in next time they'd cross paths. After their almost kiss last night, she had no idea how to deal with the boy. Did he felt rejected when she extracted herself from him or was he actually relieved that nothing concrete happened? Plus, she had to talk to him about Jefferson. She wouldn’t let him avoid the subject this time. As she continued to muse over her upcoming discussion with the Prescott, familiar ethereal voices started to rise around her, assaulting her ears little by little. It was impossible to describe how alluring and dreadful those murmurs were at the same time. They could presumably make her do anything they wanted. But she needed to embrace it, not fight it, or she would never have any answer to her questions. Her settings changed at once, placing her into a foreign fancy environment. Two red sofas faced each other in the center, standing on a big patterned rug covering half of the floor, a crystal chandelier looming over the room, projecting eerie shadows on the walls. What caught her attention the most was this gigantic portrait hanging above the sizzling fireplace, displaying a posing wealthy man she had already seen in an old picture inside the infamous Prescott farmhouse. A thin golden plaque below it titled the artwork "Harry Aaron Prescott" in small sophisticated letters.

This is definitely Nathan's house...

She made her way back to the large coffee table standing between the two couches. A piece of paper was left on the mahogany furniture along with a basket made of wicker, containing an expensive bottle of champagne and a small golden sculpture that Max picked up for further analyze. 

Looks like a mini estate.

The note was next on her list.

"For Sean, to our beneficial accord and future partnership. Let's give this town a new birth together, and may our affairs be favorable." She read inside her head.

Who is this from?

Sean's secret project for Arcadia was turning exceedingly unclear and troubling the more she learned about it. Giving the room one last check and deciding that nothing interesting was left to peruse, she stepped out through one of the two present doors, ending up in a barely lit corridor. Seriously, what was it with rich people and ugly old paintings? All the windows alongside the hallway were covered by thick red drapes, keeping her from peeking outside to study the house's vicinity. Well, she could have easily move them aside but, she wanted to explore the place further first. Halting abruptly, she recognized a familiar polished wooden door, the same that led her into this creepy room full of dark paintings and photographs of bound women. Just as her hand reached for the handle, a children's
voice emerged from behind her.

"You can't go in there." It said, startling her greatly and coercing the young woman to shift around to see who was there. A little girl in a white floral dress that she was certain to have seen somewhere in the past was looking up at her, arms resting at her sides listlessly. "It's daddy's private room." She added with a naive tilt of her head, like that information would suffice to explain everything.

"Are... are you Nathan's sister?" Maxine questionned in a gentle tone, not wanting to scare the child away. She remembered now, it was one of the two kids she had previously seen in her dreams. The young boy in a sailor outfit had no doubt been Nathan, as the picture in his room proved, and the resemblance couldn't be pure coincidence, in addition to the tragic circumstances.

The little human didn't respond, staring at her casually with an intensity that unsettled Caulfield. She then walked away, enticing the freckled teen to follow in her steps. They soon arrived in a spacious living room filled with sofas, armchairs, table lamps pulled atop white sophisticated doilies adorning chests of drawers and a single extravagant television. Her attention was drawn to the framed photographs representing the Prescott family in its entirety, especially the mother's face, since it's the only one she's never seen until now. Blond hair tied in an intricate hairstyle, spirited emerald eyes, a thin dainty silhouette clad in a strict but classy black and white suit. She looked the part of the perfect business woman.

"Mommy cries when nobody can see." Disclosed the small girl still standing next to her impassively. "She's really busy, our mom. Just like daddy. She always looks at the family pictures when she's alone."

Nathan's mother is unhappy? Maybe nostalgic...

Max noticed the child had disappeared from her side when she got out of her reflection, and decided to proceed alone to continue searching for clues. The creaking noises produced by the shining parquet she was treading on made her uneasy. She hated this place. Everything in this house emanated sinister vibes. How could Nathan handle living here? Something turned on without any warning, emitting a continuous whirring sound.

"Max Caulfield. Where do you think you're going?"

The concerned party turned around, the gruesome feeling in her chest growing exponentially. The TV had magically switched on by itself. And now, it seemed to want to have a conversation with her, even though it wasn't displaying anything apart from the greyish ridges traveling up the screen.

This is a whole other level of crazy...

The novice photographer stalked over the apparatus, her index finger moving forward to press the power button. "Don't touch that dial, Max." It warned suddenly. She leaned backward in response, irrational fear taking a hold of her as she gawk at the screen, her knees touching the floor in an attempt to level herself with the intriguing machine. The voice coming out of it sounded simultaneously masculine and demonic. Otherworldly.

"It's all about power." It started once more. "You can't trust anyone." The time traveler could only listen, hypnotized. "Have you find the list, yet?" It demanded. "You should keep nosing around until you do..."
Church bells were chiming from far away, two adolescents sitting on one of the benches standing in front of their dorms. They had their back to the building, choosing to face the trees, grass and bushes spreading further from Blackwell instead and scoping the wildlife slowly waking up with them. The boy had his phone glued to his ear and kept humming in agreement with whatever was told to him over the line, looking thoroughly bored, while his female companion was fiddling with the expensive golden bracelet around her wrist, the foot at the end of one of her crossed legs dangling impatiently by itself.

"Who was it?" she inquired as he finally hung up.

"My dad. He's coming to the game, he wants me to be here."

"You're going?" Her eyebrow shot up, the girl seemingly doubtful.

"I don't want to. I don't care about those stupid ass jocks playing with their ball. And looking at Wells licking my father's boots has lost its appeal a long time ago." He grumbled, fetching a small white pack from his jacket.

"Wanna hide in my room? It's becoming a safe haven for rich kids with shitty parents." She smiled wittily, bumping her elbow into his arm and inspecting him lightening the tip of his cigarette.

"You would know." Smoke escaped his mouth as he chuckled. "Did you tell your mom about the contest?"

"Nop'. I tried, but i don't think she was listening, she's too busy with their next exhibition. I really hope i'll win, so i can rub it in their face."

_I hope you won't._

She watched the barely perceivable tremors his hands often had to deal with. "Are you taking your pills, Nate?"

"Not this again..." he sighed tiredly.

"You know this is—"

"For my own good, yes, i know." The boy huffed. "I do it when i think about it."

"I bet it's not that often." She deduced in a chiding tone.

Nathan didn't respond. He extended his cigarette to the blond who gladly took it. "I saw you and Caulfield yesterday." Victoria blurted out bluntly, making his heart race.

He choked on the remaining fumes inside his throat, coughing vehemently. "What? When?" He panicked.

"At the party Nate, _chillax._" She made sure to get him to unwind before continuing. "You're lucky i was the only one who saw you hugging. You have no idea of the gossip it could have lead to."
"It wasn't a hug! That crazy bitch jumped on me!" What a blatant lie.

"Oh yeah, and under that horrible assault you felt compelled to put your arms around her." She rolled her eyes.

"I didn't—" he cut himself off, never good at finding excuses whenever he was caught in the act. "Whatevathefuck."

"Are you... attracted to her?" She explored the possibility, a fine brow arching elegantly.

"What?!!" Shrieked the Prescott. "Fuck no! Are you crazy?!" He fumed, offended.

"Well, you could be, i don't know." Her arms rose in the air slightly. "Listen, i know i talked shit about her all the time, but that doesn't mean you have to hide things from me if you actually like her. Even just as a friend."

"What's with the sudden flip-flop?" He wondered if the usually bitchy teenager had hit her head or something.

Seconds went by silently. "Max is... fine." She exhaled the admission like it was the hardest thing she ever had to say. "I had a talk with her at the party. Don't get me wrong, she's fucking weird but... okay. Even Taylor and Courtney like her. I was thinking she might be ready for the Vortex." She sent him the look a child sends to its parents when he just confessed a terrible blunder. "What do you say?"

"Do what you want, Vic." He shrugged it off dismissively.

Now his own best friend wanted to hang out with the very bane of his existence. She wouldn't stay away from him manifestly, no matter what kind of trick he might pull out of his sleeve. He was fucking scared of what the girl would tell him. The bitch had such an advantage on him with all the informations she had on Jefferson's little business and his own involvement in it. All her nonsense about superpowers was absolutely insane. He didn't want to believe her at first. Who would? But like she pointed out, there was no other plausible explanation. Jefferson would have never let her go without being sure she wouldn't be able to remember, like for Kate. How could she stand seeing the freak everyday like nothing happened after everything she supposedly went through? Plus, he saw what she did with that hourglass yesterday. She didn't seem aware of it when it happened but she was definitely at fault. The small relieving part of it all was that his visions hadn't been hallucinations like he first thought. Knowing that he wasn't completely crazy gave him some sort of comfort. The hipster insisted on telling him to let her help repeatedly. What did she think she could do exactly? He knew Jefferson enough to conclude that even superpowers probably wouldn't be enough to stop him. Rachel had made herself clear though... If he didn't behave with Max's plans, she would take actions, and she sure didn't look like she was kidding. He wanted to prove himself to her, to make amends for taking her precious life away, but how would things turn out for him in the end if Caulfield busted the old creep? What was her so-called grand scheme precisely? He couldn't keep avoiding the subject forever... That stubborn nymph would indubitably slyly corner him the next time she saw him anyway.

Just be a man Nathan.

It was most likely what his father would tell him, as he used to while the boy was growing up. Beat him up, tell him to stop crying like a little bitch, to have some balls for fuck's sake! That was Sean Prescott fucked up method of turning you into a fine progeny. And from what he had confessed to him in the past, he had earned the same treatment in his childhood, delivered by his very own father. Violence and anger issues seemed to run into the family.
"She was acting strange at the party though..." evoked the short-haired blond, running a hand through her soft hair and tearing him from his silent contemplation.

"When is she not?"

"No i mean, really. I saw her knock cups out of some girls hands. Her and her friend kept looking around like something bad was gonna happen."

*Tryin' to make sure nobody ended up drugged and ready for the taking i guess.*

"Um, what the fuck is that?" Victoria's head shifted to their left, a frown arising on her pretty features.

Nathan's stormy orbs darted to her new source of attraction, realizing that it was just this good old Tobanga. A dainty silhouette was standing in front of it though, its entire body quivering nonstop for unknown reasons. Max was pulling another one of her freaky little shows right under their eyes. Not that he wasn't used to it by now, but he certainly didn't need Victoria to behold such events.

"How did she end up over there? Did you hear her walking behind us?" Her pointed chin bumped into her shoulder as she twisted around to briefly peer at her friend, gaze full of interrogation.

No, he didn't. Caulfield was a real fucking ninja, even in a trance. He was too busy trying to find the perfect lie to feed her with to immediately notice she had rose from the bench and was now walking toward the crazed chick, not a bit intimidated by the uncanny spectacle.

"Um, hellooo what the fuck are you doing?" Chase singsonged, fruitlessly waving a trinket ornamented hand before the brunette's face.

Nate rushed up to the two girls. "Vic, go back to your dorm." He didn't want his only true friend to witness anything fishy. She had to stay blind to all the paranormal shit occuring in Arcadia.

"What? But—"

"Do it. I'll take care of Caulfield." He dismissed her.

She sent one last worried glance to her unresponsive classmate, hands stroking her crossed arms in a quest for solace. "Is she alright?"

"Yes, don't worry. Come on..." He pleaded, and she reluctantly yielded.

Left alone with the walking disaster that was the hippie, he considered his options for a moment, fists trapped his jacket's pockets. She was obliviously having one of those fucked up visions that blasted totem liked to give them. Well, he didn't get them anymore. Maybe the thing had another favorite victim these days. But perhaps he could try to see if it was willing to work this time around...

"You're such a pain in my ass, Caulfield." He grumped, placing his left hand on the totem reluctantly.

The sensation he had experienced in the past comes back in full blast. It begins at his legs, like somebody is grabbing them to tug on it and sweep him off his feet. Then the background changes. The succession's always the same. He instantly recognizes the inside of his parents estate. He's in the corridor leading to the staircase. Light footsteps run up to him and something collides with his body, a small pair of arms encircling his legs. He turns around and looks down to meet blue steely eyes that perfectly match his own.
"Nate!" The child exclaims jovially.

"Kristine?" His eyes narrow at the nonsensical view.

"Are you looking for the missy? She's in the living room." Indicates the far too young to be real Prescott girl. The similitude was striking, every detail of her face, posture, clothes or even mannerism—like the fact that she could not stay fixed for more than three seconds—corresponding with perfect exactitude to the memories he had of his older sister. Well, she didn't look that older in this instant.

"Who's the missy?" He manages to question despite his bafflement.

"You know, the pretty missy with the freckles!" she explains while cutely poking at different spots of her nose in exemple.

"What's she doing here?"

"The TV's talking to her." She answers as if it was nothing out of the ordinary.

"...The fuck?" He knew his television well enough to be aware that it didn't speak to people. The thing might have cost a fortune but still... that option wasn't included. "W-why are you here, Kristine?"

"You're so silly, Nate." She titters, a hand over her mouth, like a proper lady. Something their mom had taught her at a very young age. "How could i be Kristine? I'm ten years old." Rationalizes the kid.

"What the hell are you then?"

"Nothing. I'm just a conduit." She responds, already making her way to the next room, but halting when she perceives that her little brother is rooted in his spot. "Are you coming? I think the missy is stuck." His sister informs before disappearing around the corner.

He carries on to the living room. Everything was so accurate it fazed him, navigating his own house without even being there was borderline creepy. The hipster was kneeling in front of the television, fully absorbed in whatever she was watching, or listening to. The bright luminosity of the device makes a face appear sickly pale. When he grasps that the student won't come back to the real world without a little help, he seizes her shoulder to shake it gently. Max's attention turns to him, the schoolgirl blinking out of her torpor as she seems to recognize him.

"What the fuck are you doing?" The crazy hippie leisurely rises from the ground as he speaks.

"That thing talked to me." She says, mentioning to the large apparatus. "It said i have to find a list."

"What list?"

"I don't fucking know!" Her foot sharply taps against the floor. "We're inside your house, so i suppose it's here." She grouses.

"Wow wow wow!" He shakes his hands in front of her face, his expression indicating he wasn't gonna take any shit from her this early in the morning. "Slow down on the suppositions, Caulfield. You're not nosing around in my fucking house."

"Too late." The bitch has the nerve to talk back, eyebrows furrowed in a peevish manner. "Don't you see this? This is... We're both at your place, Nathan! At the same exact time." She emphasizes each words.
"We aren't really there, technically." Nathan feels the need to underline.

Her shoulders slouch as she sighs softly. "I know... Do you believe me now?"

"..."

"Nathan, i would never joke with something so serious. This is as crazy for me as it is for you. This totem... thingy is trying to tell us something, and i think we should listen..." Her sentences are accentuated with wild gestures.

"...I believe you." He admits. "With everything i saw already, it's not like i have much choice." His right knee starts to jerk impatiently.

"We need to trust each other. I can understand it will be hard for you, and don't think it's a piece of cake for me either, but we have to. I understand... that it will take some time. And it's totally fine."

The mention of trust leaves him skeptical. Everytime he had decided to let someone in in the past, he had been royally fucked over. Nevertheless, the Prescott recalled the rational words she had spit in his face the other day in the laundry room. She was right. If she wanted to ruin him, she could have simply gone to the cops by now. But she didn't. Still, her obscure private plans unnerved the shit out of him. He always hated the unpredictable.

"...You have to get out, Caulfield." He ignores her speech, even if he's sure she's aware that he pondered on it for the last thirty seconds, and chooses to get back on track to more pressing matters. "People are gonna start exiting the dorms and if they find you like this, i can't do anything for you. After the shit you pulled yesterday in science, you better keep your head low."

After some time, she nods and the both of them stare at each other in concentration. When they get out of the vision, Max is attacked by the cold air as they look around to retrieve their bearings. Nathan watches her scratching her forearm unwittingly, noticing that the action was definitely made out of habit, if the furious red marks across her skin weren't proof enough.

"Stop that." He slaps her devastating fingers away. "You're gonna make yourself bleed, dumbass."

"It's okay. It's just an itch." Was she really that stupid? She knew he had mental issues and she thought he couldn't pinpoint the side effects of anxiety?

*You forgot who you're talking to hippie.*

"An itch doesn't do that, it's the stress manifesting physically, you ignorant bitch!"

Taken aback momentarily, she glances at the grass under her naked feet. "I... have to dress." She brushes his remark aside before running in the opposite direction to return to her room.

*Now who's avoiding the subject, huh?*
No storm Super-Max. Two Whales breakfast to celebrate?
10/11 8:45am

Your treat?
10/11 8:45am

Of course hippie!
10/11 8:46am

Alright then.
10/11 8:46am

Cool. Cheapskate!
10/11 8:46am

:P
10/11 8:46am

UGH! NO EMOJI!!!
10/11 8:47am

Chloe was installed in the blue armchair facing her big television, watching the news with unusual interest. She had a peanut butter jar in one hand, a spoon full of the substance hanging from her mouth as she licked it repeatedly. An old yellow cover was shielding her bare legs since the adolescent was still in her pajamas. The face of her best friend materialized out of nowhere on the screen before her, making her gape. The teen grabbed her cellphone as fast as lightning, spilling some soda on the coffee table in her haste after her hand knocked into her glass. Cursing the entire world for her bad luck, she decided the small disaster could wait a bit before she had to fix her mistake and dialed her childhood partner's number. It only took ten seconds for the hipster to pick up the phone.

"Man, they're talking about you on the news!" She divulged immediately.

A fed up sigh greeted her ears. "Is this about Kate again?"

"Yep! Aaaand they found your name..." she added speedily.

"Ah, shit! They're so fucking nosy!" Deplored an infuriated Max.

"You're one to talk." She responded with an amused smile. "Whatcha doing, Supergirl?"

"Trying to dress up and looking at our board." If the rustling noises she kept hearing over the line were of any indication, then her friend was most likely scuffling with her clothes. It wasn't easy to slip anything on while holding the phone.
"Solved another mystery?" She hoped, gulping down another spoonful of her delicious treat.

"The Tobanga did it again." Maxine didn't sound particularly pleased with that fact.

"What, another vision? Dude, what did it show you?" Chloe couldn't help getting excited everytime something weird happened to her associate. Why couldn't it happen to her too? Well, from what Max had previously related to her, she did seem to attract death more than anybody else on this planet. Good thing those occurrences seemed to have vanish along with the impending storm threat.

"Remember the house i was in last time? Yeah, definitely Nathan's." The brunette confirmed.

"Oh, i knew it! Did you pry into his things?" The blue-haired chick was bouncing in her seat at this point.

"Some of his dad's stuff. It was really fucked up Chloe... Some things make sense, and some don't... I'll tell you more at the diner." Price could almost hear her rub her hand against her face.

Heavy footsteps were stomping in her direction all at once. That specific noise could only mean one thing. She was in for another one of Sergeant Pepper's lectures.

"Gotta go, step-douche incoming." She announced hurriedly before hanging up.

She turned around, an innocent expression glued to her face as she watched the worst vermin to ever have reside inside her house glaring down at her, arms crossed across his blue uniform with authoritativeness.

"Yes?" The punk offered with a wide falsely clueless grin.

"Did Max and you stole some of my stuff??"

The guy had probably looked at his surveillance footage recently.

"I have no idea what you're talking about." She bolted from the comfortable armchair, seeking to procure some paper towels to clean up her mess.

"You're gonna tell me what you and your little friend are playing at." He crossed his arms, no doubt trying to appear dominating as he watched her catch her target on the sink of their adjacent kitchen.

"Or," she started while passing by him once more, "Max and me could have a little talk with Joyce and reveal everything about the cameras you installed inside the house without asking for her permission, or all the secret files you have on those poor Blackwell girls, what do you say?" The girl proposed maliciously before beginning to wipe off the fizzy beverage from the table.

"Are you blackmailing me?! So you did go through my things!" Snarled a boiling David.

"I don't know. How would you call it, David? I call it admitting the truth."

"I can't believe this. I am trying really hard here, but you keep pushing me no matter what!" He rebuked, an index finger pointing menacingly at her.

Air escaped her lips loudly as she straightened up.

"Look, i know you're trying to find Rachel, and i'm... i'm grateful." The last bit seemed pretty hard to spit for the girl. "But don't butt into our business."

"You have no idea what you're stepping into, Chloe. This is way above your heads. Two teenage
girls playing Sherlock Holmes isn't going to solve anything, just create more problems."

"Who said it had to be dangerous?" She questioned, arms swinging widely, her wet towels dangling from her extremities. "We're not six anymore, we know what we're doing! We're not going to rush into danger as soon as it comes up! I know you think I'm stupid, but not *that* much, really." Chloe argued, pissed off and tired of always having to justify every one of her actions.

"Don't put words into my mouth. Listen—"

"No. *You* listen, David. Rachel was my friend, so this concerns me even more than you. If we find anything about what happened to her, we'll either come to you, or the cops. Shitballs! Did you think Max and I were gonna blast some guns around and start killing people?"

*That's probably what I would have done, if not for Max...*

"How can I trust you?! You even stole my gun!" The quarrel carried on.

"First off," the blue punk raised an index, "you got no proof of that, and secondly," her middle finger joined its partner, "I thought you found it back in its place." Both of her hands ended up on her hips.

"Who else would it be? I know Max made you put it back, so cut the bullshit!" Her exasperating step-father asserted.

"Then you know she's responsible! Now stop getting all up in my face!" She returned to her menial task.

"This is not the end of it." Madsen warned, as he usually liked to do.

"It sure is. Or you can kiss my mom goodbye. You think she's gonna tolerate all your spying equipment around the house?" Her blue eyes bore into his dark ones with a seriousness he had never saw her wear prior to this day. "You can be on our team and help us, or get kicked out." The teen dropped her ultimatum. "Your choice." She shrugged nonchalantly.

She heard him mumble something under his thick lame mustache, his shod feet marching away soundly.

"David." The call made him stop temporarily. "Can't you trust me for once?" Asked his step-daughter sincerely, her interrogation filling the room with a ponderous silence.

The older man sighed and disappeared upstairs.

"And I'll know if you give any shit to Max, so you better not." She singsonged, earning herself a frustrated growl from above.

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Max Caulfield was riding the bus stopping at her school everyday to get to the Two Whales diner, where an amazing meal was waiting for her and her best friend. She was sitting next to her classmate Evan, with whom she had been conversing about her favorite photographers for the last ten minutes,
thinking it would be a good therapy to get rid of her... photography problem. Now, the two of them were enjoying the silence the near empty vehicle offered them, the young woman dwelling on all the scarce informations she possessed about a certain corrupted family. If Nathan's dad was involved in a more direct manner in this dark room business, things would be even more difficult than she had expected. The Prescott boy could be convinced to fuck Jefferson over, but his own father? No way. Even if he hated him, he was still his parent. Sean definitely had some kind of strange association with all the fucked up shit going on. Without speaking about the town's ecosystem or gloomy future, the fact that he had paid for the construction of the bunker was incriminating enough. When she had sacrificed Chloe in her previous timeline, some weird things went down with the trial. For once, Nathan's dad was supposed to have to answer to some questions about the dark room and why he had participated in its financing. Well, be it on television or in the newspaper, Max never saw such a thing happen. Only Jefferson and Nathan ever had been present to court. She knew an investigation had been opened about his father, as Joyce and David had confirmed, but overnight, everything had miraculously ceased. The police suddenly stopped delving into the rich guy's business, the possible charges against him had mysteriously been dropped, and Maxine knew for certain that the bastard had paid the cops to back off. If Sean had really been oblivious to what his son and the crazy art teacher had been doing in that old farmhouse, why resort to bribing? They wouldn't have found any compromising stuff anyway, right? Was it simply because it could jeopardize his affairs? Give his dynasty a bad image?

Yeah right, like it wasn't the case already.

Stepping down from the bus after saying goodbye to Evan, the first thing she noticed was the familiar ruckus coming from the diner's interior, only faintly audible because of its closed doors. The air felt incredibly hot for an October morning, which brought her to take off her grey hoodie and tye the thing around her waist, leaving her in a simple cute white doe shirt. She spotted the fisherman she usually saw roaming around here leaning against his flashy yellow truck parked in the parking lot. He was rocking his face side to side dejectedly as if he was prepared for the sky to eminently fall onto his head.

He looks so distressed... Poor guy. All this shit with the fish can't be good for his income.

She grabbed a newspaper from one of the dispensers, blinking wildly at the title.

"Beached whale on Arcadia's coast"? Oh no... At least it's not plural...

What did this mean? It was Friday, that awful storm was nowhere to be seen, but sea creatures kept dying anyway... Well, from the informations she had gathered in the past, this phenomenon seemed to have occured prior to her powers unlocking themselves, so maybe she hadn't been responsible for every little thing that previously went wrong with this town. From what the fisherman had told her, all the Prescott development around the city was to blame. Speaking of said man, Max found him conversing with a young native american man. Loose dark long hair swayed with the breeze, his denim shirt outlining his fit form and prominent attractive features moving about as he spoke.

This is the first time i cross path with someone from the tribes who live nearby... Should i ask him about the Tobanga? I don't want him to try to spit in my face, in case this is the guy Juliet mentioned... Knowing my luck...

She knew most native american people lived among the cities and didn't necessarily reside in reserves, a very few actually did in fact, but the tribes near Arcadia Bay strangely kept to themselves for some reason. Like they didn't want to be bothered. It was rare to find them wandering around the downtown area. Scanning the area further, she found no dead birds on the ground. She was starting to seriously doubt for the Bay's safety. What if the storm had simply been postponed? No, that didn't
make any sense. There would have been signs that something ominous was coming, right? Glancing at the sky, the sight of multiple starlings hovering in the air greeted her. This whole damn week, whenever she was outside, those things were there too. Like... like they were following her somehow. But that was a ridiculous thought... From where she was standing, she could see Blackwell up in the hills, looming above the suburban area of the city. It looked so small from here. Gazing at it showed her how close to the forest the school actually was. Coughing sounds broke her out of her trance, compelling her to look at the source of the noises. A hillbilly guy was walking out of the diner. His mouth was practically concealed by the thick mustache above his lips. He was dressed in old filthy looking clothes consisting of an oxford blue and grey jacket topping a burgundy shirt, his blond hair were dirty and greasy from the way they shone under the sunlight, and the man was emanating an awful smell of cigarette and booze.

"Yeah, it's done. I was just taking a break. Don't you think i deserve a break for all my hard work?" his hoarse voice emitted a gross laughter, like some mucus was disgustingly stuck down his throat. Sadly, he was way too engrossed in his phone conversation to be careful about where he was going and ultimately bumped shoulders with Max as he shoved past her. She would have certainly asked him to apologize if she hadn't been brusquely projected into another world. Well, the world was still the same but not the place.

Must be another one of these memory sneak peeks... Great.

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wPg4aalD8eE ]

The guy had a bunch of brown envelopes between his palms. Another man was standing a few feet away, facing a big window, hands crossed behind his back. His posture kept her from peering at his face. A wooden desk separated the two of them, covered with the typical office stuff you'd find anywhere else, and a computer. The faceless dude was clearly a business man from the way he was dressed.

"This has to be distributed before the end of the week. I slipped a list with addresses among the packages. I'm counting on your usual discretion and effectiveness here."

"Of course. You know i live to please."

"Come by the house to leave me a note when this is done. No phone calls or emails. Understood?"

"Yeah, yeah, i got it. The usual procedure."

"Good. A glass of wine before you get on with it?"

"No, thanks. I'm more of a beer kind of guy. Um... Permission to ask questions, boss?"

"Accorded."

"I've been wondering for quite some time now... Why this method? Why not send everything by internet connexion? Wouldn't it be easier? And faster."

"Everything you do on this damn computers is traceable. But you are not."
"Nothing like the good ol' fashioned ways, huh?" He laughed.

While Maxine abruptly comes back to reality, the object of her interest is climbing in his truck. She wastes no time, taking her camera out of her bag as fast as possible to capture the man's license plate.

"TH.TRNSPRTR"... What to do with that now?

"You're standing in the middle of the road, kid."

The handsome young man she saw minutes ago is now frowning down at her, looking justifiably suspicious of her person. Max feels completely lost, still shaken by her insight into the hick's head, and has no idea how to respond. Something licks her fingers in a comforting manner, forcing her to look down to discover a beautiful wolf sitting at the guy's feet. She runs a hand along its soft fur, loving the way it felt against her skin, the sensation soothing her a bit since her head was starting to ache from all these mind intrusions she was constrained to perform.

"Have you two already met?" He asks the friendly creature. It whines, its ears perking up then backward in reply to his question. "Weird, he's usually mistrustful of strangers." He mutters to himself, then goes back to assessing her. "Why are you taking pictures of people's cars?"

"I... That man was..." she begins to sputter.

"Do you know him?"

"N-no..."

"Then stay away from him." He advises without further clarification. When she decides to shove her camera back in its original place, his eyes follow the movement closely. "You from Blackwell, kid?" The conception draws his eyebrows together.

"Yes. And stop calling me kid, you don't even look that much older than me..." Maxine points out, arms crossed with authority.

Her comment hardened his features briefly, his face relaxing seconds later, his amusement exposed by the slightly upturned corner of his lips. Her phone buzzed inside her jeans pocket. At first, she thought it would be Chloe notifying her that she was going to be late, as was her custom, but Max was wrong, as the "Kelly" displayed on her phone screen demonstrated.

Tomorrow, 4pm at the place we agreed on. Don't be late or you can forget about hearing from me ever again.
10/11 9:21am

Don't worry. I'm not missing it for the world.

"Um, i need to get going." Caulfield declared, pushing locks of chesnut hair out of her eyes. She barely had began her journey across the street that she was interpellated anew.

"Girl," the man called out, and she instantly remarked he made a change of appellative, "if you're from that school, you better be careful... It's owned by a shady son of a bitch."
"I'm pretty acquainted with that fact already." She reassured before pushing open the restaurant's door.

Joyce was single-handedly running the place, like the boss she was. She sent a beaming smile her way as soon as she spotted her, signaling for her to wait and that she would be coming over shortly. Officer Berry was sitting on a stool, feet on the bar's lower border, drinking his usual cup of coffee. The last time she saw him... He was crushed under that telephone pole. Pale and blue... So lifeless...

Stop being so morbid, Max. Oh, maybe i can ask him about the plate!

"There she is, Super Maxine! That's your new nickname around the Bay." The guy acclaimed when she stationed beside him.

"Well," she cut him off before he could extend his laudations further, "what would you say to helping out someone you seem to consider as a hero?" The proposal had a light hearted tune to it.

"Hmm," he hummed with indecision, "i smell trouble young lady." Foreshadowed the police officer.

"That's exactly what i would like to decipher." The youngest chose to stimulate his curiosity.

"Go on. I'm listening."

"There's that shady guy who's been loitering around my campus as of late. I don't want to sound like a nut conspirationist but, i have this gut wrenching feeling that he's up to no good. I suspect he might be selling drugs to students. I even managed to photograph his license plate..." she confessed, handing him the picture, which he took for further study. "I was thinking you could run this plate in your database for me, find out his name, or maybe what kind of job he has... Anything to prove that i'm just turning paranoid. This keeps nagging me and... I only want to be reassured, you know?"

"Alright, Max. I can see why you would find this weird. It's good that you're looking out for your comrades. I know it's genuine, you proved that the moment you got Kate Marsh to go down this roof." He praised afresh. "I'll see what i can do." Was his only promise.

Her shoulders drooped in relief. "Thank you so much, Officer Berry. Here," She pulled out a pen and piece of paper from her brown and navy bag, scribbling something hastily, "you can call me at this number whenever you have news for me. Or even if you need a service, of any kind." Assured Max while he took the note from her.

"I'll remember that, kiddo."

The first thing she beholds when her eyelids flutter open is a white ceiling that she doesn't remember ever seeing before. The soreness in her limbs drives her to groan when she attempts to extricate herself from the covers she's been tucked into without her consent. She felt so fucking groggy. Her hand comes up to rub her forehead as she finally manages to lift her upper body from the unfamiliar bed. Dana is at the end of it, propped on the metal frame indolently, waiting for her to come back to life. Her lovely face brightens when she discerns her awakened comrade, who was visibly trying to
get her bearings. What the hell was she doing in the infirmary?

"Yay, you're awake!" She delights. "You scared me, Maxaroni." Admits her classmate, a hand on her heart for dramatic purposes.

"What happened?" Max couldn't really recall how she ended up in here. Her voice sounded gruff and rough.

"Well, we were in P.E, jogging around, then you turned morbidly pale and dropped just like that." The cheerleader snaps her fingers in demonstration. "Do you remember anything?"

"I remember feeling very weak all of a sudden. And like i was gonna throw up. Then... it's complete darkness."

Ward bounces on the end of the stiff bed to install herself alongside the sick girl.

"You think you'll be able to come to the game this evening? I want you to be there to witness my sick cheers but, i don't want you to strain yourself if you're not well, girl."

"What did the nurse say?" she inquires.

"Um, that you probably didn't sleep and eat enough." She recounts while Max's gaze gets absorbed by the dangling motions of her triangle-shaped earrings.

Good guess An-Marie.

"Did... somebody see me faint?"

"Um, yeah, like the whole class," the athlete points out like it was evident, "and all the other people who saw me and the teacher carry you here."

"Ugh! My life is a big smelly shit." She swears crudely, burying her face in her hands.

That rips a laugh from Dana. "What's with the melodrama, Mad Max? Doesn't sound like you." She notes, playing with her ponytail.

"Sorry, i just... wish i could die for a few hours." That last bit is carefully soughed, as if to not alarm her friend.

Which grabs a strand of her chesnut hair out of the blue, her black lashes flapping swiftly in amazement.

"Damn, your hair are growing fast... Did you notice?"

"No..." she answers truthfully, looking down at the tips to inspect them thoroughly.

Maybe i'm aging more quickly because of all this time travel bullshit.

The Ward girl let go of her hair. " Weird." She shrugs. "Do you feel better now?"

"Yes..."

That wasn't very convincing Max.

"Maybe you're not fresh because of last night... I can still feel my own hangover." Complains the cheerleader.
"I don't drink, Dana."

"I should have known. Silly me." She bumps her knuckles on her temple.

"Perhaps Trevor's dancing traumatized me." She smirks slyly.

Even half asleep, she could still joke.

The girls crack up in perfect synchronicity, their laughs resonating against the infirmary's walls. The brunette turns into the absolute depiction of the crushing teenager at the mention of her boyfriend, and if her pupils could form a heart like in the cartoons, they'd probably do it right now. The skater had plainly successfully swooned her.

"I can see why. That boy is a calamity on the dancefloor." Yet it didn't seem to bother her too much.

"I think it's cute."

"Me too."

"I should probably go change." She decides, getting up from the bed. "I don't want to roam the corridors in my gym shorts all day."

"That'd be nice for the guys around here." Her friend teases, her blue eyes ogling her from head to toe.

"Shut up!" The shorter girl slaps her friend's arm painlessly. "And don't worry, i'll be here tonight."

"Great! I'm so excited!"

Yeah, i can tell.

Dana departs from the infirmary while answering her ringing cellphone, and she determines that the call is from Juliet when she hears the sporty teenager utter her friend's name. The door closes quietly behind her, leaving a giddy Maxine alone with lots of unanswered questions. She couldn't keep going like that, people were gonna notice something was wrong with her if she kept passing out in public. She had to find a way to eat without emptying her stomach right after. Well, stop stressing so much about everything would be a good first step. Scoping her surroundings, she makes out her phone on the table across the room and sticks it into her shorts waistline before exiting the place, stumbling upon a sweeping and whistling Samuel in the hall.

"Hi Samuel."

He ceases his cleaning activities to speak with her. "Hello young Max. Are you feeling better? I saw your friend Dana carry you here with one of the teachers."

"Yes, i'll be alright."

The cool air circulating in the corridor is strangely more chill than usual, which reminds her that she's standing there in her sportswear. She had one little mystery to solve before she could go back to the gymnasium.

"So," she starts in an enigmatic tone, "a squirrel came up to me yesterday, to give me a nut... You wouldn't have anything to do with that, would you?" Her eyes narrow playfully at her interlocutor.

"Ah, i thought a little treat would make my friend Max smile again. She looked pretty down." He rubs the back of his head as he enlightens her.
"Well, your friend Max greatly appreciated the gesture." She smiles at the touching admission.

"Then Samuel is glad."

Biding her friend goodbye, Max wanders down the hallway to find a nervous looking Daniel being hounded by Logan. The jerk had the poor boy cornered against a locker, looming menacingly over his victim. She hated those kind of things. Why did some people always feel the need to bring others down? Plus, that prick had a good part of the previous night trying to mack on her after striving to get Victoria and Taylor to twerk. Needless to say he failed miserably in every one of his attempts.

Dickhead.

"Hey you! Back off!" She angrily stomped toward the two students.

"Oh, it's Max! So, did you think about that touchdown i mentioned yesterday?" He slurried disgustingly, wiggling his eyebrows at her.

"And what about that punch i proposed right after?" Her hands were firmly set on her hips as she glared at the douche.

"Meow~! Max is so fierce. I like it." Poor guy wasn't gifted when it came to flirting apparently.

"I don't care what you like, get out of his face! Let's make this clear Logan, if i ever see you bother Daniel again, your face will be so damaged that even your mother won't be able to recognize you."

"Daaaaamm, you're giving me the full body tackle, Max!"

"Go away."

He obeyed, retreating from the two artists languishly to walk over the doors leading outside, stopping midway to share one last perverted comment on her appearance.

"Oh and, nice legs Caulfield." He winked, finally stepping through the school's entrance.

"I swear i'm gonna make him bleed one day." She promised, gritting her teeth.

"Please, call me if it ever happens." Joked Daniel in return. "Thanks for saving my skin by the way." He acknowledged with his usual spanish accent.

"Don't thank me, it's normal."

"Max is always here to save the day." He smiles gently, the movement hoisting his glasses higher up his nose bridge. "Like at the party last night. I was glad to see you there."

"You seemed to have a good time with Brooke at least." She teased, arching a playful brow.

"Oh, you noticed..." He looked down at his feet for a moment, flushing cutely. "None of it would have took place if not for you. Max, i want you to know how much confidence you gave me, nobody ever did that for me." That phrase sounded way too familiar, reviving painful souvenirs for the brunette.

"You've always had my back and now you're going to let me die... Thanks Max..."

"Please Max, don't kill me so we can finally have our tea session."

"I survived poverty and an abusive family, just so i could end up here to die..."
"Max? Max!" A masculine voice was calling her back to reality, shaking her shoulders slightly.

She blinked the images of her friends patiently waiting for their deaths in the diner away with difficulty, glancing up at a concerned Daniel.

"Are you okay? You're crying..."

Her right hand falteringly grazed her cheek to realize he wasn't lying. The memory had made her heart ache to the point of weeping.

"Um... It's nothing. I'm alright. It's just... allergies."

He didn't seem to buy it, but he let it pass nonetheless, and she was grateful for that fact. Wiping her soft cheeks, she pulled out her vibrating phone to peek at it.

Hey Max, Alyssa and i are going to see Kate at 5pm this afternoon. Wanna come with us?
10/11 12:09am

Count me in Stella! :)  
10/11 12:09am

Great! She's going to be so happy!
10/11 12:10am

"I'm sorry Daniel, i really have to go."

"It's fine Super-Max. But remember, i'm here if you need to talk, okay?"

"I won't forget it." She grinned reassuringly.

When she stepped into the locker room, Nathan was there, shamelessly fishing for something through Victoria's locker. Well, the blond was his friend so maybe it wasn't that much a breach of her privacy. She halted in the aperture to check out the scene, leaning against the door frame with her arms crossed casually over her chest. He was too engrossed in his search to notice her presence, it would seem.

"Man, this is turning into a perverted habit of yours." She taunted.
It was the second time she found him in an area reserved to women.

_Maybe he's hiding something._

She internally laughed at the ridiculous thought of Nathan secretly being a girl.

He leaped back a bit to see who had the nerve to intrude, only to resume his occupation when he realized it was just the annoying twee bitch.

"Oh screw you, skank." He rolled his eyes, taking out an orange-hued pill bottle and shutting the locker hurriedly.

_Victoria keeps a part of his prescription among her stuff?_

Max approached one step at a time, watching him pop one of the white little things in his mouth. He gulped it down easily, without any water, like he'd done it his entire life.

_Is this part of his routine or did he have an episode?_

"Is your dad coming to the game today?"

He sent a sharp look her way. "Why are you talking about my dad?" He tramped over until they stood face to face. "What are you planning you sneaky little—"

"Nothing." She held her palms up innocently, batting her eyelashes mockingly. "Just making conversation."

_Or trying to lighten the mood._

Why was he so stiff? After yesterday, she thought they had made some progress. Especially with that sweet hug they shared. Perhaps he didn't like the fact that she had indirectly snooped around his house this morning. Like it was her fault... Or maybe their _almost_ make-out session in the dead of the night was the motive.

"I'm not buying it." He refuted, arms crossed.

"Too bad. We have other things to discuss."

"Like what?" He played dumb.

"Let's talk about your emancipation for starters." His face said it all. "Unless you want to evade the subject and run away like you usually do." She mentioned, implying his cowardice to get to his ego.

She didn't think he could narrow his eyes further, but again, he proved her wrong.

"Alright, spit it out Caulfield." He hissed, reminding her of an angry snake.

"You have to meet with your lawyer. You need to prepare your defense with him."

That made him blink. And frown. "What?!" He winced, not comprehending the purpose behind her request.

"When the moment comes, you have to say that Jefferson forced you to do all these things, i don't care if it's true or not, just do it. Tell them he threatened to kill you if you spilled the beans to anyone, or if you refused to cooperate with his plans."
"Woah! Hold on a sec—"

"When the time comes," she cut him off, "you'll have to be the one to go to the authorities to confess everything."

"What?! I can't! They'll throw me in jail!" He hollered, looking at Max like she had grown two heads and his conclusion was evident to predict.

"Not if you play your cards well. If you reveal everything on your own, it will show your willingness to cooperate." The freckled girl emphasized her words with a hand over her chest.

"Then what?! You think they care? I'm the son of this town's biggest pain in the ass! Don't you think they'll be happy to get rid of me?"

"Stop acting like you're everybody's number one enemy."

"No. That's my dad. Doesn't mean they'd throw away the opportunity to lock up his offspring whenever they get the chance." He barked, unconvinced by her idiotic preaching.

"Nathan, if we do this correctly, and if you actually listen to me, you will not go to jail." Maxine assured tenaciously.

Didn't she know when to back down? The hipster had no common sense!

"You really think i'm gonna walk out of this shit free?" Nathan seethed, pointing at an imaginary location to accentuate his speech.

"Not entirely. You have to insist on the fact that Jefferson didn't leave you a choice. And that you're subject to mental illness, which makes you easier to exploit. They'll probably send you in an institution to get treated."

"That's your brillant idea?!"

"What else are you expecting, Nathan? You did do wrong, after all. And you have to get help so you can start anew. Don't you want to feel better? To finally sleep at night, to not wake up drenched in sweat because you have those horrible nightmares? Don't you want the hallucinations to stop? Or the tremors? And don't get me started on all those illegal drugs you take to get stoned. I know it sounds scary, but this is the best option for you."

"Yeah, let's isolate the freak from everyone, huh? Isn't it rather the best option for the rest of you?"

"Stop it. You know that's not what i meant."

He scoffed, glaring down at her like she was the worst thing to ever cross his path.

"There's something else..." She started afresh. "The cameras in the dark room, does he have full time access to them?"

"Yeah. He can watch the footage in the bunker or on his phone."

"That's what i thought." Max exhaled with angst. "When was the last time you talked to him?"

"Face to face? When we... When Kate was there."

"So, last week? Even after Kate tried to jump, he didn't ask to speak with you?"
"No! He made it clear that i have to keep my head low, but that's all. He doesn't really talk to me since... Rachel."

"He's pissed." That wasn't very hard to determine.

"Yeah. He ignored me for months after that. Then one day he comes back and tells me that if i want to gain back his trust, i have to help him get Kate."

"That piece of shit." The hipster cursed, her head bending backward for a second. "Listen, if you two eventually run into each other, you have to act like you usually do. He can't suspect that you're turning your back to him."

"No shit, Sherlock." Nathan snarled. "I swear to God, you're mental." He added as a side note, rocking his head in a disbelieving manner.

The Prescott heir's shoulder brushed her own as he commenced shuffling toward the door.

Suddenly, the vision of Jefferson striding in her direction—when it was in fact just Nathan's—assaulted her mind. From her point of view, she understood that the boy was curled up on the ground, staring up at his teacher, his cries and wheezes reverberating along the dark room's sturdy walls. Rachel's lifeless body laid near the Prescott.

"What's gonna happen now?"

"It's okay, Nathan. I'm gonna clean up your mess. Now, relax."

The bastard had a hazardous-looking syringe in one of his hands, the object jutting toward the ceiling.

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bpdwwa7lsUI ]

Nathan's calloused fingers gripping her arms brought her back to the present. "What's with your eyes?" His unusually wrinkled forehead showed how much she freaked him out.

"Don't touch me!" Maxine exclaimed, slapping his hands away like he was contagious. "Please..."

Her voice softened at the last bit.

"Oh, i see. Well i'm sorry for putting my disgusting hands on you. Don't let my concern burden you, bitch."

"Nathan, it's not that. Just don't touch me, please..."

"You know what? Fuck you!" He spat before storming out of the room, not giving her the chance to elaborate.

She could hear his furious stomping gradually fading away.

This is definitely not my fucking day.
Not even a minute later, just as she was about to strip, the door was flung open, startling her. A pissed off Nathan prowled toward her, banging his fists on each side of her head to trap her between his body and the lockers, the sound resonating loudly against the walls. Max was paralyzed, his intense gaze pining her to the furniture.

"I can do whatevathefuck i want!" He declared with a condescending attitude.

Before she can say anything in response to his aggressive behavior, his lips are on hers. The girl has no idea on how to react to the situation. The only person she kissed before was Chloe, her best friend, a person with whom she's always been so comfortable, and it was a challenge. Oh, and she was in control. Which is absolutely not the case at the moment. Her eyes must have closed because she can no longer see a damn thing as his mouth moves sensually against hers and makes her loose her current train of thoughts. A jolt of electricity courses through her when his tongue comes out to lap at her bottom lip, patiently seeking entrance. She gives in, and the feeling of warmth spreading in waves across her lower belly is quite rewarding in itself. There's some dominance in the way his arms cage her between the metallic container and his body, or in the way he towers over her. She realizes his hands slipped under her shirt to stroke the skin of her back when a violent shudder travels up her spine, forcing a breathy gasp out of her. The boy's wet appendage coaxes her own to play with each other. Her brain barely registers the embarrassing little whimpers that came from her throat. If anyone had told her Nathan Prescott would be good at seducing her before, she would have probably laughed in their face. His teeth nibble on her lower lip before he pulls slightly back to let her breath. Max quickly becomes self-conscious of the fact that her face probably looks like it's going to burst from how red it is.

"Need help changing, Caulfield?" he teased softly into her ear before his mouth resumed its way down her neck.

Her hands snuck past his jacket and pressed upon his sides in a desperate attempt to find support. His left hand suddenly grabbed the back of her thigh which he drew up against his hip, pressing her closer to him. She could feel the hardness of his belt against her knee, as well as the softness of the rest of his clothes. Nathan's fingers started to play with the rim of her gym shorts while the others were slowly caressing the lower parts of her bra, right underneath her breasts. A sly thumb passed the underwiring to touch the flesh hidden there, action that made the boy emit a low groan and intensify his suction on his victim's neck. That noise birthed strange emotions inside her. Everything was getting way too intense for the poor adolescent who never really had formerly experienced lust. Her mind was busy battling with the desire to let him do whatever he wanted and the urge to fight back and let him know that this was a very bad idea. His mouth was turning too harsh for her fragile skin though, so she had to stop him before he could leave a bruise.

"W-wait... Don't leave a mark." She pushed onto his chest to get him to back off a little, her timid eyes meeting his ignited ones.

"Or what? Gonna stop me?" he cunningly recaptured the girl's lips before she could protest further.

Her stupid brain seemed to be floating in the air instead of doing its job, which should have consisted of forcing her to realize that this was wrong, and not dosing her up with endorphins to make her feel like she was on cloud nine. The two teenagers spent quite more time kissing passionately, Max being so out of it that she had lost count of how long it actually lasted. The boy chose to wait for the exact moment he felt her ripe for the picking, before cruelly stopping their sinful activities altogether.

"This is what you get for giving me blue balls." He whispered against her mouth, still staring at it with lecherous intent. "Be careful, virgin." Was his final warning before he bailed out of the room urgently, the sensation of his hot breath grazing her face having yet to vanish from her tingling flesh.
Max languidly slid down the locker she nearly had been flattened into, her legs turned to jelly, breath short and heart twitching madly.

*You need to get a fucking grip, Max.*

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[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f2cGxy-ZHIs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f2cGxy-ZHIs)

She sees the world from a different point of view, a higher one. Feels taller, heavier, not herself. People busy themselves around her and everybody's clothes are clearly from the nineties. Tall skinny girls are aligned in front of her, looking expectedly in her direction as if awaiting for a verdict. Blonds, brunettes, redheads and more, all with contempt and disdain dwelling on their features, all except for one. This one—positionned at the end of the line—draws her eyes, which she suspects are not really her own at the moment, and she finds herself assessing an unobtrusive frail young woman. She's staring at the floor absently, playing with the elegant pendant hanging around her neck.

"Mark?" Calls a man beside her. "What's your choice?" Maxine feels her fingers fiddling with the camera between her hands.

"This one." The young man she's currently inside points to the oblivious ingenue. She knows this voice. It belongs to her freaky art teacher.

The decor shifts. The chosen girl is sitting on a dark green chair, feet on the edge of it, arms and elbows resting on her knees, the posture a clear sign that she does not want to be bothered by the outside world. Maxine, who's actually sitting at her side in a similar seat, can't help but admire her natural beauty.

"The other girls are very mean to you..." Jefferson's voice comes out of her throat, and Max has to remind herself yet again that it is his.

"That's your fault." She clarifies, her breath forcing her long and straight black hair to sway. "They're jealous because you chose me."

"Well, i'm sorry for being the source of their petty behavior." He apologizes softly, in a tone his former student knows only too well.

"It's fine. I'm used to it."

"You've only been here for a week." He points out, and she can feel his frown.

"I meant i'm used to people being mean to me."

"That's a sad thing to say..." He speaks lowly, sounding truly saddened by the revelation.

"I don't understand either." Jefferson must have gave her a look of incomprehension, because she quickly elaborates. "Why you chose me... The three quarters of them are way more experienced.
And you're a big professional. It doesn't make sense." Her head rocks slightly from left to right in emphasis.

"Aren't you a tad too self-conscious?" The famous photographer observes.

"I have no confidence in myself." She admits with no trouble.

"Why did you want to become a model then?"

"So i can be someone else. In front of the camera, i don't have to be me. I just have to be whoever the photographer decides. I can play, i can pretend. I don't have to stay my weak pitiful self." The explanation brings her mind miles away from here if her gaze is any indication.

"Why not be an actress then? Wouldn't it be more fitting?" Max feels his lips stretch into a smirk.

"I tried but, i can't act for shit." She declares, finally letting herself smile and the both of them are soon laughing at her frank admission. "And i have a very bad memory, i can never remember my lines. So, i'm left with modelling... Not that i mind too much."

"I'm sure you'll have a very successful career. You clearly have what it takes." He reassures, slumping further into his chair without taking his eyes from her.

"How would you know?"

"I just do. Don't you trust my judgment? I thought i was a big professionnal..." The guy has always loved his sarcasm apparently.

"My own parents don't believe in me, why would you?" Her black eyes focus on a distant point, and Maxine realizes she has difficulties with eye contact.

"If you don't believe in yourself, why not let me do it for you, Miss Riggs?" Mark proposes, voice full of hidden purpose.

She finally turns toward him, her sceptical gaze boring into his. "You're a weird man, Mr. Jefferson." She notes, and Caulfield cannot agree more with her observation.

Everything whirls and she ends up in the middle of a raging party. Neon lights, music, alcohol, dancing people, all the usual bullshit is within reach. Her new body stomps over a bathroom door standing in a secluded corner. As she opens the door, the nearly unconscious body of that Riggs girl is sprawled upon the cold tiled floor. The poor thing is wearing a loose and partly low-cut black dress held by very thin straps against her shoulders. It suits her well, brings out her naivety and innocence.

"What did you take?" He asks, lowering himself next to her and shaking her a bit to drive her out of her lethargic state.

"Heroin... I feel so sleepy..." she whispers, a hand on her forehead.

Max's surroundings change once more. The strong hands that she's sharing with Jefferson are holding a newspaper.

"Young budding top model Deanna Riggs still missing one week after her mysterious disappearance."

The dreadful fact that Deanna was Jefferson's first binder comes back to her. But she doesn't have
the occasion to ponder on it for long since the shifting comes back. Mark opens the door leading to an unfurnished storeroom. There are pillows and covers on the floor, and poor Deanna, curled up and supposedly anemic. She glares up at him, defiant, despite the traces of dried tears smearing her cheeks. Her naturally pale skin seems closer to the one of a corpse than the one of a pretty white lady who doesn't often go out under the sun.

"Aren't you hungry?" He inquires, glimpsing at the untouched plate next to the door. "Why don't you eat the food i give you? There's nothing suspicious inside, i promise."

A long minute passes where she doesn't answer and he abstains from saying anything more. Then...

"I'm not getting out of here alive." She cleverly guesses, her voice incredibly raspy. "Why bother?" She deadpans.

The next time he enters the room she's confined in, the girl is cramped in a corner, scraping her fingers up and down along the wall tortuously, like she's trying to dig into it to find an exit.

"It's your fault you know. If you weren't so keen on drugging yourself all the time, i would have never had a chance to take you away." He blames, walking up to her.

He grabs one of her hands to inspect it closely. "You're tearing your nails off." He remarks. "Well, it's not that big of a deal. There's no beauty without a beat after all, right?"

He takes out a bottle of pills from his pants, extracting one from the container.

The woman's head twists away when his hand approaches her lips. "N-no. I don't want to forget." She whines.

"Come on, Deanna. Just one shoot. I'll let you sleep after." He half-heartedly tries to convince her.

"I can't remember what you do to me with this." The dark-haired girl reproaches spitefully.

"That's the point. Isn't it easier if you just forget? Plus, i need you calm and obedient for this."

"Why me? What did i ever do to you?" She wonders, brows knitted together in incomprehension.

"Aww, Deanna. You never did anything wrong. Don't think otherwise." He coos, face tilting to the side tenderly.

"You're psychotic." She notes, pity and disgust evident in her eyes.

"Says the one tearing her fingernails off." He counters ironically.

"I wish i had enough strength to kill you." She regrets mournfully.

"Should have eaten, then. Too bad. And that's not a really nice thing to say." He grips her jaw and pops the pill into her mouth.

Contrary to what Maxine believed, there is a next time, and the room is still the same. She has no idea how many days Deanna has spent in this horrible place, her heart clenching at the depressing thought. Jefferson opens the door leading to his victim. The girl's gaze is fixated upon his gloved hands, and a half frightened half relieved glint in her dark eyes tells Max she knows exactly what kind of fate awaits her.

"I'm really sorry." He tells her, prowling in her direction. "I didn't want things to get to this point, you simply leave me no other choice. I'll get better at this, so i don't have to kill the next ones. I
promise." He's above her before she can do anything. She seems too weak to try to defend herself anyway.

His covered fingers encircle her throat tightly, constricting her windpipe with just the necessary amount of pressure to keep her from breathing. Nothing more. Caulfield feels no desire to hurt the girl inside him.

"You weren't the perfect subject Deanna, but, it still means a lot to me that you participated in this. Thank you for letting me capture your innocence."

Riggs throat is bruising, her face quickly changing colors, her until now constant struggling ceasing altogether as all traces of life vanish from her gaze.

"Maybe i'll find her one day... The perfect subject..." the man marvels at the possibility with a faint murmur.

Max's eyes snap open as she jolts awake, the condensation spotting her desk being the first thing she discerns in the foggy chaos of her rousing brain. Then her professor, attending to his everyday business at his own desk, manifests himself by strolling forward at the sight of his recently awoken student.

"Back to the world of the living? I tried to wake you multiple times but, you were sleeping like a rock." The sunlight briefly reflects across his glasses as he advances, blinding her for a short disagreeable moment.

You're a fucking monster...

Damn, and you thought you had it bad!

Her arms are curled on her table, creating a comfy cushion for her to rest her head on if she so desires. That's probably how she fell asleep earlier. "I must have nod off while waiting for you." She elaborates, finding her voice only after clearing her throat. "Did you... Did you touch me when you tried to wake me up?"

"Yes. Is there a problem with that?" He inquires curiously.

That explains the memories.

But she got so much though, how many times had he tried to rouse her exactly? She checks her surroundings, sweeping a disoriented gaze across the classroom. "...I'm sorry. I was supposed to help you..." she apologizes, rubbing her forehead absentmindedly.

"It's fine. We still have some time left." He swiftly gestures to the clock hanging in a corner of the room. "I'll let it go if you promise me to sleep better at night, alright?" The guy offers, lips twitching lightly.

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xOCDUQ2zuXE ]
"Who said i didn't sleep at night?" Maxine disputes at the insinuation.

Before spilling any further information, the man bends over, elbows and forearms planted on her desk to support his weight. His face gets much closer to hers as a consequence. "Principal Wells told me you collapsed in one of your classes this morning." Was this some kind of interrogation method? The bastard could play the concerned card all he wanted, by no means would she ever buy it.

She scoffs, irked by how fast news traveled around here. "The adults in this school are worse than teenagers when it comes to gossip."

"I wouldn't call it gossip. People care about you, Max. They're concerned." His eyes drop to her forearm, which she's scratching furiously again, her sleeve rolling up because of her actions. She cannot help it, this stupid itch is simply insufferable.

His voice drops an octave as his left hand grabs her wrist with the utmost care, the movement forcing him to balance his weight to his elbows. "You're hurting yourself." Jefferson admonishes in a tender tone, the thumb of his right hand busy brushing her inflamed skin in an effort to relieve her of the pain. "Are you sure you're alright?" The same hands that strangled that poor girl to her death are currently on her. That fact alone makes her nauseous.

"Don't touch me. You disgust me."

"Peachy." She jests, getting her limb out of his clutches and concealing its repelling view with the help of her hoodie's sleeve.

He snatches a nearby chair, installing it next to her table to plop down on it, arms on the back of the furniture. Now he really looked like a cop trying to get something out of her. "You look like the world is weighting down on your shoulders." His gaze examines her face in an attempt to decipher what's burdening the novice photographer.

"Not the world. Just one little town."

"Remember what i told you? You can talk to me if something is bothering you." He drawls the last part invitingly.

"You bother me."

"You're my teacher, not my psychologist." She reasons shrewdly.

Mark smiles encouragingly. "You don't have to talk solely to a professional to get things off your chest, Max."

"I told you already, i'm unbreakable." She defends with a smirk.

"That's debatable." He counters.

The young woman leers up at him for a moment, wondering why the art teacher wanted her to open up to him as much as he did. "We should get to work." She states, standing up abruptly, and he wastes no time doing the same. Perhaps this was the approach he had employed to get close to Nathan. Was he planning to replace the boy with her? Probable, knowing hisacute taste for sharing his knowledge, or anything to make himself look wise and clever. If that's what he wanted, she'd pretend to eat out of his hand until all this shit was settled. She'd play him at his own game. Max couldn't wait to see his face when he'd realize he was done for. She still couldn't believe that anything of what she saw inside her instructor's mind was real. That poor girl had been sequestered like an animal in a cage, serving as a pretty toy for his depraved personal photo shoots. Her anger
level suddenly rises above what her body can apparently tolerate, her fist discreetly tightening behind her back. Jefferson and her are staring straight into each other's eyes, and for once, he seems perturbed by the intensity of her gaze.

"Um, yeah, i guess we should." He murmurs absently.

*I want to punch his fucking face.*

Without any warning, the glass pane protecting the equipment on her left breaks noisily, interrupting their staring contest so they could search for the sound's provenance. The girl's rage wasn't to be trifled with anymore it would seem. So that was what made the hourglass explode yesterday... Stella's anger channeling through her body. Which reminded her that she could probably move objects around without having to touch them henceforth.

*I almost forgot about that... Oops.*

She'd have to learn how to control that or accidents like the one in the science lab would be commonplace, and she couldn't risk that. She was already lucky nobody had further questioned the weird event of the previous day. Her teacher looks back at her with an astonished expression, no doubt wondering what happened, and Maxine shrugs innocently to indicate that she's as lost as him about the occurrence, before making her way to his desk in hope of finally starting on what they were supposed to do.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rSNpMpQ_O_M]

Hospitals were so gloomy with their asepticized walls and floors. Every little sound echoed way too loudly, especially those massive double doors that made her wince anytime somebody let them close behind them. Stella and her were sitting next to each other on the black chairs alongside Kate's room, the patient and Alyssa gone to fetch some snacks and drinks from the vending machines standing in the adjoining corridor. A nurse passes by them, smiling amiably at the two seated adolescents. Max returns it automatically, her mouth having a mind of its own.

"Alyssa told me you spared her from drowning last night." Chats her classmate.

"Yeah, some jerks were playing around with their water weenies." Max glances at the red fire extinguisher at her side. Those things were really practical when it came to door breaching.

Hills was fiddling with her green hairclip. It could have looked genuine if Caulfield didn't detect some nervousness emanating from her movements.

"Stella, if you want to ask me something, just do it."

She sure wasn't prepared for what came out of her classmate's mouth though.

"Is... Is something going on between you and Mr. Jefferson?" The intellectual girl tilts her head a bit
as she drops her question, eyes inspecting Max's reaction closely.

The hipster blinks uncontrollably at the suggestion.

"Eww... Why would you ask me this kind of things?"

"Just an intuition. The way he looks at you is very special... And he gives you a lot of attention compared to his other students... I wouldn't judge you if you two... you know... had an affair. God knows i wouldn't say no in your place!" she jests reassuringly.

"Urg, no way. This is so damn gross."

Stella chuckles at her cringing face. "You're really special, Max. More than half of the girls at Blackwell would die for it."

"Well, i'm good with staying alive, thanks." She mumbles funnily between clenched teeth.

Her interlocutor giggles again and a comfortable silence fills the atmosphere. The harsh words of Stella's mother cross the student's mind once more, and she can't help but feel the need to meddle into the poor girl's affairs. She couldn't provide the same kind of help she was offering to Nathan, but she could still try to lift her spirits as much as possible.

"Stella, i know you buy drugs from Frank." Maxine drops the admission like a bomb.

"I—Uh..." Stella's naturally soft voice falters.

"Don't worry, it's our little secret. I'm not putting you on the grill here. I'm not sure if your consumption comes from your... difficult background, or just the need to concentrate on your studies but, i want you to know that, if you need to talk, or anything else, i'm there."

"Um, thanks but, what do you mean by "difficult background"?" She repeats, brows furrowing.

"I know about your parents."

"How is that possible? I never talked about it to anyone."

"Yeah, i kinda suspected that."

"You know, i'm really gonna start thinking you have superpowers."

"Look... Sometimes the people you love are the ones who hurt you the most." She tentatively begins, realizing how much she actually sucked at optimistic speeches. "Keep doing what you're doing, Stella. You're strong, you don't need them to succeed. Those awful words they said to you, it's just garbage. Look at you, after everything you went through, you're still busting your ass for Blackwell. You're smart, honest, and nice. You can accomplish so much, all by yourself."

"Thank you, Max. I really appreciate that." The smile she aims her way melts Max's heart as if it was made of ice. "You're not going to tell me how you found out, huh?" She guesses astutely.

"Nope. Sorry... Way too intricate."

"It's alright."

And here is Kate, delicately holding a sheet of paper in her right hand, followed closely by Alyssa who's arms are full of chip packages and soda cans. The girls settle down with their friends, most of them already noshing on their snacks, except for Max and Kate.
"I made something for you after your visit yesterday." Confesses the latter, handing her the page she was previously carrying. "And you're in there."

Caulfield's cerulean orbs skim over the adorable drawing. A cute bunny and a lovable deer were chilling together amid a colorful autumn forest, sophisticated white cups and a teapot set up between them on the grass.

"Really? Which one am i?" She jubilates.

"Can't you guess? You're the doe."

Oh... Kate definitely has a good eye when it comes to certain things...

"Funny you should say that..." Max laughs awkwardly.

"Do you like it?"

"I love it. Now, this is getting a nice spot on my bedroom wall!"

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=owouKyUd_zE ]

The ceiling lights kept making weird sounds similar to the ones of a spring, catching him off guard every now and then. This secret bunker was full of dark memories, but surprisingly, enjoyables ones too. He remembered the first time Mark had ask him to stay after class, a strange glint in his eyes that immediately rendered Nathan distrustful. He had witnessed it before, in his father's gaze. But then, the art teacher actually managed to sway him with carefully chosen words and praises. Three weeks of small talks here and there and Nathan had been foolishly won over, left thinking that his strange interests were nothing to be ashamed of, that there was nothing wrong with him, and that the world—people—were simply not ready for this sort of artistic vision yet. The boy had the tendency to get obsessed with his visual subjects, just like the old freak. And, in the course of this demented week, he had found a rather interesting new material to work on, as the bunch of monochrome pictures spread on the coffee table demonstrated. A material named Max Caulfield. Prescott examined his handy work, gaze traveling along all the beautiful representations of the adolescent's freckled face. One of them displayed her sitting in the science lab, the tip of her index finger touching a sand hourglass while she pensively stared at the object. In another one, she was lending a hand to the school custodian—the same one who had reprimanded him for trying to steal the Tobanga—the way too large hood of her black raincoat falling onto her eyes and only leaving her small nose and plump lips visible. She was smiling widely in this one. As if the old weirdo could be funny! One of the most emotionally charged photograph he had taken of the girl was the one where she was stretching her hand toward a distressed and suicidal Kate Marsh up on the dormitories roof. The fourth exhibited her standing in front of the school building that same day, looking up at the sky during a splendid golden hour with a very serious face, as if she was waiting for something specific. She nearly had caught him in the act for the next one. It was in the diner, right before she had revealed all the dirt she had on his person, while she dreamily observed the outside world through the window next to her.
And there was that curious moment when that small squirrel had shared one of his nuts with her. He even had managed to capture her throughout the party last night. *Those* pictures weren't black and white though. The hipster looked pretty good in the red and purple hues provided by the expensive lightning system he had afforded for their little soiree, so he decided to make an exception in his artistic habits. She would probably be freaked out if she knew about him secretly taking pictures of her. Especially after the shit he pulled off this morning... He had such a hard time stopping himself from ravaging her against the lockers. Her gaze had clearly gave away her excitement. Knowing that he could turn on Max Caulfield, the fucking virginal goodie-two-shoes of Blackwell, was such a great stroke to his ego. He had been so angry with her at first, he wanted nothing more than to punish her by making her feel embarrassed and ashamed for treating him like a freak, even if she denied it. Seeing her so pliant in his hands polluted his mind with inappropriate thoughts of the girl very willing and writhing on his bed. It was purely a physical attraction, of course. Nothing else. Something about Caulfield—maybe her captivating eyes, or her plump sweet flavored lips, perhaps even the way her flesh invited to contact—thrilled his senses to the core. Their playful spat of the previous night had stirred instincts he wasn't aware of owning to the surface. He'd be better off if the twee bitch could stop arousing him with her unconscious leers.

Yeah, her eyes were clearly the main cause of his struggle.

Another individual barged inside the room in quick strides, humming a happy tune. It could only be Jefferson. The man didn't halt when he detected his student, or more likely apprentice, and proceeded to make himself comfortable by stripping off his jacket, rolling up his sleeves and taking out a whiskey bottle from one of the closets present in the bunker.

"Wearing gloves?" His teacher notes casually.

He did, for once. Thanks to Max's little comments about DNA evidence.

"Yeah. Maybe i'm finally starting to learn."

He could practically hear the "about time" crossing the instructor's mind.

"How was school today?" He asks, not really sounding interested by the answer.

Nathan watches him pour the liquor inside his favorite glass, propped on his desk, the amber liquid glittering slightly under the powerful lights the room was equipped with.

"Same as always."

The man immediately remarks the pile of photographs in his hands, and his eyes illuminate, like they always do at the sight of those things.

"Oh, working on something? Let me see." He rudely grabs the stack of pictures from the boy, the hand holding his beverage lowering to the coffee table to put it down carefully.

He most likely wanted his hands free to snoop into the pile more easily.

"Please, don't ask for my permission." The Prescott snaps in an almost biting tone.

Jefferson sends him an amused haughty gaze for a second, then returns his full attention to the photos.

Nate knows the first ones are just his habitual shots. Animal corpses, lots of things relating to death,
and even that little boy he captured on the beach during his latest psychotic episode. The moment he gets to Caulfield however, he can clearly see a shift in the older guy's eyes. "There's a lot of... Max, in here." He points out, as if the teen himself may not be aware of it. Or maybe he better not be aware of it. His face relaxes seconds later and he snorts at something he must have found funny. "I guess Miss Caulfield has a way with animals." He comments with a smile, plus the arch of a dark brow. "How pure..."

She has a way with more than that.

"I didn't know you were pals with Max."

A furtive interrogation—of which he was the undefeated master—was about to begin.

"I'm not. I'd rather die." The lie quickly bursts out his mouth, but sounds authentic.

"Does she know about this?" he raises the images until they reach his ears, nodding toward them.

"No, can't you tell? They're all taken from a distance."

He hums, dubious about the last part of his statement. Nathan absolutely hated the way he stared down at him from behind his glasses. Those damn things seemed to sharpen his gaze even more with the light reflecting across the spectacles, making them appear more cold and detached than usual.

"Max is a very interesting subject. I can understand the interest. She is aesthetically... i guess flawless would be the most fitting term."

That's all? Why not resort to worship while you're at it?

"You should stay away however." He continues. "She is too peculiar, you could never do a satisfying job at capturing her." The blow collided straight with the teenage boy's ego.

His photos were suddenly extended back to him, and he wasted no time retrieving them.

This did not bode well. The way the creep talked about the girl indicated his interest. Things could get pretty dangerous for Caulfield if the art teacher decided he wanted to fill one of his binders with her face. Or was he planning something else?

"But you would, right?"

The famous photographer frowns, eyes alit with mirth. "Do i detect some spite in your tone, Nathan?" He inquires, with a small tilt of his head.

"No." Denies the rich heir.

"Are you getting obsessed again?" The guy was talking about Rachel of course. "Be careful, Nate. You don't want to repeat the same mistakes, right?" Insinuates his former mentor before returning to his desk, sipping on his whiskey serenely, his humming resuming with greater intensity.

Nathan gulps discreetly. The sentence sounded more like a direct warning than a question.
Night was already starting to fall. The match programmed at 7pm had already started ten minutes ago. Two teenage girls were cautiously hiding beneath the stairs leading up the stadium's bleachers, butts glued to the ground while the seated supporters screamed and cheered to support their favorite team. The blue-haired one was meticulously observing her friend who had her eyes closed in concentration.

"You couldn't do that earlier?" Reprimands the punk.

"No, i couldn't! I didn't have time and i can't exactly do it in the open as you can guess." The brunette grumbles, opening her eyes gently as if to not shake away her focus.

The bunch of keys previously laying upon the grass between them is now floating in the air.

"How do you do that? God..." Chloe questions with a freaked out expression.

"I think it's tied to my emotions, somehow..." she explains.

"What do you mean?"

"The first time it happened, i was... feeling weird. That's when the hourglass hovered, then i was really angry and the thing exploded."

Price's sky blue orbs chase the moving object from side to side. Right. Left. Then right again.

"I'll never get use to this shit." She whispers, puzzled by the uncommon view.

"It's such a strain though." Admits Max, already sensing a massive headache creeping up on her.

"Don't push yourself too much." She requests, placing her hand on her accomplice's shoulder in reassurance.

"I have to learn to control it."

Scolds the smaller teen, setting the poor robot panda keychain free of her influence so it could fall back on the ground abruptly.

"You got time. I don't want you to pass out."

Too late.

"Do you have any explanation for this one?" Inquires Joyce's daughter softly, face moving closer to Maxine's.

Her powers always seemed to greatly tease the secret nerd's curiosity.

"Hell no. The others all had a link with time. I mean, for my rewind, it's pretty obvious. Then the time-traveling through the pictures... Photographs are like, still memories, right? And the access to people's souvenirs... Well those are little pieces of time, inside people's heads. Makes sense. But the sudden telekinesis... No idea."

"Your life sucks, Max." She declares, shoving her keys back in her pockets. "But it's so fucking cool!" She exults with glee, hugging her cute companion without any finesse.

"Thanks for the moral support." Drawls Max in an amusingly unconvinced tone as the embrace comes to an end.
Her friend leans a bit to the side to steal a peek at the outside world, withdrawing from her cover to monitor a certain Prescott's impending arrival, Caulfield's face following suit. A luxurious vehicle pulls over the distant sidewalk, principal Wells already there to greet the powerful man.

"It's him. Look at that car... Motherfucker..." Chloe looks ready to jump into action at any given moment, if her bouncing knee is any indication.

The exact instant Sean's unfit figure steps into her peripheral vision, she knows. Knows that all those demons and devils described in biblical literature are too far-stretched recounted fantasies from people deeply anchored in denial. Because the one she has right before her eyes possesses no beastly form, hiding under a perfectly human disguise, and yet she can recognize an evil thing when she sees one. Nor does he need any supernatural powers to establish supremacy over his insignificant subjects, meaning all the people of this town. Pawns in his game, ready to be crushed and sacrificed for his own gains. Luke was right. The mean bastard by excellence. You can read an entire existence of condescension, aloofness and dictatorship merely on the individual's face. How Nathan had survived all these years under the rule of his caustic patriarch, she would never know. The only physical trait he shares with his son is the color of his hair. His face is round, eyes very small behind his glasses compared to the rest of it, chin incredibly wide, just as the width of his cheeks. She sees more of Nathan in his mother, as confirmed the family picture she found this morning during her short tour of the estate.

Ray shakes Sean's hand with false eagerness before they begin to tread in the bleachers direction.

The faculty member looks agitated, his tension palpable from where they stand, but the novice photographer perfectly understands. The Prescott's presence casts an ominous veil over the place. She bets it's the case everywhere he goes. Maxine can hear Wells voice blabbering words about financial matters while the two grown men climb the stairs, their heavy strides echoing above the hidden adolescents. They sit at the end of the top row. Two young women abandon their hiding place to ascend the steps in their turn, staying at a good distance from their stationary objectives. The girls review their plan assiduously for quite some time until they feel ready to execute it. Max brings her hood over her head once they're finished.

"What are you doing?" Queries her associate.

"I need to cover my eyes. They tend to roll back when i do this." She elucidates, gaze secured on her future victim.

"That's hella creepy." Remarks the grimacing punk.

"Tell me about it."

"Okay, they've been placed for at least five minutes now. Can i go?"

"Yes."
Her favorite girl in the world leaves her side to sneak over the two male observing the game. She makes short work of her mission and with just the right amount of sweet talking, Blackwell's principal is following her to a more secluded corner to discuss falsely serious matters, leaving the Prescott man by himself.

Max stalks closer with the pace of a predator, seizing the opportunity, eyeing her prey attentively. Her heart has never beat this fast in her entire life. Her irises dart to Chloe one last time to make sure her partner is still talking with her ex-principal and keeping him busy. The rebellious teenager has her arms crossed over her jacket and is clearly engaged in her heated discussion with the head of the school. Miraculously, there's an unfinished drink in close proximity to Sean. Right hand in her pocket, she clenches her napkin firmly. Now was the time. Shutting her concealed eyes, she pictures the object lifting in the air repeatedly, praying to whatever mystical forces who were listening that everything would work out. Once she considers herself focused enough, her eyelids open once more to fix her only chance to get an exclusive insight inside the tyrant's mind. It was all about desiring something and imagining it happen.

I can do this. I know i can.

A crack resonates inside her skull, the awkward shifting sensation signaling that her efforts weren't vain. That damned big sized white cup floats above its owner's head without any awareness from the concerned party. She manages to make it drift behind people's backs, making sure that nobody notices anything. As it reaches her target, looming dangerously over his oblivious head, she flips the drink over, pouring its content all over the douchebag. Curses fly out of his mouth faster than lightning strikes the earth as he jumps from his seat. Roars rise from the public, partially covering his crude words. The Bigfoots had scored, it would seem, and she struggles to not let the ruckus distract her. She approaches him nonchalantly, making certain to appear relaxed despite the lump stuck in her throat and the awful shivers running down her spine.

"Here." Is all she utters as she hands him the tissue confidently.

She knows he's staring at her by now, even if she can't witness it first hand underneath her large hood. Since he's much taller than her, all she can perceive are his clothes, especially his brown pants and polished shoes.

His hesitation doesn't last long. Cold fingers slide over her own as he grasps the offering.

The change of settings is instantaneous. She recognizes the office she visualized this morning at the diner, except that things are a lot clearer now. A cozy chair similar to the one Wells has in his office stands behind the desk, reminding her of Chloe, and the only visible divergence was probably the price since it looked way more expensive.

Like everything around her.

A very familiar Prescott crest is hanging above the fireplace—the guy liked those things apparently—the only reason she can identify it is because of the replica her school library has been equipped with. Jefferson is in front of her—or rather Sean, as she tends to forget—holding a flute of champagne in his hand.

"Follow me." Ordains the man she is currently... possessing? How could she even call it?

A few steps along a lengthy corridor later, the two men enter another place that she sadly recalls all too well. Her professor scans the room with a stimulated gaze, his dark eyes wandering over all the creepy artworks hanging on the walls.
"Do you like it?" Asks Sean, hands linked behind his back, and Maxine has no trouble sensing how proud the freak is of his ornaments.

"Well... It's good to meet a man of the same tastes. It's pretty rare after all." Mumbles the youngest of the two.

"Less than you'd think." The remark earns him an interrogative glance from the teacher. "I'm sorry i didn't show you this sooner. I wanted to wait until i deemed you ready."

"Ready for what?" Jefferson frowns.

"We've known each other for some time now." The rich individual underlines mysteriously. "You must know that i financially provide for most of the school costs. My family technically owns this establishment. I could give Wells a little push in the right direction... Give my personal recommendation for your employment."

"And what would be the catch?"

"This is why i like you, Mark. You read people so well." He praises, arms crossing over his chest. "My son is a photography enthusiast, which i think is the reason why he's so dead set on disregarding his destiny and ruining our legacy. His latest desire is to study at Blackwell, because of its photography course. And what better instructor could he have than a man like you?"

His interlocutor seemed rightfully wary. "I feel like this is not the sole expectation you have of me."

Max can feel a disturbing smile forming on the Prescott's lips. "He's not the only aficionado i'm acquainted with."

"What are you alluding to?" The inquiry is followed by a small sip on his drink.

"What i'm trying to say, Mr. Jefferson, is that a lot of people would be more than willing to pay an important sum of money for an exclusive preview of your less... conventional work."

"You want to make this a business?"

"Now we're on the same page."

"With all due respect, i think you don't realize what you're asking for... I'm already taking a colossal amount of risks for this as a simple hobby, and you're asking me to incorporate other people to the equation... People with mouths, people who talk."

"Trust me, you have no reason to worry about this sort of things." He assures with conviction, then takes a step closer to his friend, maybe as a method of intimidation. "You like money, don't you? I fear Blackwell might not be enough to cover your expensive tastes, Mark. An important income on the side could help however."

"Do i even have a choice in the matter?" Jefferson was a shady fucker, so he could no doubt sense when someone else was trying to manipulate him.

He did it on a daily basis after all.

"Of course. I trust you will make the right one. You're a smart man after all."

Sean's hand briefly pats the photographer's shoulder in a manner that reminds her of an owner petting its docile and well-behaved dog.
"One last thing. You will be expected to meet my son during your teachings. He can never know about this. I don't need him to turn even more disturbed than he already is."

*Who's fault is that you piece of shit?*

"Please, think about my proposition." Was the last thing Max heard of their suspicious conversation.

When she comes back to the real world, her head is pounding, close to explosion.

*God... Nathan doesn't have a clue that his dad is behind all of this... And Sean doesn't know about Nathan's involvement. Jefferson is playing them both...*

Those bastards were pulling the strings together. Mark knew Sean wouldn't get grilled because of his money and influence, so he got Nathan into the deal to fuck the both of them over in case their little deal would ever get exposed. All the dots were finally connected. She was going to have a lot more "homework" to do than she originally thought.

The girl is so engrossed in her musings that she doesn't feel the red liquid trickling down her nose. She turns around in a tentative to evade the freak's presence and walk back to her friend.

"Miss..." His singular voice calls out, commanding her body to halt without having to touch her at all.

Caulfield faces him again with extreme slowness.

"Your napkin." He stretches it toward her. "You might need it more than me." He insinuates with a creepy twitch of his lips.

Before she can do anything to prevent it, his digits meet the underside of her nostrils in a hardly perceptible touch to show her the messy result of her nosebleed. She can't believe it. He had just smeared her blood on his fingers like it was normal demeanor. It reminded her of how Jefferson had wiped her nose using his thumb in the dark room, not at all grossed out by her vital essence, or hesitant at the notion of probing her face with his hands and invading her personal space.

She tries to gulp but discreetly chokes on her saliva as it strictly refuses to get swallowed, before carefully removing the tissue from his hand to pull it back in her pockets.

No more words are exchanged between the two. Wells soon rejoins them—his little talk with his former student concluded—as she rapidly recoils from the Prescott patriarch.

All the way back to Chloe, she can sense his soulless gaze on the back of her covered head. The fact that her and her punk friend are situated so far below the man concerns her, because it gives him full leverage to observe them from his perch.

"You're not gonna take that off?" The punk mentions to her greyish hood as Maxine settles beside her.

"No. He's still looking at me." She feels her friend's body beginning to shift already. "Don't turn around, you're gonna make it obvious!" Lowly warns the student between clenched teeth.

"Wow, check out your nose! Too much blow?"

"Too much power would be more appropriate." She retorts, wiping the rest of blood from her face.

She draws her attention to the ongoing match. Max sure was no expert when it came to football, but
she could tell Zach and Logan were killing it. The Razorbacks could crawl back into the hole they came out of. A flouncy Dana was waving at her from the lower levels, all the cheerleaders positioned near the pitch, and the shy girl returned it timidly. She looked gorgeous in her cheerleader outfit, her athletic body being perfectly outlined by her uniform. Caulfield noticed Trevor sitting among the crowd, eyes fixated on his girlfriend, his features a display of pure satisfaction.

"You're gonna sum it up for me, right?" Invites the blue-haired girl in a hushed murmur against her left ear.

"This is worse than i thought."

"He's involved?"

"Fuck yes, he is."

"So, they drug and kidnap girls, and then what? Don't tell me they..." she nearly gagged at the notion.

"No! No not that." Quickly refutes the brunette.

"Then what?" She sighs. "When will you tell me, Max?"

"Tomorrow. We'll have to talk about it with Kelly. You'll... get your details there."

Price eyes narrow skeptically. "Why do i feel like i'm not going to like it?"

"Because you won't." And that was an euphemism.

Chloe takes her hand, feminine fingers squeezing her own, in a touching attempt to bring her comfort. "Don't stress it too much, okay? Whatever it is... i'm sorry you had to go through this."

Me too Chloe. Me too...

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pHQUGrq1seM ]

Frank Bowers was exiting his RV, seeking the company of his faithful companion, whom he had left outside by itself to attend to its animalistic needs. He however stopped dead in his tracks when he located Pompidou playing with what resembled a translucent version of a common deer. The creature seemed to be looking right at the man. He blinked, bewildered by the sight and his mind whispering the weird idea that perhaps the animal was trying to communicate with him. Frank looked down at his hand, observing his empty beer for some time before throwing it in the bottle cemetery he had unconsciously composed nearby.

"I need to slow down on that shit." His head rocked from left to right as his legs ascended the stairs of the vehicle once more to get away from the awkward situation.
Well you can't hold me
I'm too slippery
I do no sleeping
I get lonely
You can touch me
If you want to
I got poison
I just might bite you

A young woman was loitering on the edge of the fountain facing her school, elbows digging into her thighs as she reflected on the troubles clogging her existence, when a familiar flock of starlings decided to catch her attention by forming a black skull amid the clouds. Mistrustful of her unreliable sense of reality, she determined that her best option to make sure she wasn't hallucinating all of this was to photograph the phenomenon. Task accomplished, her charming cerulean eyes examined the freshly acquired picture, which fortunately displayed a full graphic evidence of her sanity. After more advanced contemplation, the girl discarded the tiny thing, lifting herself from her seated position to leave the area, mind overloaded with even more questions than five minutes ago. A hiding crow she wouldn't have the chance to distinguish took off with the polaroid she had tossed away, the cascading fountain left as sole bystander of the crafty theft. Miles away from Blackwell, Nathan Prescott emerged from the old decrepit barn owned by his family. As the young heir dragged his eyes to the ether, a dark skull molded by birds was looming over the entire flourishing landscape.

Lie in circles
On the sunlight
Shine like diamonds
On a dark night
Ain't no mercy
In my smiling
Only fangs and
Sweet beguiling

Arcadia Bay's police station was gradually being deserted, the late hour leaving desks covered with coffees, donuts and other sorts of treats. Although one dedicated officer was working on leaving a message on the voicemail of a troubled but heroic adolescent.

"Hey, Max, Officer Berry here. I ran the plate you asked for and I got the info you wanted. Guy's name is Bobby Fallon. From what I read, he's doing private work for the Prescotts. So I think we can safely assume that he's not distributing drugs on campus. Maybe Sean hired him to keep an eye on Nathan, wouldn't be the first time, as you already know... Nothing to worry about, kid. I hope this helps. See you around, Max."
The future, he don't
Try to find me
Skin I been through
Dies behind me
Solid hollow
Wrapped in hatred
Not a drop of
Venom wasted

Cheerful whistling could be heard inside the unfurnished room of the unfinished Pan Estate, debris coating the messy floor of the building. One oblivious man—cause of the light ruckus—was studying plans in the middle of the empty place, his fluorescent yellow jacket popping out among the scarce lightning. Until the individual began to hear weird rumblings in his back. Quizzical, he chose to turn around to inspect the commotion. His breathing ceasing completely at the sight of four imposing coyotes stalking toward him. The papers he was holding fell from his hands, the worker prudently moved backward, eyes set on the prowling creatures. His trembling palms hiked up in some kind of surrender that he sincerely hoped the ferocious things could understand.

He let out a shaky laugh, his lack of air not helping with his attempt to ease the situation. "Nice doggies..."

Low growls echoed along the sturdy walls as a result.

"Is this some kind of coalition? I-i never killed a-anything before... i swear!" He avowed with a brittle voice. "W-well maybe that ugly spider when i was ten... but it ran under my shoe, i-i didn't even see it! Please..."

A yell erupted from his throat as he was forcefully shoved to the ground by the closest beast. His shriek was interrupted when his pupils gazed up in its dark mesmerizing eyes. He felt some strange invisible force pull him in, temporarily simmering the man down so he could pay attention to the disembodied voices arising all around him. For some twisted reason, he was persuaded they were coming from the herd currently threatening his life.

"This place is sacred."

"Get out while you still can."

"Death will come to those who withstand."

Minutes later, the disheveled employee emerged from the structure's entrance, charging in his superior's direction.

"I quit!" He announced, violently throwing his helmet to the ground.

"What?!" The foreman exclaimed. "What is it this time?"

"Four fucking coyotes man! That's what it is! I was THIS close to being mauled to death!" He drew a short imaginary distance between his index and thumb. "Sayonara, motherfucker." He saluted with
false politeness before giving his boss the finger and bailing out of the doomed location.

"Me too. Fuck this job." Informed another, joining his colleague in his pursuit of freedom.

Their chief gawked at them, limbs posed in a questionning manner. "You... You—You can't ALL bail on me, Prescott is gonna have my fucking head!"

"And we're trying to save ours here." Noted yet another one of them, also making his way out of the construction site.

Well you can slip in  
Try to find me  
Hold your breath and  
Flat deny me  
It makes no difference  
To my thinking  
I'll be here when  
You start sinking

Two people of a certain age were sitting face to face at a wooden table. A man with long white hair fastened in a ponytail and a familiar woman with much darker ones, who took a drag of her homemade cigarette.

"The boy has trouble understanding why you left." Conversed her acquaintance.

"Why would i want to live in a cage?" Trails of smoke slipped out of her mouth, one of her brows rising questioningly.

"Our reserve is prolific and marvelous, he can't grasp why any of us would leave that behind. Or how this place could be compared to a prison." He explained, sipping on the tea she had prepared for the both of them.

"I don't like people telling me what i should do or where i should live. Or that i should be kept on a patch of land to dwell among my kind." She answered sternly.

"You know he doesn't see it like this."

"There's a lot of things this kid doesn't see. Explain them to him. He'll listen to you."

"Why would he? He's as stubborn as a mule." Smiled the old man.

"Because you're his chief, and i'm a crazy old coot." The statement was obliviously a reference to a sentence previously uttered by the young boy they kept refering to. "Hania feels entitled to his culture. Just like that Prescott man, he makes the mistake of thinking that man can own the land. He doesn't realize his luck because he's stuck in his little bubble, has never seen the other reservations. He doesn't understand the poverty, the misery, the alcohol issues, the abuse, the corrupted leadership, he doesn't know that the youths are killing themselves because there is no hope."

Something whaked against the closest window, interrupting their conversation. A crow was tapping
on the pane with its beak, the limb obstructed by a flat object secured in between. The woman opened the window to let the bird fly in, the latter bringing what seemed to be a polaroid to her male companion.

"Well, there is still hope for us apparently." He indicated, showing her the small thing.

Her gaze skimmed over the object, a small smirk appearing on her face at its content. "Are you harassing those poor kids?"

"I'm merely curious about our little friends."

"So you feel the need to scope the entire town to search for them?" She implied, a wrinkled finger tapping against her cigarette butt to make its consumed part fall into the ashtray.

"I didn't do anything. I was sitting right here all this time." He defended humorously.

A hoarse laugh came from her throat, her lips sealed and refusing to release the sound. "You'll never change."

"Would you want me to?" He wondered, petting the head of the docile raven fondly.

"No, old friend. Stay exactly who you are."

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O2t86dAxuLw ]

Deanna was truly a sight to behold. How could people so naturally attractive exist? Judging from all the articles Max had found while perusing the web, the girl had been missing since 1995, and was rumored dead ever since. She had signed a contract with a famed modeling agency and, from what her earlier visions seemed to indicate, had crossed paths with Jefferson during a casting for a prestigious fashion magazine of the nineties era. She was only twenty when she disappeared, leaving an unconcerned family behind who had claimed that their daughter had probably run away away to hide somewhere nobody would find her because of her shameful history with drugs. That made Maxine realize how lucky Chloe and her were to have been born into caring families. Between this poor model, Stella and her horrible mother, and Nathan with his monstrous father, most kids she knew lived very unfortunate and miserable lifes because of their fucked up parents. Caulfield continued to squint at Deanna's professional pictures for some time, admiring the young woman's ingenuous beauty. Her dark hair and eyes contrasted drastically with her pale skin, giving her an aura of fragility and brittleness which diverged with her clever spirited gaze. If she was still missing after all these years, that meant her remains were still undiscovered. The freak must have burried her somewhere secluded, like he had done with Rachel. Maybe she'd be able to learn the location of the girl's body by touching her teacher the next time she'd stay with him after class. At least, she wouldn't have to support his toxic presence further this week. Max was literally free of him until Monday.
Just as she closed the tabs concerning Riggs and decided to get on this dear Bobby Fallon's case, her connexion chose to dissolve into thin air.

"What? Ugh, not now!" she whined.

She needed his fucking address! If she could even find it... She was almost certain he was linked to Sean's little photo business.

Sighing loudly, the novice photographer rose from her chair, closing her useless laptop in the process before dragging herself to her bed and curling up on it. Vibrations brutally disturbed the atmospheric quietness of her room.

Come here!
10/11 00:26am

I'm not your dog. And i'm busy. If you want it that much, YOU can come.
10/11 00:26am

Suck my ass Caulfield!
10/11 00:26am

Ew, no thanks.

Hardly three minutes later, Nathan was at her door. He didn't knock, probably thinking it was below him, choosing to barge in instead and disrupt her peace of mind. They eyed each other like two animals from different species not knowing what to make of the other. Would one of them finish eaten?

"That's what you call busy?" A scoff escaped his attractively shaped lips, hands burried in his pajama pants pockets. Her unamused silence filled the air edgily. "Wow, moody nerd alert." His brows went up and down as he delivered his gibe. Grasping that he wouldn't get any response, he let his attention drift to the lit chinese paper lights hanging above her bed, the view engrossing him. Getting a grip a minute later, he walked up to the mousy girl, satisfied when he saw her lift her head to stare back at him.

"Stop being so edgy, i'm not gonna rape you." He cleared up bluntly.

Wowzer, straight to the point.

Technically, what occured during lunch had nothing to do with rape, and the fact that she wouldn't really mind him doing it again was what scared her the most. As long as he didn't initiate it, she wouldn't do anything deviant, right? No, scratch that. Even if he made a move, she would totally resist and push him away! That's right!
The boy installed himself at her sides, completely oblivious to her internal conflict. "I think Jefferson has his eyes on you." He disclosed out of nowhere.

Her response took some time to come out of her mouth, but it did eventually. "He wants me to replace you, i think." She guessed wildly.

"What?" Of course he was gonna force her to elaborate when all she wanted was to shut down and go to sleep.

Max placed her chin on her connected knees before granting him any further explanation. "He doesn't trust you since Rachel's death. He wants another protege, i guess."

"Then he's planning to get rid of me." He concluded anxiously, laying back onto her bed with his hands linked under his skull.

"I won't let that happen." The guarantee made him glance at her, an odd gleam crossing his steely irises.

For a minute, she swore she could see an emotion akin to respect flikering across them.

"What's wrong with him?" He inquired, grabbing her teddy bear and mentioning to his missing eye.

"I swallowed it when i was little."

A sharp chortle erupted from his throat. "As expected."

Yeah, that typically meant she was dumb. She leaned back down on the bed to rest upon it, their bodies so close that she could feel the heat emanating from his skin.

"Your dad... What is he planning for the Bay? Why does he really want those estates built?" Max braved his temper by asking the question lingering inside her mind since this morning.

For once, he didn't beat around the bush. "...He made a deal with some rich foreigners."

"What kind of deal?"

"He's supposed to drive you all out of town to make place for them. I don't know anything else." He cut the conversation short, but his tone indicated he wasn't being deceitful.

She lightly shook her head against her pillow. Max wasn't feeling courageous enough to spill the infos she had acquired earlier on his creep of a father, nor did she possessed the strength to battle with Nathan tonight. She'd wait for a bit, and reveal everything to him when she deemed him prepared enough to hear it.

"He's such a bastard."

"Tell me something i don't know already." He replied, grabbing the trashcan at the feet of her bed to peer at its content before putting it back on the ground, unidentified things budging around from inside the container. "Why did you throw away your cookies?" He seemed seriously baffled by his findings.

How dared she throw away something as wondrous as cookies? Victoria would probably kill for those.

"I... can't keep anything down."
She saw no point in lying. He'd harass her until she spilled out the truth anyway.

"I heard you collapsed in P.E." He related. "You're gonna die if you don't eat."

*Thanks for the tip, Einstein.*

"I do eat Nathan, but it's pointless if it keeps coming out before I can digest it."

"You're such a fucking mess, Caulfield." He sighed exasperatedly. "You can't even take care of yourself and you want to take down Jefferson?" He scoffed. "For real, do I have to babysit you all the time?"

"Get off your high horse, you're the one who keeps asking for us to sleep together."

"You're the reason it happened in the first place, bitch."

Her bust heaved from the sheets, thin arms steadying her from behind.

"Oh, come on! Can't you just admit it? It helps you sleep at night, and it's the same for me. This is just some mutually beneficial arrangement. What's to be ashamed of?"

He was gazing ahead, eyes set on her bedroom window to look at the outside world, refusing to meet her eyes or even answer her inquiry.

"I'm even more fucked up than you, Caulfield." He finally proclaimed, the syllables muffled by his tense mouth. "There's no way I can help you. There's absolutely nothing warm or jovial about my life."

"I don't need rainbows and sunshine to get better."

"No, you need to talk about it, which you refuse to do."

"That's not true." She denied, like the unskilled liar she was.

"It is. That punk ass you call friend, she knows about what happened to you in the dark room?"

"She knows i was drugged and kidnapped."

"And also that he took pictures of you?"

"...No."

"See? You tell people what you want and keep the rest to yourself. You're a miserable liar. And a bad one at that."

"I don't have a choice. I know her, she let's her rage control her. You have that in common. She could kill him if she knew it was him. I'll... tell her when it's time."

"Oh so she doesn't even know who it is? You're such a hypocrite. Always running around telling people what they should or shouldn't do, even when you're no better than them."

**He's right. You know he is.**

Maxine laid back on her bed quietly, turning her back to the boy.

"Nothing to say?" He didn't bother trying to hide his smugness.
After five interminable minutes, he twisted around to glimpse at the noiseless teenager girl.

"What's with the silent treatment?"

Looming over her, Nathan discovered the source of her silence. "Tch—! Why the fuck are you crying now?"

The minx didn't stop there, oh no, in fact, her discreet sobbing redoubled.

"Stop it." He ordered.

"..."

"I didn't say that to be mean." He desperately tried.

"..."

"Oh, i know! Mood swings. Fucking periods, right?"

"..."

"No?"

"..."

"You're really not sexy when you cry." The Prescott huffed, his back hitting her bed once more.

Like i ever am.

She could never really tell his intentions toward her. Sometimes he seemed to want to bring her down, then the next moment he was doing the exact opposite.

And they say girls are the complicated ones...

All teary-eyed, the girl turned back around to leer at him, her rosy cheeks smeared by wet trails. She sniffled to keep her nose from running, studying the boy's profile as tears continued to cascade down her face stubbornly.

"I know i'm handsome, but control your hormones, hard up."

Max perceived a familiar heat kindling his eyes as they shifted to her. She kept staring despite his warning. So he flicked her between the eyes, like the jackass he was.

"Ow! What was that for?" Max cried out, rubbing the dolorous spot with her hands, more tears trickling from her eyes because of the acute throbbing.

"Stop staring and go to sleep!" He growled menacingly.

What did i do this time? What a stupid brute!

One last glare to his insufferable person and she buried herself under her colored sheets, her hair, forehead, and right hand being the only things remaining visible to him. She closed her eyes, determined to doze off like a newborn baby and to stop worrying about the jerk. Seconds later, she felt the tip of his fingers brushing her own lightly, and when she realized the touch wasn't accidental since his digits weren't moving away, she subtly intertwined them together.
He's doing it again.

Just like that, and with Kate's bunny as sole witness of the singular scene, the two adolescents fell into a deep slumber, hands never receding from each other over the course of the night.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter, Max meets very interesting people and gets some answers about Arcadia Bay.
Saturday, October 12

Chapter Summary

Some Arcadia lore in this one, among other things.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PSvXwVil0-I ]

The only thing she can distinguish at first is the grand trail of light the sun casts upon the sea. As the blur around her vision evaporates, she immediately recognizes the cliff supporting her feet. Just as the previous night, the lighthouse is nowhere to be seen, and like in her precedent dream, the rocks, trees and blades of grass Chloe and her used to see are disposed differently than what she remembers. She's reminded of the reddish boundaries she encountered while time-traveling through photographs in the past when she spots some outlandish wavering borders all around the beautiful landscape. Once Max swings around, two shadows representing human silhouettes are crouched on the ground, facing one another. Their light and relatively small corpulence would suggest children or young teenagers.

The scene is static, the shady pair looking ready to stir out of their stillness at any moment now, yet nothing happens. Max approaches with unsure steps, her right hand raising toward the bizarre figures, only to halt in hesitation.

"Touch it," whispers something which strangely resonates inside her mind instead of her ears.

And so she does. Her dark, faceless companions suddenly come to life.

"Time is a thread, and life a circle." A girl's voice says to her comrade with a potent accent that the photographer would never be able to describe effectively, nor estimate its exact origin.

The speaking shadow's index finger meets the earthly ground to trace said thread in a spiraling motion, drawing a gyre into the dirt, luring the other child's attention to it.

*Looks like a whirlwind... Or the Vortex Club's symbol.*

"How is life a circle? Isn't that silly?" Questions the other, also a girl from the sound of her voice, tilting her head in curiosity.

This one's accent is quite distinct too, but contrasts radically with her friend's.

"Look around you," starts the first one again, palms jutting toward the heavens. "The sky, the Earth, the stars... All of them are round. The wind seems invisible at first, until it whirls to manifest itself. Even the birds make their nest in circles. Time creates things, make them grow, then die, so they can
be reborn again. This is the great way of life."

*Where am i? This is obviously Arcadia but, it feels like another time entirely.*

"My dad says christians enter God's house when they die. Where do your people go?" Asks the second girl, who seemed to always be interested in what her friend had to say.

"I don't really know. Mine said that when he would pass, i shouldn't be sad, cause he'd still be there, all around me."

"Around you?"

"Yes. He said he'd join his deceased brothers and sisters to protect this sacred land."

"That sounds formidable! Why can't we do that too? That's unfair!" Her extremities smack against the solid ground, in excitement or outrage, Maxine doesn't know. Maybe both.

A clear laugh reaches Max's eardrums.

"Well, we're still alive at the moment. So we shouldn't talk about death so much. Why not live fully and protect each other instead, for now?"

"I think i'd like that." The student could hear a smile in that sentence as she observes the little girl place her hand above her friend's, communicating some sort of promise through the gesture.

The environment alters, something she's becoming fairly accustomed to. A clearing amid the forest... People stroll around, attending to their daily lifes like they couldn't see the enormous anachronism that she was, planted right there at the heart of their settlement, similar to a tree in the middle of the ocean. She can perceive adults, children and elders because of the way they speak, walk and behave. It is her only clues to what they are since, just like her first apparitions, their skin and clothes are covered by a dark veil. Those shadowy humanoids laugh and talk with each other in those peculiar accents she heard before, share food and trinkets with friendly generosity, and Max sometimes hears words pronounced in a tongue utterly foreign to her among the barely audible hisses of understandable english.

*This is definitely not 2013... Those people are settlers. Is this the mutual symbiosis Miss Grant was talking about? The atmosphere is so peaceful...*

The boundaries are still present, but the pioneers don't seem to notice them either. Every sound her ears pick up is distorted by crackling noises. Promptly, the shifting sensation comes back, and her settings stay the same albeit some details differ. Like the bloody reeking corpse at her feet for example. She nearly doubles over at the sickening stench. Three manly forms are facing what looks like a woman and a man three feet away from her, aiming their guns at the helpless couple. Their straight postures indicate no fear on their part however.

"You are responsible for this. Do you even realize what you've done?" Chides the offended gentleman.

"What we've done? How dare you mingle with savages! You're a traitor to your kind!" Defended the leader of the armed group.

"My kind? What kind?! The one who murders in cold blood for no reason? I bet you'd have killed all of them if we didn't come back sooner! You monster!"

"With pleasure. They're not humans. They're not like you and me. They're ignorant to the ways of
God. We could tame them, make them useful."

The woman intervenes, her chin jutting onward with pride. "He calls himself civilized, yet is willing to destroy anything that doesn't think like him. You're wasting your time talking to this one."

"That bitch knows our language?" The racist guy took offense to that fact apparently.

"My people have a way of speaking with animals." She continues to defy.

"Are you comparing us to beasts?"

"What else could you be? You use pretty words and yet all i can hear is a serpent spitting venom. You soil this sacred earth with our blood and call us savages. Your foolishness knows no bounds."

"You have quite the mouth, old crone. We'll see if you're still so talkative when my men come back to finish you and your primitive tribe."

"Go on white man, build your nation on our bones, see what it gets you. The land you dare to desecrate will reclaim itself, and the green grass you stomped on will use your fetid corpse to regrow once more." Her phrase ends with a spit at the xenophobe's boots.

"Don't push your luck!" He roars brutally, pressing his gun over her heart.

The peaceful fellow interposes himself between the two.

"Stop it! This isn't right! Please, leave. You are not wanted here. We're good folks, all we desire is peace."

"Good luck with that." Mumbles the detestable man. "I'll remember you old bitch." He warns, his index finger to her face.

The three gunmen disappear in a flash, leaving their two victims behind.

"They'll be back. Those monsters are going to pillage us, kill us off..." Anxiously exhales the only remaining man. "I'm deeply sorry. You welcomed us here and... we attracted those devils to this place. This is entirely our fault."

"Do not fret, friend. None of you are responsible for those evil men's acts."

"What are we going to do?"

"Wait. If those men think they can have their way with the help of violence, they're in for a surprise."

"Whatever do you mean?"

"Whoever brings harm to this place or our people will gravely regret it."

She turns toward the horizon, last words bouncing remotely all around them and dispersing weirdly in the air.

"We will protect. We will preserve. We will not bow."

It's their turn to dematerialize. Mesmeric chants ascent and echo in circles around her out of the blue, masculine voices repeatedly pronouncing series of words resembling strange incantations. She turns around and here she is, back at the lighthouse's location. Lighthouse which is still missing. It rapidly gets hard to see anything, because she's now in the center of a considerable entropy. A deluge of
rain, wind and thunder greets her, yet no tornado in sight. Lightning strikes all over the landscape, the thundering sounds always delayed from the violent blazing strings of light. That's when she sees it. The monstrous tidal wave springing from the sea and towering over an occupied beach.

A tsunami?

Dozens of men are running in the opposite direction, trying to escape the impending moist fatality waiting to befall upon them. Her instincts kick in and allude to the credible idea that the fleeing faction is of connivance with the white supremacists she had met earlier, without their own cognizance obviously. Like precedently, the spectacle is motionless, until she nears the end of the cliff to watch the unfurling chaos more closely.

The panorama unfreezes and the surging water smashes mercilessly onto the sand, sweeping the dwellers from the solid ground in one efficient blow. It doesn't last long, but the picture is already engraved in her brain, especially their cries of terror. As soon as the land is cleared of living humans, the scene halts momentarily, only to unfold once more, in reverse this time. It reminds her of the never ending nightmare she had before sacrificing Chloe. When she roamed the halls of Blackwell while students were walking backward. She witnesses the tremendous wave retract from its preys, who magically come back to life and race in the inverted direction.

Just as she thought the disaster was about to unravel one last time—the view working similarly to a broken tape rewinding endlessly—the murmurs cease and she bounces upward as modern music hits her eardrums.

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k2IDrD8zy1Q ]

She's in her bed, wrapped in cotton sheets that are far more agreeable than the raging weather she had found herself trapped in. Her ragged breaths slowly ease down as she endeavors to compose herself. This wasn't a nightmare. It felt too real, too tangible. Maybe she should do as Miss Grant suggested and find out more about her alma mater. If her dream was a real insight of Arcadia Bay's history, then her teacher had been right. This town really had a lot of secrets to unearth.

"There's a lot of power in this region."

You couldn't be more right, Miss Grant.

The air circulating inside her room felt heavily suffocating and damp, as well as laborious to capture with her nostrils or even between her parted lips, to give her lungs their much needed supplies of oxygen. She could feel sweat prickling under her skin, ready to leak out of her pores at the slightest opportunity she'd give it by moving about. Barely awoken and the temperature was already unbearable.

God, what's with this heat?

Her left palm palpated the place next to her out of reflex, the fact that she found nothing else than soft covers drawing her gaze. Like she expected, Nathan had absconded the room. How could he incessantly arouse prior to her?
Standing on wobbly legs, heels scraping the fluffy material of her carpeting, she shuffled awkwardly
to her fan—placed on her window's sill—activating it to cool down her room. Touching the
scorching pane giving an open view of the dorms yard told her that the climate wasn't that much
cooler outside. The draft blowing from her air conditioner forced her hair to sway away from her
blazing nape pleasantly, alleviating her for only a moment.

Max squatted to give a tasty carrot to Alice, who tickled the tip of her fingers with her cute little
snout before proceeding to chomp on her food. Her daily mission accomplished, she grabbed the
poster left on her desk to take another look at it. Why was Arcadia so dead set on guiding her to Pan
Estate? What could she accomplish there exactly? Or was this just to help her find something that
would facilitate her investigation?

A noisy vibration interrupted her musings as her cellphone pulsated on the green squares serving as
her nightstand. A call from Chloe. She glanced at the clock on her screen to see it was only 7:30am,
before swiping her thumb across the gadget.

"Chloe?" she answered, still staring at the paper in her hand.

"Still wanna rebuild that fort?" Her associate sounded way too enthusiastic for an early morning.

"I..." A smile graced her lips. "Yes, of course."

"Then i'll be picking you up at ten, Bat-Max. You better be ready. We can go to the protest right
after."

"Understood, Captain Chloe."

"Oh, good! You still remember how to address your superiors, slave."

"I didn't consider sidekicks could become superiors... Especially when the slave possesses mad
powers..." she implied threateningly, discarding the poster on her unmade bed.

A short anxious silence met her ears for the next five seconds. "Please don't make something fly into
my window." The blue one pleaded in a wary tone.

Maxine chuckled. "Don't worry, i'm not that powerful." She sighed as another wave of heat
assaulted her. "Why is it so fucking hot in here?"

"It can't be, i'm not there yet."

"Yes, i'm sure you're the principal cause of global warming. And to think all those scientists are still
searching for solutions when the problem is just a punk in some godforsaken hick town."

"Ah-ah."

"Too bad you weren't on the Titanic, you could have melt that iceberg and saved so many lives."

"Okay smart-ass, i get it."

Without any warning, Nathan barged into the room, his hands filled with the blue cooler she
antecedently saw in his own bedroom.

Eyes wide, she brought her index to her mouth and sent him her most severe look in a warning for
him to stay mute, "Alright CHLOE," her insistence on the name didn't escape him, and he rolled his
eyes in understanding, "i think i should go shower now."
His indiscretion was probably due to the fact that students woke up late on the weekends, choosing to linger in bed to rest properly after a long and stressful week. Lucky them. He certainly wouldn't be able to roam the girls dorm without being spotted if this was a Monday morning. The boy progressed to the middle of the room, plopping his ice box on the floor before flopping down next to it.

"Dude, why are you speaking so loud? You're being weird all of a sudden." Chloe remarked suspiciously.

"Sorry, the girls are really noisy this morning."

"The joys of cohabitation. Gotta bail. See you later, snoopy hipster."

"You're a real poet with those rhymes."

"Eat me. And get that ass in gear!"

Max hangs up, throws her phone on the bed carelessly, stares at Nathan for three seconds, then lowers her stereo's volume so they could converse without raising their voices too much. Her intruder was pulling out diverse edibles from his ice-cold treasure chest.

"What's this?" She nods at the food.

"Breakfast." He shortly replies.

Her hands hook on her hips. "Okay, i see where this is going. Are you gonna force feed me?" She sends him a rebuking look.

He shrugs, assembling his meal on the floor absently. "Maybe. You'd make a great duck with all those annoying sounds you produce all the time."

Great, now he wants to turn me into foie gras.

"I highly doubt my liver would be tasty though."

"Sit down." He snaps, gritting his teeth.

She snatches the water bottle near Lisa before complying. Once she was installed and done sipping on the refreshing beverage, he stretched a banana toward her, which earns him a questioning look. She puts down her bottle, still eyeing him peculiarly.

"Fruits are pretty easy to digest." He explains in a barely audible manner.

The advice makes her wonder if he ever had problems similar to hers, and if it's why and how he discovered his information.

She accepts it, gripping the other end of the fruit until he lets go of it. "If you say so..." she begins to peel it in a shy manner. "Are you... worried about me?"

He snorts like she just told him the most offensive things he's ever heard. "Fuck no. Rachel will kill me if you die, so eat fucktard."

He bites into his muffin like an uncivilized barbarian, small pieces of it falling down on the floor. Her poor carpet was gonna get covered in crumbs at this rate. Never in her life had she thought she'd find herself eating on her bedroom floor with Nathan Prescott.

"You really think she can harm you as a spirit?" she wonders doubtfully, flinging her peel into the
trashcan at the end of her room. It goes in.

Wowzer, Max... Maybe you should give basketball a try.

"How would i know? I'm not taking any risks though." His words are muffled by the chunks of food in his mouth.

She eventually remarks that he's not wearing his usual red jacket, sitting in a simple white shirt and blue cardigan instead. The heat was certainly at cause. Even then, he didn't seem prompt to let his arms exposed unless he was in his pajamas. She never saw anything wrong with the limbs in question so, she didn't understand why. Did the boy have complexes?

Maxine stares at her banana weirdly, unsure of the future consequences eating would have for stomach. "You know she doesn't really hate you, right? Is that what she said in your dream?" She reassures, then inquires, finally taking a bite of her fruit.

It didn't feel nauseating or cloying. Maybe he was right and fruits were a good option.

He marks a pause in his chewing before answering. "No, but when somebody comes up in my face and threatens to haunt me for the rest of my life if i don't do as they say, i wager they don't really think of me as their best friend." His eyebrows scale his forehead in emphasis.

Especially if you gave them an overdose...

"She only wanted to make sure you were on our side. She once told me she held no grudges against you... She's not happy about what you did, of course, but she said there was no place for resentment where she was now. So, yeah... Be wary that she'll kick your ass if you don't listen, but don't hold onto the idea that she hates you, because that's not true."

The boy doesn't respond. She's aware he's registered what she said and put it in a segment of his mind to reflect on it later. For now, he takes advantage of her persistent forearm scratching to change the topic of their discussion.

"Can't you put some fucking moisturizer on it?" He scowls, eyes set on the irritated and almost bloody streaks coating her skin.

"I don't have any."

His eyes raise to the ceiling. "Tss—Are you sure you're a girl? You're hopeless."

That i am.

They keep eating in silence, the calm and somehow sad melody coming from her stereo filling the atmosphere with a tranquility he must not often experience in his own chilly, dusky room. After some time, and once his muffin is successfully consumed, he breaks the quietness hanging between them.

"The dyke, she knows about your so-called rewind powers?" His voice is hushed, nearly imperceptible over the music and the birds chirping coming from outside.

"Of course. And her name is Chloe, not dyke." She corrects straight off.

Nathan's attention is focused on the drawing Kate gifted her with the previous day, pasted to her wall with the help of adhesive. "Whatev... She believes you?"
"Yes."

He licks his lips in nervousness, his white teeth showing for a second. "What about Rachel? She..."

"Knows she's dead? Buried in the junkyard?" She interrupts. "Yes. She also knows you're responsible. So try to avoid her for the time being."

He snorts ungracefully. "For the time being? I'm not crossing paths with that slut ever again."

She frowns at the rude denomination. "Can't you be respectful for once? After what you did to her, I think she deserves it. Plus, she's my best friend. So stop calling her names or I'll hit you." Max forewarns, trying to sound intimidating.

The teenage boy in front of her archs a brow, utterly unimpressed. "You think I'm scared of being hit at this point?"

That drives her to shut her big mouth for a clumsy instant, her body stilling as she fathoms her faux pas.

Caulfield sighs, a trembling rush of air exiting her mouth. "I'm sorry for the reminder... but I don't appreciate people smack talking Chloe."

She engulfs the last bit of her banana, gulping it down after further mastication. Now that the topic is on the table, she realizes they never really talked about it in details. There was a high probability he didn't even want to. How do you get over your own family abusing and hurting you? Simply imagining her own parents doing the same to her made her queasy. What about his own mother? Didn't she care about her husband hitting her son? Did Nathan possessed absolutely no ally inside his family circle?

"Nobody ever did anything about your dad? I mean the... You know what I mean." She drops her attempt at finding the right terminology.

He links his fingers together over his crossed legs, scanning her room with blurred eyes that doggedly never meet hers. "Kristine tried to help but, she couldn't do much. She was just a kid too. She wasn't scared to give him shit because she knew he wouldn't hit a girl."

*Oh so he does have some principles... Twisted ones.*

"You never had anyone else?"

His gaze dims right off the bat, and she detects sadness dripping from his stormy orbs, although he's clearly striving to hide it.

"...My sister and I had a nanny growing up... An old hag... Tight bun, strict clothes... She never smiled. I thought she hated my guts. She never talked to me except to give me orders..." He narrates, contemplating her bleak colored floor.

She lets him expand his tale, staying respectfully quiet.

"Then one day, she found me crying in the hallway, and took me to my room to read me a children's book." The short-fused student huffs soundly. "She never said anything else... just read the damn thing. After that, it became common occurrence. It was always the same shitty story..." His head shakes a little at the recollection. "At first I didn't understand why she was doing it. Then I noticed it only happened the days my dad beat the crap out of me..."
She cared about him in her own special way...

He reaches for a lustrous red apple inside his cooler, juggling with it in indolent moves as soon as it's in his possession.

"Even when he didn't leave any bruises and i wasn't crying... She always knew somehow..." His sharp brows furrow at the inexplicableness.

Maxine bends forward a bit, attentive to his childhood story. "Maybe she saw it in your eyes... How did you feel about it?"

"I don't know... It made me feel better... To see that someone cared, aside my sister..." he took a mouthful of his fruit, producing a keen crunching noise.

I can imagine.

"What happened then?" she inquires, spurring him to continue.

"My dad fired her." Max frowns at the cruel notion, even if it did sound like something Sean would do without having the courtesy to blink. "She told me herself after reading her book to me one day. She went to his office and admitted she had been diagnosed with cancer five months ago. That it was getting worse and that she'd be obliged to resort to chemo. So he kicked her out. Can't have a decaying nanny meandering the house, you see." Nathan recites the last part spitefully in a spot-on imitation of his father's voice. "That's what he said when i confronted him."

"That's so awful..." she comments morosely, tugging on her white short-sleeved nightshirt.

"It pissed me off." The freckled girl watches the boyish hand resting on his knee contract and unclench in a fist repeatedly. "She said she already knew she was sick when she took the job. That's why she didn't want to get attached to us. So she acted cold to keep her distance. But when she deduced i was abused, she couldn't help herself..."

She had no idea what to reply to his confession. Silence held more value than words sometimes, so she opted for that option.

"I kept it, the book..." He carries on, tone lowered in a seemingly shameful manner. "It's fucking ridiculous, but i thought... Just in case i'd forget her... I should keep it to remember." He admits, his cheeks gaining a bit of color.

Nathan clearly regarded confessing personal matters as a sign of vulnerability or weakness. She bet he had his dad to thank for that.

"I don't think that's ridiculous. Did you ever try to find her after she was gone?"

He scratches his itching nose. "Yeah. I was too late. The cancer got her and she died."

Oh, Nathan...

A twinge surfaces in her chest, clawing at her heart. "I'm sorry... Did things ever improve with your father?"

The Prescott boy hurls his apple core inside her bin without moving from his spot, just like she did before. It goes in too. Maybe her previous score wasn't so exceptional...

"I don't have any bruises anymore, 'least not from him." His bony shoulders raise as he shrugs
dismissively. "That's the only improvement. When I hit sixteen, he turned the physical abuse into a mental one. The bastard knows exactly what he's doing." He opines, tongue scrubbing the inside of his cheek noticeably.

*I have no doubt about it.*

Nathan suddenly topples backward on her floor, resting his chesnut head on his arms, placed behind it. "What about you? Why do you have PTSD? It's not just the dark room, right? There's something else." He surmises accurately, unfolding his legs and spreading them out along the ground.

Max hesitates. She fears talking about this is going to make her eyes water, or compel her to bawl her eyes out, which she irrevocably wants to avoid.

She ends up discussing the matter anyway. "...I... watched Chloe die so many times I lost count... Jefferson even shot her right in front of me once... And I witnessed the storm kill so many people... All because of me."

"I'm not a mass murderer but, the guilt-tripping? I can relate." He tells her, gaze fixated on her dull blank ceiling.

*Thanks for the mass murderer title, jerk.*

Maxine's eyes flicker downward until they lend on the brownish ends of her hair. Dana was right. They may not fall lower than the middle of her neck, but they shouldn't have grown this long in barely a week. Her cerulean stare darts back to the slumped daydreaming individual before her, and she notes that during the integrality of their chat, he hadn't looked at her once. Was it embarrassment? He probably regretted his anterior actions in the locker room... She tried not to think of their past kissing and fondling too much, but it sure was stuck in a corner of her head despite her efforts. At least he still felt comfortable talking to her, so it wasn't that awkward... The only problem was catching his gaze and making it last further than a second.

In spite of her better judgement, she decides to test the waters. "Why do you keep avoiding my eyes?"

He pauses, delaying his reaction.

"I'm not. You're just paranoid." He falsely accuses.

*You perfectly know I'm right, Prescott.*

Her phone buzzes against her sheets. She grabs the device and Kate's name emerges on the screen, like a well-timed miracle.

Max, I'm out of the hospital. I'm staying with my parents for the weekend, but I'll be back to Blackwell on Monday. I can't wait to see you again!

10/12 7:57am
You don't know how happy i am to know this Kate. Are you sure you're ready to come back?
10/12 7:57am

Don't worry Max. And i'm not gonna return to my classes right away, Principal Wells said he wanted
to give me time to get accustomed to everything again. So, everything should be alright.
10/12 7:58am

That's good news! I'm so glad, Monday seems too faraway now :)
10/12 7:58am

I know! You're such an angel. I don't know how i could have ever felt lonely with you as a friend.
10/12 7:58am

It happens to all of us. And an angel, me? More like a suffocating mother hen ^^ Have a wonderful
time with your family! I'll see you soon.
10/12 7:59am

Max lifts her nose from her screen to see that Nathan hadn't moved an inch. Whatever, she still had
to shower and dress. Let him squat her room if he so desired.

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-OpCYprw4FI ]

Max thought their fort would have been completely destroyed after five years of abandon, but to her
big surprise, it was still standing. Her and Chloe spent an entire hour sprucing it up with the help of
the tools the punk kept in her truck, as well as several branches and twigs they had found here and
there. She remembered the day they started to build it like it was yesterday. A simple stroll into the
forest had ended up in a full afternoon of hard klutzy labor. They didn't even got to finish their handy
work that night was already falling and they had to get back to the Price's household to feast on a
tasty dish of pastas, prepared by no other than the Two Whales Queen. When they told Chloe's
parents of their ongoing manufacture over diner, William reacted excitedly, bouncing up and down
like a five years old, and proposed to lend a hand. Joyce had rocked her head from left to right, rolled
her eyes and told them not to come back home too late. He even stole the ladder in the garage so they
could use it to enter their wooden cocoon, and made them swear to keep it a secret. A giggle escapes
her lips at the retrospection.

However mocking the two girls had been, he did a great job with the construction and made it look
like an actual treefort, unlike the feeble sprigs hut Chloe and her had put together. The man may have
been rubbish at anything related to bills, but he was quite skilled with his hands. But now that the
blue-haired girl and the photographer had grown up, they seemed to have improved a bit at manual
tasks, as showed their renovated but still weathered pirate fort.

Chloe Price has her hands on her hips, regarding the woody crib in front of them with pride. "Yo, i
think we did a good job, Maxgyver! What do you say?" she slaps her friend's back in
congratulations.

"We still got it, for sure." Smiles the hipster, eyes wandering along the beams fixated to the forest
trees.

The punk sits down on the ground, the Blackwell student following suit. She carefully places the
guitar her friend had forced her to bring on a patch of grass next to them.

"Do you remember the retarded boys who tried to raid our fort when we were eleven?" Recounts her
associate.

Maxine chortles as the memory replays in her mind. "We kicked their asses with wooden swords."

Chloe's grin is wolfish. "And they ran away like the little pussies they were."

"Those were the best times ever." Laughs the mousy girl.

"We were the real shit back then." The rebellious teen brags in return.

"But not now?" Max archs a skeptical brow, eyeing her best friend with offense.

"Of course now too, hippie!" She protests loudly, her feminine voice echoing through the woods.
"We're gonna make the world bow." She declares assuredly.

She missed their childhood days... Their innocence, insouciance, naivety... They had nothing to fear
from the future, life seemed to be waiting for them with opened arms, and now... Now Max had
radically no idea of where destiny would take them once all this crap with the dark room would
finally be done. And it couldn't be too soon.

Chloe teeters backward, sprawling herself full-length across the autumn foliage. "I wish Rachel was
here."

She heard this phrase so many times before, but the circomstances are wholly different today.

"Me too. But i feel like she still is, in some way." Caulfield discloses, knowing her partner is only
seeking comfort and the reassurance that everything will be alright.

"I can't wait to give her a proper burial... Do you think we get bound to the places we die?" Wonders
the blue-eyed punk.

Maxine seizes a thick stick and begins to draw a spiral into the soil, the small vortex reminding her of
her earlier dream. "I hope not. That'd be sad." She mentions with a rictus.
"Fuck yes. We better get the hell out of Arcadia while we're still young if that's the case. I don't wanna play scary punk ghost in this shithole for eternity." Price's left calf falls onto her right knee, her limbs beginning a series of nonchalant motions from side to side.

"You wouldn't scare anybody anyway." Banters the schoolgirl, observing her friend's ebony boot swaying offhandedly.

"Me?" She exclaims, a hand over her heart at the affront. "I'm a walking nightmare for old grannys. They cross the street when they see me comin'."

Their blue stares meet each other with amusement. The bullets hanging around the punk's neck are dipping into her cleavage, her short hair are tickling her chin and her features are more relaxed than what Max is habituated to. Since they were kids, she always found Chloe's charm quite unique, like she could pull off anything and still look amazing regardless.

"Yeah, i'm sure they're terrified." The hipster retorts with a disbelieving snort.

Price huffs noisily, her sigh filled with melancholy.

"We used to imagine any kind of way to get out of this town." She soughs, studying the barely visible clouds above their heads, the view hindered by the forest canopy.

"I feel like the Earth isn't big enough to get far away from all this bullshit now." Confesses Caulfield.

Chloe's eyes lit up like she just remembered something interesting. "You never told me how was Seattle. Do you have friends there?"

Maxine winces at the reminiscence. Seattle hadn't exactly been the fable she had been advertised by her parents, or other people of her closest circle. The blue-haired fiend would have fit in without any issues, that much was easy to figure out, but her? Nope. Her school years in the big city had been awkward and lonely. She wasn't utterly forlorn, of course, yet even with some great friends here and there, she never really felt like she belonged, like she purely enjoyed her new habitat... Perhaps because Chloe was missing from the big picture.

"Not really. I felt so awkward amid those people. I got to make two friends though." Admits the mousy girl.

Her friend hums pensively. "That's always something... What's their names?"

She flings her wood stick through the air, watching it lend near a poor frightened rabbit she hadn't noticed until now, which took off with the speed of light and disappeared into the bushes. "Kristen and Fernando. I didn't really stay in contact since i'm back in Arcadia." She mentally scolds herself for that.

"Out of sight, out of mind... That's obviously how you roll, Max. What a heartless bitch i can be..."

"Yeah, a habit of yours apparently." Replies the punk sarcastically.

Max's eyes dim a little at the well-deserved nagging, her head drooping toward the ground. "Sorry... I'll try to contact them. I don't wanna repeat the same mistakes."

That earns her a winsome chuckle from the other teen.

"Relax, i'm not that mad anymore. After everything you did, i think you earned your BFF medal back." She gives her a feeble and painless kick in the shin for emphasis. "Are those guys into
photography too?"

"No. Fernando loves music, he's part of a band. And Kristen's into painting. But they're really supportive of my passion. They were hyped that i got enrolled at Blackwell."

"So all your friends are artists, except me." Remarks Chloe.

"You are an artist," Maxine corrects, "in badassness."

"At least my talents are acknowledged by somebody." The teenager smiles proudly.

"Like gun shooting and hanging out with drug dealers..." Caulfield jests.

"I am so going to hit you." Threatens her partner as she heaves from the foliage, supporting her weight with her thin arms behind her.

Max grabs her instrument and begins to play with her guitar's strings. The punk-rock girl's gaze roams her associate's silhouette from head to toe, listening to the tuning of the device and smiling mockingly as the wannabe musician sticks out her tongue in the process.

"I didn't know pirates liked to play the guitar." She says wittily.

"Maybe i'm a bard pirate. Should i sing you a ballad my lady?" The student asks with a strong whimsical accent.

Chloe cringes. "Urg, stop that! You sound like my dad."

"William always did love talking like he was stuck in the medieval ages." She endorses with a laugh, her hands still busy with her instrument.

Her companion's eyelids close for a second at the memory. "He sounded so lame. I miss it... I miss him. Do you think... Do you think he's aware of what's hapenning? Like Rachel... I wish i could dream of him too."

"I know. I miss him too. Him and our pancake races."

Also, his goofy grins, the bedroom eyes he gave to Joyce when he wrongfully thought Chloe and her weren't looking, his crappy jokes and horrible puns, the way he constantly rooted for her and her gift by taking photographs with his own polaroid camera whenever she was around, his adorable obsession with France, the childishness lingering in his soul even as a grown-up man... Everything.

"How did it feel? Seeing him again..." Chloe queries, swallowing soundly.

"At first? Unsettling, and awesome... But letting him die again, it was the worst. You were right beside me, being your usual happy self. Completely oblivious to what was going on... And there was no way i could tell you. It was awful."

She could just envision the scene... "Hey Chloe, you'll never see your dad again, cause he's gonna die in a car accident. But have a good day!". Ridiculous.

The punk's warm digits compassionately squeeze her shoulder, drawing her cerulean gaze to her painted blue nails. "Don't tear yourself apart. You did what you thought was right, that's the only thing that counts. Hell, i would never know how to react to this kind of shit." She's obviously trying to bring solace to her blameworthy conscience.

She recoils her extremity and shifts a bit to face Max completely.
"So, going back to happier things, did you ever write a song? Your friend was in a band, after all."
She pries.

The freckled girl licks her dry lips before answering. "Once. Fernando helped me with it. He has
way more experience in this than i do."

"Really?! Amazeballs! Sing it to me!" Her accomplice for life is already bouncing on the spot.

"I don't know... It's really not that good..."

"Come on, dude! I wanna hear it! Before we have to crash at the protest..." Pouts the rebellious teen
with puppy eyes.

After five whole minutes of bickering, Price finally convinces her friend to sing for her...

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YXy4hi9tWfg ]

They were staring at the faraway foothills, swarmed with trees that clung so close to each other that it
produced an enormous mass of green over the horizon. A real contrast to their current surroundings.
Muddy, murky, dismal surroundings.

"Wow, this spot used to be full of trees." Evoked the Price girl.

"Not anymore." Max asserted.

Dreary clouds were starting to cover up the sky, partially turning it a lacklustre color instead of the
bright blue it previously arrayed. Even unfinished, Pan Estate looked more impressive than she
would have thought. The steel scaffolding all around its tall white walls was empty of workers. In
fact, the entire construction site seemed deserted by its employees, except for the foreman currently
speaking with a man donning a fancy walnut shaded suit, his snobbishness misshaping his honed
features.

*One of Sean's lackeys no doubt.*

Those two were observing the protesters with a foul gaze, in a manner akin to wealthy folks giving
peasants the stink eye. Some pricks who undoubtedly thought they were better than anyone else...
The Prescotts apparently hired people of the same ilk as their family. The peaceful assembly was
contained behind portable railings to ensure the safety of everyone, albeit the zone wasn't undergoing
any dangerous operations due to its lack of labor.

"I think this is the most action Arcadia's seen since you left." Chloe commented as she listened to the
audience's shouts. "Let's take a closer look." She suggested, grabbing Max's hand before progressing
forward to enter the crowd.

A guy leading the manifestation was talking into a megaphone, his voice carrying itself farther than it
normally ought to thanks to the device. Multiple placards were looming above people's heads, displaying diverse slogans like "No to Pan Estates", "Violation of the treaties", or "Pan Estates equals deforestation", in addition to many others. One giant black banner was held by a small group of people in particular, parading a big "Free Arcadia Bay of those Prescott bloodsuckers!" written in bold white letters.

*I couldn't say it better.*

As the swarm of citizens continued to chant their discontent, Maxine located a familiar corpulent woman who just happened to be her favorite teacher among them. The freckled girl tugged on her partner's hand to signal her to follow, the two teenagers trying to make their way through the demonstrators hindering their path.

"Who's that?" Inquired the punk when she realized they were aiming for the older woman.

"My science teacher. She's really cool." Notified Max in a low voice just as they arrived to their destination.

Grant must have sensed their presence because she immediately turned to face them, her ebony eyes brightening at the sight of Max Caulfield.

"Miss Grant? You came to the protest?"

"Of course i did, Max. And i'm glad to see you did too. You proved you were concerned about your school when you signed that petition, and you show your thoughtfulness for this city by coming here today." She esteemed with small gestures, drawing her student's gaze to the pink nail polish festooning the tip of her digits.

"How are things going so far?"

"Feels like talking to a brick wall, especially since the majority of the workers have quit their job. Mr. Prescott seems to have enough trouble without us interfering."

"The workers are gone? Do you know the reason?"

"They complained about unsafe working conditions. Said they constantly get attacked by animals. Way too dangerous for how little they're paid. I never rejoice at people's misery but, this is certainly good for our campaign."

*Animals attacks? I swear things get weirder by the day...*

"I didn't know you were a part of it." Max topped, getting more interested in the subject on account of her professor's declarations.

"I'm not the only one. Samuel is here too, i had a talk with him earler. Such a sweet man."

"That he is." She confirmed with a smile.

"I also spotted that news writer girl, what's her name?"

"Juliet." She quickly gave away.

"That's it. I didn't talk to her though. She seemed pretty engrossed in her note taking." Informed Grant, who started to fiddle with the peace symbol she used as a pendant.

"That's our Juliet alright, always chasing the scoop... Nobody else?"
"Alas, no. You should have seen Principal Wells face when i offered him to come with me. I thought he was going to drop on the floor after how wan he became." She chuckled with mirth, mouth closed and teasing gaze.

_Miss Grant sure likes to twist the knife._

"That guy's the Prescotts puppet. He wouldn't do anything to oppose them." Chloe intervened.

"She knows..." pointed out the brunette.

"Oh, i like her already!" Grinned the punk-rock girl addressing her friend.

"And who is this?" Demanded the frizzy-haired woman as she eyed the unusually tall teenager.  

_Time for presentations._

"Chloe, my best friend." Max presented, her open palm mentioning to her associate, the movement causing her wristbands to bob.

"What's up?" The latter greeted, two of her fingers pressed to her temple in some kind of salutation.

"Nice style. You remind me of a niece of mine."

"I hope she's badass then. So, you're a science teacher?"

The freckled adolescent needed to get out of here before this turned out like one of this nerd conventions Kristen and Fernando had dragged her to in the past. Max liked nerdy things, but even she had her limits. And those limits had been violently breached the moment she was accidently tackled to the ground by a drunk Chewbacca.

She could feel the red rising to her cheeks just by recalling how the ridiculous event had drawn everyone's attention on her person.

"Uh, why don't you two chat a bit while i explore the perimeter?" she proposed awkwardly, already discreetly slipping away.

"Go on, i'll catch up with you." Promised the blue-haired youngster.

Chloe was probably going to tell the woman about her secret passion for scientific theories, or try to swipe some information about time traveling from the teacher. Such a dork. Maybe Miss Grant would recommend her books to read. If it could keep the girl busy and away from the trouble she constantly liked to dive into, then bless her.

As she distanced herself from them, Maxine lifted her head to the sky and instantly missed the view of the canopy the trees used to form around here. The woods of Arcadia were so dense that they were still far from dematerialization, but even so, every bit of forest that disappeared was a hard pang to her heart. If things kept following this road, maybe their own treefort would be endangered by the Prescotts thirst for territory expansion. The girl remembered the birds ordinary presence amid this land of foliage and conifers when she realized their chirping could barely be heard over the ruckus people were creating. Juliet appeared distantly among the crowd, excitedly snapping pictures of everything that moved around her, notepad stuck under her armpit. "Engrossed" had been a considerably fitting word...

Something smooth and dry brushed the hipster's right foot in a trice, startling her in the process. A superb onyx snake was slithering between her legs, sliding along the forest floor and moving onward
until it vanished outside of the constricting mob. An odd sensation compelled her to follow, and she soon found herself apart from the protesters, facing a group of native american people who were mostly keeping to themselves. Yet she recalled seeing some of them among the rallying crowd minutes prior. Perhaps they took turn.

Amid the clique of women and men, an old woman sitting on an isolated trunk captured her attention. She felt a powerful need to converse with the lady, whose aura seemed strangely tinged with mystery.

*Maybe i can make the most of this encounter.*

Her face was essentially devoid of wrinkles and possessed a pretty golden complexion, but her hands were veiny and definitely had age to them. Her jet windbreaker fell mid-thigh, grazing against her dark pair of jeans. Beholding old women with long hair—that were kept loose moreover—was a very rare occurrence, for her at least.

Ere she could open her mouth, something furry collided with her legs. She lowered her gaze to see a washy grey wolf she recognized from yesterday, although his owner was nowhere to be seen. It wagged its tail serenely as it stared at her with a beam of light reflecting in its large ice blue eyes, settling his paws on her feet as a sign that he was set on staying right where he was. Not that she minded. The native people aside them seemed surprised by it however.

Refocusing on her initial target, she noticed that the woman wasn't paying any attention to her, even though she was standing right before her.

"Excuse-me, mam... Are you from the tribes who live nearby?"

She didn't bother looking at her, choosing to stay fixated on the ongoing protest.

"Maybe." The stranger simply answered.

"If so, could i ask you some questions, please?"

"You can always try."

Her reply destabilized Max for a moment, but she decided to take her courage in both hands.

*She doesn't look annoyed by my presence but she doesn't seem to care either.*

"Yes... Um, do you know anything about the Tobanga? You know, the totem located at Blackwell Academy..."

That sure got her some inquisitive glances from the gang next to them.

"Are you from that school?" Questionned the oldest with a weird smirk, as if she could sense her friends insisting stares.

"Yes, actually."

"Is that totem causing you trouble, young girl?"

That put her off pretty efficiently.

"U-uh..."

Her interlocutor trawled for something in her pockets. "Is this yours, by any chance?"
A familiar polaroid was proffered to her. It displayed a flock of starlings morphing into a skull up in the sky.

*The fuck?*

"How... How did you get that?"

Maxine was rapidly growing livid. There was no way to explain this rationally. She had discarded the picture near the fountain the previous day, so why was it in this woman's hands? Said woman pulled the photograph back to its original place, finally setting her awfully perceptive gaze on the young student.

"What animals do you see in the forest, girl?"

*She's completely reversing the situation... I was supposed to ask the questions and now i'm being thoroughly interrogated.*

"Deers, for the most part." She responded honestly.

She was quite sure she would have been able to tell if she was bullshitting her anyway, even had she been the best liar in all Oregon.

"Hmm, interesting. What's your name?"

Chloe Price emerged from the roaring gathering, unnoticed by the hipster until she sauntered toward them.

"I'm Max, and this is Chloe." She pointed to her sidekick, now standing alongside her.

"Yo."

The punk had always been so eloquent...

"Chu'mana. Nice to meet you." The oldest smiled, observing her new acquaintances, with a good emphasis on Max.

"Same. You didn't answer her question though." Intruded the blue teenager.

The chestnut-haired girl frowned, glancing at her. "How do you know i asked her anything?"

"You always do, sista." Was all she got for a response, accompanied by a wink.

"Why are you girls so interested in an old totem?"

*How do i explain this without sounding like a complete lunatic?*

"Uh... Let's say it does... special things... Do you know where it comes from?"

The group of native people looked at one another in a bizarre manner, no doubt eavesdropping on their conversation. The old woman jumped on her feet, licking her dry lips as she swept a gaze across their settings.

"We shouldn't talk about this here. Too many ears. Follow me."

Max highly doubted that those "many ears" could hear anything with all the commotion around them anyway, but her and her friend followed the elder as she made her way deeper into the woods. Chloe
arched a brow, curious of their new companion's intentions, yet willing to trail behind her nonetheless.

"So, you girls know about spirit animals?" She inquired, shoes scraping the twigs and dead leaves noisily.

"A little."

"Yours is the deer, huh? What about your friend?" she nodded in Chloe's direction.

"I don't know mine." Interjected the concerned adolescent.

"Actually, it's on your arm." Informed Maxine, chin jutting toward her friend's covered limb.

That got her a funny grimace. "A skull?"

...Are you cereal?

She couldn't resist the temptation of rolling her eyes. "No dumbass, a butterfly."

"Oh... Oh!" Price uttered in realization, features suddenly tinged with wonder. "How do you know that?"

"Long story." She put the topic to an end.

A faint upturn of the woman's mouth demonstrated her subtle amusement. "You two seem to possess a strong connection. People who share the same spirit animal usually do, so i thought it might be the case."

Is that why i was able to see Rachel's spirit? Or why i feel like there's some kind of link between us?

The aged individual studied Chloe from head to toe, her gaze piercing into hers as soon as her inspection was done. "Butterflies are omens of transformation and rebirth. They are also strongly related to the soul, and to death."

"Death? That's me alright." She mentioned to herself with a proud thumb.

Max chastised her by whipping her arm, the slap leaving a stinging sensation in its wake. "That's not funny." She chided broodily.

"Can you guess what is mine?" Riddled the native woman.

The image of the onyx serpent she encountered minutes ago promptly came to mind. Did it guide her to the woman?

"Is it the snake?" Caulfield guessed dubiously.

Her mysterious interlocutor stopped dead in her tracks, forcing the teens to halt with her and shifting slightly to peer over her shoulder.

"So she does look more closely than the average people..." she muttered with a satisfied mien.

She resumed her route without any more words. The mousy brunette blinked, sharing a disturbed glimpse with the Price girl. Minutes later, the small female band arrived to an isolated spot scattered with rocks and cairns that Max stumbled upon before, near the lighthouse. Mystical whispers she swore she heard in her childhood roved to her ears the second they set foot in the area. It was also
way colder than in the rest of the woods. The old woman ceased her progress before one of the piles of rocks.

"Time and space work differently in this place. Some of my ancestors are buried here. The Tobanga you mentioned serves as a conduit for spirits, to help the deceased guide those who remain." She elucidated, her back to the juvenile girls.

What does that mean? That the dead people who lived here before are the ones who gave me those visions?

"Help for what?" Asked Chloe, who noted that her best friend was already pondering on the native's words.

The latter turned around, an absent air glued to her face, like she was busy fishing for answers and memories in the far-stretched boundaries of her mind. A soft breeze forced her raven hair to dance around her sharp-featured visage.

"When i was a child, my grand-mother warned me about Arcadia's future. She said something would endanger its nature and wildlife. That some greedy men's actions would cause waste and destruction to this harmonious land. Power can easily influence the healthiest mind to take a dark path. But she told me not to worry, for children who came from all horizons, would come and put an end to it. They would bring peace and balance back to the Bay. And that their actions would be reproduced across the globe over the following years. Our ancestors called them rainbow warriors."

Chloe let out a little gasp at the appellation.

"I heard about that one!" That fact was apparently exciting to her. "It's an old native prophecy. But, it speaks about the entire planet, not just Arcadia Bay..."

"One thing at a time, child." Calmly expressed the woman, her voice consistently silky and possessing a wise tune. "A bunch of kids all living in the same town can't possibly change the ways of the world over night."

A fucking prophecy? Was this some kind of joke the world was playing on her? Because Max wasn't laughing. Not at all. So much questions were afflicting her thoughts. It may have sounded like nonsense but deep down inside her guts, she knew this could bring light on lots of the inauspicious events that recently occured in their life. But she'd need more than rubbish auguries to be able to believe. She was surprised to still be capable of skepticism after all the crazy shit that went down this week, or in her ancient timeline.

"That's insane. I... How can we be part of something like this?"

"No big fire starts by itself, child. It always begins with a very small spark. Arcadia Bay, with its brilliant and greatly aware nature, may be a good start."

A small spark...

Maybe she was overthinking all this. Perhaps their mission wasn't as considerable as she feared. The woman didn't talk about anything too absurd after all. She only affirmed that those children would stop a man from harming the town's natural prosperity, and it could be by any means. Very normal means. The photographer also didn't require any further hints to understand that the greedy guy she mentioned was no one else than Nathan's corrupted father.

"So, basically, Sean Prescott's reign of terror needs to stop?" Caulfield elaborated.
"I certainly don't need a prophecy to understand that... Do you?" A dark brow rose to the elder's hairline, a smile gracing her thin chapped lips.

Chloe was the next one to speak. "Nope'. Why do you think your grand-mother was talking about us?"

"Because i asked her when this would unfold, and she said i would know, for time would suddenly start to work in reverse, my days would seem to lengthen, and my actions to repeat incessantly."

"She's talking about your rewind." Chloe elbowed Max softly, whispering between her teeth.

"I didn't understand what she meant until i started to dream about those omens myself." The native went on. "Then i figured out she was talking about a time-wielder."

Maxine took a step closer to her, her skull-patterned sneakers connecting with the clumps of moss coating the ground of this shady glade.

"Listen, i feel like i can trust you with this for some reason... If i was the time-wielder you were told about, would you have any idea of where my powers could have come from?"

Chu'mana, as she was called, leaned her head to the side, giving her much paler face a swift once over.

"In your entire life, what strongest desire have you ever felt?"

"That's a hard question. To... save my friend, i guess..." she admitted truthfully, glancing at her faithful companion who smiled sweetly in return and brushed their fingers together.

Although i didn't know it was her at the time.

"And when did your abilities began to manifest?"

"At that moment..."

"Well, there you go." She delivered the conclusion like an evidence.

"You think i willed it unconsciously?"

"Perhaps. Or you might have prayed for help, and something might have listened."

Seeing her unconvinced frown, the long-haired woman began to pace around the burial site, her wrinkled hands swinging along her explanations.

"This place is powerful." She started anew. "If you try to harm it, it will strike back. If you try to protect it, it may lend you a hand."

"But, it doesn't make sense! Rewinding time caused a massive storm. It destroyed the town, killed innocent people. And it was my fault." Debunked the young woman.

"Of course it did, child. You fiddled with the thread of time. Did you expect it to come back to normal once you set it loose?" Her tone was a tad mocking. "Was it really all your fault, however? Or did you just accelerated something that was already in process and made it ten times worse?"

Max sighed, her shoulders slouching. "I don't know. Why give it to me in the first place then? I don't understand."
"What did you accomplish with this power?"

"I... We were able... to find a missing friend. And catch a twisted psychopath..."

"Do you think you could have done that without it?"

"No way."

"And after all this, you were able to come all the way back here to make things right again, while already knowing where your friend could be found, or what that evil person really was?"

"Yes."

Chu'mana briefly gestured to the brunette. "And here you stand, alive and head full of precious informations that you would never have possessed otherwise. A great gift of knowledge... Don't you think?"

A blank filled the atmosphere for a second, the birds singing and the howling of the wind being the only things remaining audible.

"...I think i see where you're going with this."

"Lucky you. I don't..." Chloe cut in with exasperation.

"It's pretty simple. Do you always succeed in all that you do on your first try?" The native lady asked the punk.

"Um, no..."

"Of course. You have to do it again, and again, until you find the right way. Think of you and your friend's trials as a draft, and this one last chance as a blank page waiting to be filled."

The term irked the adolescent. "A draft? Do you have any idea what she had to go through to be here? I don't think so!" She scolded.

"Chloe, calm down."

"I would never pretend to be able to understand what sort of pain your friend had to endure, child. Or what horrors she may have witnessed. But do you want all her efforts to go to waste?"

Maxine decided to butt in before her partner in time loosed her cool for good.

"Why me though? I'm just a student." She queried.

"Can you imagine how things would have turned out if someone similar to that Prescott vampire had been given the same gifts as you?"

"It would lead to catastrophe."

"Exactly. Arcadia wouldn't give powers to someone who carries bad intentions. Or is plagued by selfishness and greed. It would only bring its ruin."

"So, let me summarize... Arcadia gives me the means to save my friends, and in return, i have to help it get rid of what could bring its destruction?"

"See? You're getting there." She commended, taping her index finger against her temple.
Max rocked her head from side to side in total incredulity. "How do we manage that?"

"You're asking me?" The elder laughed frankly. "What do you think i am? The Great Tree of Knowledge? You have to find your way by yourselves, kids. Your fates are your own, whatever my ancestors may have predict. Just because something was foretold, doesn't mean it will successfully occur."

Sean is Arcadia's biggest problem at the moment, and he's connected to the dark room... Unveiling all this shit could lead him behind bars. If he's jailed, then it means the end of his business, right?

"Al-alright, i think i got it. There's something else..."

"I'm listening." She stated, arms crossed over her glossy windbreaker.

"Rewinding time is not the only ability i developed recently..."

"Believe me girl, anything this place gives you, you will need. Whatever it is. Use them for the greater good, don't fuck with time again, and everything should be alright."

"That'd be great. Um, you also mentioned children, not one child, but children, in what your grandma foretold."

"Don't you have friends your age who were necessary to the good proceeding of your journey?"

Like Rachel? Or Chloe... Maybe even Nathan...

"For exemple, would you have discovered your powers without your friend there?" Her index finger pointed to her mute associate.

"...I suppose not."

Chloe seemed to miraculously wake up at this moment. "Oh, so i have a role in all this!" She boasted.

"You and all the young people entangled in this mess." Added the oldest.

"Hear that?" The blue teenager elbowed the photographer once more. "I'm not just a sidekick." She wiggled her eyebrows playfully.

Max ignored her friend's gibe, eyes furrowing at the moss-veiled floor. She had plenty to ponder on now. Maybe too much, actually. And those strange otherworldly murmurs just kept coming and going at different intervals, haunting her ears as well as preventing her from mulling over her newly found knowledge further.

"We will protect. We will preserve. We will not bow."

Her early morning dream made a lot more sense after this lucky encounter with the sagacious woman.

"You can hear them whisper." She had no idea if it was a statement or a question, but at least the old native was plagued by the same phenomenon.

"I'm not alone." She changed the subject. "There's someone i know who was able to have the same visions as me... The Tobanga seems to react to him too."

"What? Who?" Inquired Chloe, taken aback by the disclosure.
"Nathan."

"That bastard?" her face scrunched up, clearly not happy with this fact.

"Who is this Nathan?" Chu'mana stepped in.

"He's Sean Prescott's son." Answered the freckled girl.

"Then that boy may have an important role to play in his father's demise."

*Yeah, this place likes to make things complicated, doesn't it?*

Chloe snorted grumpily. "Hard to believe."

The brunette focused back on the wise elder. She may not have answers to everything, but she was extremely informed nevertheless. Had she been waiting for this moment all this time? Had Arcadia planned their meeting all along? Max would have probably never came here if it wasn't for the blue bird who gave her that poster.

"You seem to know a lot about Arcadia Bay." That sounded like an accusation, even though it wasn't.

Her aged lips shaped into an enigmatic smile. "My family's been here a long, long time." She drawled.

The sentence brought unpleasant chills down Max's spine for some obscure reason.

*How long exactly?*

A loud shout resonated across the woods, making her jump out of her skin. "Chu'mana, where are you? We need you here!"

The three women gazed in the yell's direction, only to see nothing else than the dense army of trees surrounding them, the people calling for her being too far to be noticeable.

"I'm needed elsewhere." Announced the concerned party. "Goodbye girls. I wish you well in your endeavor." She bowed her head respectfully in a subtle movement, which Max returned politely, before heading toward the group seeking her.

She halted solely for a second, looking at the student over her shoulder.

"Child... Don't expect it to last forever."

*I sure hope it won't.*

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He hates his room. There's too much space, too much blanks, and no one to fill it. This is the place that reminds him the most of his utter loneliness. Yeah, it can fit all of his high-tech equipment,
contrary to the Blackwell dormrooms, his four-poster bed is more cozy and pleasant to lay on, and
the panorama his gigantic bow window—which spread out on half the length of his bedroom wall—
offered was increasingly stimulating compared to the one Blackwell provided. Yet, he always felt
like something was amiss.

He closes his laptop after having spent hours perusing the internet. It was useless anyway. Boredom
is weighting down on him and follows him in every room of this goddamn house, like a ball and
chain attached to his ankle. He had tried everything he could. Video games, the web, calling
Victoria, vainly attempting to nap, going over the fresh photographs he had taken this week, but
nothing could hold his attention for more than ten seconds. Literally nothing.

Nathan wishes his sister were here. Why did the dumb bitch had to fly to Brazil and leave him
behind like she did? Did she really think a stupid mail every three weeks, sometimes even a month,
would be enough? "Sending good thoughts" didn't suffice to make his life easier, or keep him away
from the drugs he was currently tempted to take. She could ship her jaguar to the estate if she
wanted, running away from the creature would give him a satisfying occupation at least. A frightful
one, but it could never be worse than being stuck in here, pacing across his room like a ghost
haunting a deserted manor.

"I miss you" my ass!

He had no problem picturing her frolicking with animals and people in her stupid ass jungle,
admiring mangroves and waterfalls, an exotic flower fixed in her long nut-brown hair, like the
models in those dumb commercials for shower gels. God, he desperately needed an absorbing
activity or he would go insane!

Deciding that nothing here would help him lift his spirits, the young boy parted from his glum
bedroom, crossing the upstairs corridor with the speed of light and proceeding down the oak staircase
leading to the first floor. After progressing through another endless hall, right before he has the
chance to reach the living room, something laying upon the marble floor catches his eye. An
abandoned piece of paper, supposedly forced through the letter plate of their large immaculate
entrance doors. The thing is calling to him and his eternal curiosity, especially since he had zero
better things to do.

Nathan approaches the white sheet, his expensive shoes clattering against the ground. He bows to
retrieve the note and after a cautious look left and right, begins to read its short content. The atrocious
yet miraculously comprehensible handwriting indicates that this had been either penned by a child, or
a total drunkard.

"It's done. I burned the list, as usual."

This was no doubt addressed to his father, and came from one of his minions. One of the words in
particular struck him, Caulfield's voice ringing distantly in his ears.

"It said i have to find a list."

"What list?"

"I don't fucking know! We're inside your house, so i suppose it's here."

He didn't like the idea of the hippie roaming around his house uninvited, nor the thought of an old
totem telling her to snoop into his family's business. But seeing this note told him that what they both had experienced in their previous days was real, not a figment of their imagination. What did that fucking list contain? And why would Crackfield need to find it? What kind of shady shit his dickhead of a father involved himself in? He squeezes the paper in his hand, shoving it in his pockets, brewing over what he could do with it. If it was on the floor, then his dad hadn't seen it yet. Good.

The adolescent's feet automatically take him to his original destination while he ruminates on the slim amount of informations he had been given since the start of this fucking absurd week. As soon as he spots his pricy television, which was running in the background when no one was there to watch it, he halts in his course. The demented pixie hipster said *this* thing spoke to her, and seeing the device in reality after that strange episode gave him shivers.

Nearing the long red sofa he usually liked to lounge into, he grasps the black remote control standing on the furniture's arm and press the red button to render it silent. God knows he hated silence, because it made his thoughts sound too loud, too overwhelming, and since they were pretty dark most of the time, it was a very portentous thing to do. But he didn't have a choice, he had to make sure his family's estate wasn't haunted by some crazy ass spirits who dwelled inside his TV and whispered nutty suggestions to strangers who happened by his house. Even the notion was incredibly preposterous. Nathan squatted in front of the apparatus, gluing his ear to the screen. He must have looked like a mental patient who had escaped the hospital and was currently on the loose. All the insane shit he was driven to do because of that wacky twee bitch...

"Nathan?"

The feminine voice makes him jolt upright, his body twisting around to see who had interrupted his weird activity. The sight of his disquieted mother greets him. She was clad in one of her numerous business attires, her blond hair styled in a flawless ponytail, posture as straight as a wood stick.

"Did you take your treatment?" She quizzes, a discernable crease between her light brows.

He snorts. "Did you take your treatment?", not "Oh hello son, why are you pressing your ear against the television like a maniac? Is there a reason?". He really wasn't in the mood for that. If she wanted a freak show, then he'd give her one.

"No *mother*, your freak of a son didn't take his pills." He spits vehemently. "Maybe you should call Daddy's pigs before he gets *craaaazy* and murders someone." The Prescott boy insinuates with a reproachful tone.

She assesses him silently, the emerald gaze that he and Kristine didn't inherit traveling from his face to his hands, to his tremolous legs. It was the same look you gave to a rabid dog when you wondered if he needed to be put down or if he had any hope to be cured. She apparently chooses to ignore his sentence altogether.

"Dr. Bill will come see you when he's back from his tour. What do you think?" she inquires in her usual aloof and hushed voice.

Oh, great! That bastard had been pumping his parents money since he was a kid. Him and his inane advices and tips on how to fix his anger issues. Fuck that guy.

*Please invite him mother, i can't wait to give him a piece of my mind.*

"Asking me? Woah, that's new. You never bothered before."
She sighs, shoulders slumping slightly. "If you're going to be like this, i've got no time for your anger crises." Green orbs already recoil from his form to peer at the door, Nathan sensing her desire to leap away from his toxic presence without any trouble.

He won't let her this time. She'd have to look at the monstrosity she had birthed.

"Oh, i'm sorry your majesty, should i take an appointment to talk with you?" He curtsies mockingly, blocking her path.

"Nathan."

The word hangs heavily in the air. His body reacts instinctively before he can absorb anything of the situation, goosebumps crawling all over his skin. He doesn't have to spin on his heels to recognize his main tormentor's voice. The boy listens to the sound of his father's strides shortening the distance between them, the man halting behind his back. His mom stays impassive, completely unfazed by the tense atmosphere, like the obedient, compliant wife she's always been.

"Will you ever stop being a source of disappointment to this family?"

*Good question, big daddy.*

He faces the bully. The rich entrepreneur is staring down at him, discontentment apparent despite the apathetic expression he perpetually wore whenever the two of them were gathered in the same room.

"Doesn't seem like it." He grins provocatively. "Should have made another Prescott after me. Now you're stuck with a deranged, unstable offspring. You and mother should get it on before it's too late for your prodigious line—"

**Slap**

The noise is sharp, akin to the hurtful gesture. He blinks in fast successions. The scumbag had done it again. He had dared raise his hand on him, *again*. His fists clench until his knuckles turn white, the pressure he exercises on his extremities coercing them to shake spasmodically. His steely orbs, the same he got from the abject person who just abused him for the hundredth time, moisten. Not from sorrow, not from misery. Just pure, unadulterated ire. An intense, electrified stare contest commences between the two Prescott men.

"Sean, this isn't necessary." Chips in his mother, who puts her hand on her husband's arm in an attempt to suppress his temper.

She never sounded convincing before, so why would she start now?

"Do i have to treat you like a child or will you finally decide to behave like a man, *Nathan*?" Sean's tone is curt, composed, controlled, as it always was.

His son's nostrils flare, rage emanating from him like a dark cloud looming over his head. Nathan's going to peal the skin off his own face if he doesn't get out of here soon. He despises the way his name rang whenever it came out of his patriarch's mouth. The boy takes off, fleeing the scene with a hurried, wrathful pace. What was the point of resisting his cravings? Why did he even bother? Fuck everybody. Fuck restrain.

Pigs or no pigs, Frank'd better be at the beach right now.
The girls are sitting at their usual booth, parallel to each other this time around. They left the opposite bench free for Kelly when she'd arrive. Max is browsing the outside street through the window next to her, her right foot tapping rhythmically against the floor, while Chloe is scrubbing the nerdy graffiti on the table's corner with her nails. Joyce is on shift and busting her ass to clean the mess clients had left after the previous rush the diner had undergone. Everything is much calmer now, which is good for their business. They'd need to hear themselves talk, and they couldn't afford to let overly curious ears eavesdrop on their worrying conversation. Apart from them, only two clients remain, installed at the very far end of the restaurant.

The clean floor tiles are sparkling because of the sunlight passing through the blinds. The jukebox is unusually silent since a cockroach had mysteriously broke it last Tuesday. Well, nobody knows this detail except for Maxine, but she's glad. It gives her peace of mind to ponder on what she's gonna disclose to Kelly. Chloe grabs the Two Whales menu and makes several attempts at getting it to stand vertically on the table on its own. Max peers at the red clock hanging on the wall alongside the TV. It's already four.

And she said to be on time...

"What's a douche canoe?" suddenly inquires her friend.

The brunette is taken aback at first, but rapidly blinks her surprise away and smiles at the silly term. "It's an insult. Like douchebag... Where did you hear that?" she wonders.

"Your science teacher told me Sean Prescott was a big douche canoe." Confesses the blue-haired adolescent, still fiddling with her carte.

An amused smile forms onto Caulfield's lips. Miss Grant had always been quite unique. She never backed down from giving her opinion, whether it was pleasing to hear or not, and whatever status you possessed among society, she cared little about. The woman only saw you for what you were, not who. Fancy family names hold no meaning to her, just like for Max.

"Dude, i still can't believe what that old woman told us." Chloe admits, her brain trying to decipher the informations they had been given over and over.

"Me neither... Everything is so..."

"Surreal?" The punk finishes. "Do you think it was bullshit? I don't know why, but i have a feeling she was telling the truth." She says, brows furrowed.

"Me too. I don't see what she would gain from lying about this anyway. And after everything that happened, i'm truly convinced Arcadia is trying to guide us... Like Rachel did..."

"Yeah man, i hope everything turns out okay for us."

Max smiles as her gaze hooks the sky blue orbs of the Price girl. "Preach it, Sista." She replies.

That makes her partner blink in astonishment. "Max, you're starting to sound like me. It's... kinda scary."
"It was on purpose, you dork." She elbows the rebellious teen playfully.

One of the doors leading inside the building opens, the noise drawing their attention, and the second the new girl enters her peripheral vision, Max knows. Kelly's finally here. She's scoping the vicinity with the same haunted gaze Maxine had exposed to the world for so many weeks after the traumatic events she had went through. Also, her student file contained a photo of her face, so they could recognize her easily. She hadn't changed a bit apparently.

Her long mane consists of lustrous flaming locks that tend to curl in large waves at the tips, her bangs falling right onto her eyebrows, similarly to Caulfield. Max lifts her hand in the air to wave at her, beckoning her forward. As she nears their booth, more details appear to the brunette. Her face is gaunt, high cheekbones shadowing the sides of her visage, ivory skin contrasting deeply with the brownish amber irises that look right back at her.

"I'm Max," she informs with a hand over her heart when their guest stops next to their table. "It's nice to finally meet you, even if the circumstances aren't exactly... the best."

Kelly is staring mistrustfully at Chloe, her right hand squeezing the strap of her black bag. The punk had long let go of her plastified menu to concentrate fully on the newcomer. Davis is wearing a common pair of jeans and a baby pink long-sleeved shirt that shows her protuberant collarbones.

"You didn't mention there would be someone with you." The redhead reprimands, refusing to sit down for the time being.

The tense tone drives Max to stutter. "Y-Yeah, sorry. This is Chloe, my best friend." She gestures to the silent girl beside her who's engrossed in a staring contest with their informant. She's not sure either of them are listening to her. "She's only here for the mental support. Don't worry, she's not gonna blab about this to anyone." She continues reassuringly.

"Yo'," lets out her associate, who is seemingly done gauging Kelly with her sky blue eyes.

"Please, sit down." She offers with an inviting motion, mentioning to the bench facing theirs.

The girl complies after ten whole seconds of hesitation, removing her bag from her shoulder and dropping it next to her on the seat. The light coming from the windows behind the pair of wannabe investigator casts onyx shades along her slender form.

"Um... Do you want something to drink or... eat?" Politely proposes the mousy student in an attempt to assuage the stiff atmosphere.

The glare she receives for that suggestion is chilling. "This isn't a date. This is serious." Deadpans their new companion.

"I know. I was just trying to put you at ease..."
"Want to put me at ease?" She parrots. "First off, i want your name on that." She declares, pulling a blank piece of paper from her bag and sliding it along the table until it reached the mousy girl's hand.

Her nails are non-existent, indicating she probably had the nasty habit of biting them. Quite the nervous tic. Max hesitantly grabs the pen she hands her next.

"Um... Can i ask you why?" She tests the waters.

"I couldn't really recall it since our conversation over the phone. I need a way to find you again if i ever find out that you bullshitted me." The readhead answers matter-of-factly.

Maxine's gaze drops to the small note. "Alright. I understand." She begins to scribble her name on it. "And i assure you my intentions are one hundred percent honest."

Chloe, who had stayed relatively mute until now, chooses that instant to butt in.

"Dude, why are you so uptight? Cut her some slack. She only wants to help." She scolds, disapproving of the girl's behavior.

"That's what she claims." Defends Kelly. "I don't know her. She could have ulterior motives for all i know." She suspects, utterly distrustful.

She was clearly on edge. The novice photographer fathoms this as a defense mechanism. Her sole way of protecting herself from all the hurt, the pain, the damage others could inflict on her. Rage was a weapon you tended to use often when nothing managed to soothe your aching soul.

"She's right, Chloe." Intervenes Max. "You can never be too careful." She gives the paper back to Davis.

The latter steals it from her fingers and shoves it in her jeans pockets before darting her alert eyes to the blue-haired teen. "I was quite trustful of people once, see where that got me..." she hints, voice tinged with sarcasm.

Chloe doesn't respond and turns to her best friend instead, waiting for her opinion on the matter.

Kelly follows suit. "So, are you gonna spill the beans or what?" She asks impatiently, although her tone has smoothed down a bit.

Maxine lets out a breath she didn't realize she had been holding and puts on a serious face. Time to go down to business.

"First, tell me what you remember of that night, even if it's not much." She sees her guest mark a pause, her cold stare fixated on her. "If you please..." The schoolgirl adds awkwardly.

The pretty adolescent's eyes droop to her own hands, resting on the table, and she tugs on her sleeves until they are completely covered by the soft cotton material.

"I don't recall much. I was at a Vortex Club soiree, and i was dancing and laughing with some people. Like everybody does at a party. But i made the mistake of leaving my drink unattended, and someone must have put some shit inside it... In the middle of the night, i started to feel lightheaded, so i went outside for fresh air... and after that..." she seems so focused that Max is sure her head is hurting from the effort. Kelly sighs frustratingly when nothing else comes back to her. "I can't remember anything else after that!" She reproaches to herself, knuckles impacting sharply with the metallic furniture in aggravation.
Max's palms open, facing the defeated redhead, as a sign for her to calm down.

"It's okay." She comforts gently. "Do you... Did you hear things while you were out of it? Like some people talking, but the drugs made you think you were dreaming..."

*Like Kate...*

Davis frowns, mentally scooting her memories with difficulty. "There was..." she whispers, just to stop there altogether, peering outside the window on her right to avoid their eyes.

Price and Caulfield share a confused glance, before refocusing on their informant.

"Yes?" Encourages Maxine.

"I think i heard voices at a certain point..." discloses the long-haired teen, still stuck in her souvenirs.

"Can you reminisce what they were saying?"

She snatches the cup of hot chocolate Max hadn't finished, obviously beyond asking for permission, and takes a sip before putting the object down, back in its place. "...It's blurry as fuck. They were male voices, that much i recall. But..." Her harsh facade was gradually crumbling. She swallows audibly.

"Take your time." Advises Caulfield in a tender tone. "We understand, it's not easy."

"Pay attention, it'll be your turn next time it happens", or "This is a business, not just a hobby"...

"Stop being so fidgety"... "Are you sure you're ready for this? Doesn't look like it"... "You better not fuck this up when i let you take the reins, you know better than to let me down"... And many other shit like that... But i honestly thought i was hallucinating or dreaming it."

*Those phrases all incriminate Jefferson and show that Nathan wasn't feeling composed about what was occuring...*

"You didn't, Kelly. It was real. Those sentences correspond perfectly with what that maniac is doing." Reassures the smallest of the group.

Kelly's face scrunches up in confusion. "So it's just one guy? Who was he talking to if it's the case?" She argues.

"It's complicated. The principle responsible was the one you heard. He was most likely addressing his..." Max sighs heavily. "He brainwashed a young boy and trained him to drug girls at parties so he could kidnap them and..." She feels Chloe's intense gaze burning the side of her head. "There's someone else behind all this. A rich bastard with friends in high places, and who makes money on what that piece of shit is doing."

"Doing what for fuck's sake?" Kelly's elbow bumps against the table and her hand rubs her forehead anxiously. "I don't even know if i was raped or not..." her words trembles as she barely achieves to pronounce them.

"You weren't." The brunette disputes. "It's not part of their methods." She appends, a sick feeling cluthing her guts as she senses her future confession impending. Anxiety creeps up on her when she thinks about Chloe's reaction to the abhorrent news.

"Well, if they didn't rape me then what's the point of drugging me, huh?"
Numerous flashes resurface from the deepest, darkest part of her mind. Flashes of her teacher's face, the freak bending over her with his damn camera in hands, of the sensation the syringe left against the flesh of her neck, of the constricting grip the duct tape had on her wrists, of the repulsive need to vomit she had throughout the entire experience.

"...It's a business." She nips her lower lip a bit too hard and starts to taste blood in her mouth. She swiftly wipes it off with her tongue. "They do it to take pictures of the girls they kidnap."

"What?" Chloe interjects, turning further in her direction, face scrupulously displaying how disturbed she was by the revelation.


"No!" She denies in a trice. "At least, it wasn't the case for me. Or for my friends who were victims too... I can't speak for all of us but, it doesn't seem to be what interest them."

"What kind of photos then? Speak." Lowly seethes the young woman, slamming her palm on the table with a thud.

"Max..." Her best friend gives her the saddest look she's ever witnessed. She feels her hand taking hold of hers beneath the table, digits intertwining with hers and tightening their grip in support.

It's her turn to gulp arduously. "He binds the girls with duct tape and pose them however he wants... It's more like, a dominance thing. Something to do with submission, having power over someone who's helpless. It seems that way, i think...."

She wants to dig a hole in the ground and hide in it for the rest of eternity, but she has to do this. The blue punk is still agape, her bewildered orbs never deviating from her person, brows knitted together and forming an angry crease in the center.

"You're telling me, i was drugged," Kelly's thumb raises from her closed fist, "kidnapped," followed by her index finger, "and dragged to who knows what godforsaken place," a third finger joins its companions, "just so a fucking pervert could take gross pictures of me and sell it to other freaks?" She boils. "So i'm basically jerking material? Is that it? I went through all this bullshit so some old pigs who are into bondage could rub one off because simple porn doesn't do it for them?" Her outrage is more than tangible.

The commotion compels Joyce to squint at them from behind her counter, halting her tidying for a moment. Max sends her a clumsy smile, trying to convince her everything is okay with a subtle upturn of her mouth's corner. The blond eyes the three of them suspiciously, but eventually gets back to work.

"Listen," Maxine gets back on track, "i know this is upsetting, i went there myself, but you need to keep your cool. I don't really know if there's any form of sexuality to it... It's too freaky and bizarre to understand." Her face rocks from side to side.

"Oh, you think?!" Davis snorts spitefully. "Why else would they do it?"

"I don't know! I'm not a psychopath, nor a perv', how could i grasp how their minds work?" Denotes Caulfield exasperatedly.

When her cerulean pearls wander to her partner in time, she finds tears dripping down her pale smooth cheeks.

"I'm so sorry i wasn't there for you, Max..." she apologizes, looking as torn as that time they
unearthed Rachel's decaying body.

The student puts a comforting hand on her back and shifts a bit closer until their shoulders were nearly touching. "Don't beat yourself up for this. I bailed on you for five years remember? If you really feel that bad about it, then let's just say we're even now." She attempts a hopeful smile, but her plump lips shudder spontaneously.

"Fuck no we're not..." Chloe disagrees in a murmur. "Max, this can't possibly compare to what..." She looses track of her words, and Max knows she must be picturing how things went down in that horrible room.

She can't let her torture herself over this.

"Chloe." She disrupts her friend's rambling. "I'm back here with you. I'm alive, i'm kicking, everything is okay." She underlines, emphazing every word.

Kelly is giving them weird looks, seemingly collected compared to three minutes ago. "I don't want to interrupt this very moving moment but..."

Joyce's heels clank against the tiling as she approaches them, coffee pot in hands. Chloe quickly swings her head toward Max to hide her tears and wipes her face discreetly.

"Everything alright over here? You girls make faces you're only supposed to see at funerals." The older woman points out astutely.

"Sorry Joyce," Maxine smiles timidly, "we were talking about Kate..." She lies, her brain miraculously supplying her with a good excuse for their strange demeanors.

"Oh, i see." Moans Chloe's mom. "That poor girl... I hope she's doing better now."

"She is. I saw her twice already, and she just left the hospital this morning. She'll be back to school next week." Informs the photographer.

"Well, that's good news for a change." She grins with relief. "None of you want more coffee, or anything else?" She proposes, glancing questioningly at Kelly, whom she wasn't acquainted with.

"I'm fine, thank you." Politely declines the unfamiliar girl.

"Me too." Max burst in.

"Same." Says Chloe.

The blond scans their faces knowingly. "Alright, don't let me get in the way of your crucial conversation." The waitress drawls before retreating back to her working station.

*Joyce always knows when something's up*...

Caulfield turns her attention back to their guest. "Sorry, let's go back to the topic at hand."

The redhead sighs tiredly, threading her fingers through her bangs to get them away from her eyes. "I have no idea if this is better or worse than what i anticipated..."

"What did you thought happened?" Inquires Chloe, taking the words right out of Max's mouth.

"I was pretty sure it had something to do with rape. I'm kinda relieved to know it's not the case, but... If there's people out there with degrading pictures of me... Fuck, this is so disgusting." She shivers
with aversion.

"It is. And they're going to pay for what they did to us." Declares the chesnut-haired teen.

"What do you have in mind?" The young woman's auburn head tilts in interest.

"Chloe and i are gathering proofs about this fucked up business and the people involved. We're going to bust them." The artist explains.

"Okay, and where am i in the picture? You said you needed my help last time..." Davis reminds her, eyebrows furrowed.

"I do. I need you to testify when the trial comes up. I want you to tell the court exactly what you told me. The bits you heard in that room, they can play an important part into proving that multiple people are implicated into this shit. That this is a business." Max leans back against the bench she shares with the punk. "I can't give you any names right now, sadly. I don't know you and i have no guarantee that you won't fuck everything up by trying to find those guys to deal with them yourself. I can't risk that. I don't want them to simply die, Kelly. That'd be way too easy. I want them to rot in jail for the rest of their lifes and suffer from knowing they won't ever savor the taste of freedom again. I want them to be miserable until it drives them to think about suicide every single day in prison, just to never be able to end their torment."

A ponderous silence fills their booth.

"...Well, sign me up then. I want the exact same thing." Concludes the amber eyed girl.

"We're gonna get revenge on those fuckers." Chloe proclaims with wrath.

Kelly observes the outside passerbys for a time, then looks at the white mug Max glides in her direction as an offer for comfort.

She purses her lips as she grasps its handle. "My parents are gonna have a heart attack when this goes public..." she laughs humorlessly. "I'm gonna have to go back to therapy."

*I think it's the same for all of us...*

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[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zCOkA4Zk-VM]

Nathan was trampling the sandy gravel of the beach parking lot tempestuously, mumbling and growling to himself, his perpetually foul mood worse than ever thanks to his douchebag of a father. He couldn't believe he had the balls to humiliate him in front of his mother. The asshole could treat him like a child if that's what he wanted, Nathan would treat him like the scum he was right back! The adolescent halted his course next to Frank's RV, pulling out his cellphone from his pockets and dialing a specific number. Caulfield was right on one thing, he needed to anticipate future catastrophes and cover his ass in advance, cause all this crazy shit would eventually go public.
Maybe sooner than he thought. The name "Scott Sherman" appeared on his phone's screen right before the boy brought the device to his right ear.

The light crackling sound emitted when someone picked up their telephone echoed from the apparatus.

"Nathan, you know i don't work on the weekends." The foreign voice immediately chided, although it was entirely devoid of venom.

"Yeah, yeah whatevs. I need to see you." He dismissed carelessly.

The weekend thingy was just a sad excuse. Whevener he called during the week, the guy was also tied up with urgent matters. There wasn't a day when his fucking lawyer wasn't overworked anyway.

"Then it will have to wait." The professional rebutted.

"It's fucking important man." Nathan countered seriously, left hand striking the air indignantly as he neared the vehicle of his drug dealer.

Scott snorted. "More than my only resting time of the week? I don't think so." He debunked.

The Prescott heir snarled, frustrated to no end. "Yes it is! Listen—"

He heard the rustling of pages over the line before being cut off by his defense. "I can squeeze you in Tuesday morning."

That made him frown. "Why not Monday?" he interrogated.

"Because i'm full, Nathan." The man asseverated matter-of-factly.

"I don't care, i want Monday!" He threw a tantrum, like the petulant child he had always been, eyeing the chinese food cardboard plastered on the RV's rear pane.

He could hear the amusement in his lawyer's ensuing words. "Tuesday it is." Pen scribbling noises traveled to his ears. "Bye bye." Singsonged the dickhead.

"My father's gonna hear about this!"

Yeah, that was one of his favorite quotes to deliver when he wasn't obtaining what he wanted.

"Don't go down that road, Nate. Why do you always try to threaten me with your father? You hate him even more than i do." The guy pointed out accurately.

"Whatthefuckever. Just do as i say." He ordered impatiently.

*Do your fucking job!*

"See you Tuesday, Nathan. Don't bother calling again, i'm turning my phone off." Sherman indicated with a neutral voice before hanging up without letting him speak further.

Nathan stared at the screen of his phone with a dumbfounded expression, mouth agape.

"Fucking bastard!" He swore, nearly propelling the gadget to the ground but restraining himself just in time when he remembered he actually needed it and couldn't afford to do that.

He shoved it right back in its place, biting his nails nervously as soon as the deed was done. Why did
nobody ever listened to him? Just because he was nineteen didn't mean everything that came out of his mouth was bullshit! Adults always treated him like an irresponsible little shit, even when they didn't knew him. Just because he was his father's son, people never failed to have a preconceived opinion of him even before getting acquainted with him. The raging boy exhaled loudly, attempting to calm down while he observed a thin trail of dust swirling above the ground. Focusing on the vision soothed him a little bit. From where he was standing, he could perceive the beached whale Arcadia's newspapers had rambled about incessantly since yesterday. Not like they had much else to talk about, nothing interesting ever happened in this blazed shithole. Too bad he didn't have his camera for once, or he'd have gladly took a picture. He's had a weird ass fascination with whales since forever. He still couldn't explain it. After the appeasing sound of waves crashing against the sand thrust him out of his reverie, he moseyed around the big van until he reached the door. The stench of Frank's neglected garbage assaulted his nose, the wind slyly dispersing the smell of death coming from the bag's inner rotting components all around the place.

He winced as he banged his fist on the door three times.

A familiar gruff voice resounded from inside. "Stay down. Down i said!" It commanded, and Nathan knew the dumbass was talking to his dog. The door flung open, the sullen face of the drug dealer appearing in his orbit.

The teenager consented, hopping inside the immobile vehicle. The interior was as unsanitary as ever. Unwashed dishes, bits of bitten or half-consumed food left and right, empty beer bottles... Did this filthy pig ever clean up? Nathan hated dirtiness, he was borderline maniac when it came to tidiness. His spotless room was proof enough. The more he saw of Frank's daily life, the less he understood how Rachel could have hang out with a looser like him. What did this retarded hick had that he didn't?

"You didn't text." Complained the older man.

Prescott used his hand to wave dismissively. "No time. Too urgent."

"Yeah, well i don't like surprises punk. I got no time for it. So what is it this time?" the junkie crossed his arms.

"I need some Molly. Plus some coke."

"You got the money?"

"I always do, man."

"Wait here." He ordained, strolling to his bedroom area.

*I'm not going anywhere, brah.*

His brainless mangy mutt was eyeballing him in a leery way, looking at him like he was tasty snack he couldn't wait to nosh on. The pet was laying on the floor, devotedly garding his meat bowl. Pompidou was such a stupid fucking name. That vicious pest always growled or barked whenever he visited his owner. For what? Nathan never did anything to him. Man, even dogs hated him without reasons...

Bowers came back fast, handing him his "party supplies" at the same time the boy handed over a thick bundle of rolled bucks. Just as the transaction ended, the adolescent ready to depart from this odorous hell, someone else knocked on the door.
"You shittin' me?" groused Frank, rocking his head slightly. "Can't i have a fucking break?"

*From what, lazing around?*

The dealer stomped to the entrance, partially opening to take a peek at their unwanted guest. Nathan didn't know why, but a dread feeling settled into his stomach when he noticed Frank's hand slowly sneaking toward his baseball bat the moment he discovered the other guy's identity.

"What do you want, asshole?" Grunted the RV's proprietor.

"I want my fucking dose." A masculine voice croaked from outside.

"You don't have any money, and you already owe me plenty, Steven. So i'd bail out of here if i were you." Warned the independent druglord.

This individual, whoever he was, seemed to piss him off rather quickly.

"Fuck you, Frank! I'll come back! Better watch out you piece of shit!" Proclaimed the intruder, his words sounding more and more distant as he was no doubt retreating from the place.

"I'd like to see you try, you fat pussy!" Cursed Bowers as he violently snapped the door close.

"Troubles?" Nathan's brows raised up as he asked his question, fingers stuck in his pants pockets.

His interlocutor looked like he wanted to spit on the ground. "Just a motherfucker who thinks he's tough..."

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sNNYtm2XJGc ]

The forest seemed morbidly quiet without the protesters that previously occupied the place.

"I'm sorry boss, i did everything i could. They refuse to go back to work. I think we should look for new guys, we've already wasted enough time as it is."

"So you're fully conscious of the fact that you're wasting my time... And my money."

"I... It's not my fault, Sir. I stayed! Even with the horrible conditions, i've never let you down." Defended the foreman.

"Horrible conditions?" parroted his employer, dressed in a fancy suit.

"I... I should go..."

"Please, do so. Someone will send you new workers shortly, then the construction will be able to start again. *Those* better not turn tail, i'm already extremely disappointed with you as it is."
"Y-Yes, sir. Have a good day Mr. Prescott." The employee nodded reverently and took to his heels.

As the cold, manipulative man watched his lackey disappear into his cheap-looking car, something abruptly collided with his head, nearly knocking over his spectacles. He rubbed his aching skull and scoped the area to find the guilty party, only to discover the culprit serenely hooked on a nearby cable line above him. He certainly didn't expect to get rimmed by a raven...

From his secure perch, the naughty creature seemed to cackle at his expense.

I don't want to wait anymore I'm tired of looking for answers
Take me some place where there's music and there's laughter
I don't know if I'm scared of dying but I'm scared of living too fast, too slow
Regret, remorse, hold on, oh no I've got to go

A flaming mane of hair was ondulatiing with the draft caressing the doll-like face of a female adolescent. The young woman was cupping a small piece of paper, her watering amber eyes fixed on a name scrawled in blue ink, her mind miles away from the bustling downtown area of the city she was visiting. She thought she'd never come back to this cursed place, but here she was. She had no idea if she'd be able to keep a straight front when she'd have to face her parents in a few hours. Her weak stomach was incessantly performing annoying flip-flops that made her nauseous. Kelly was terrified of the forthcoming events that would turn her life upside down... But she deserved retribution.

Her bus couldn't arrive soon enough...

Can't worry 'bout what's behind you or what's coming for you further up the road
I try not to hold on to what is gone, I try to do right what is wrong
I try to keep on keeping on
Yeah I just keep on keeping on

With dusk rearing its head, music blasted from a small family garden among the suburbs. Two female young adults and an older one were dancing in a carefree manner, shoed feet skimming the green grass. Shadows of the fence encircling them oscillated along their smooth faces, creating dark ridges that fluctuated with the girls motions.

"Come on mom, shake that ass!" cheered the blue-haired one, making her friend giggle.

"This music is way too dynamic for me." Sighed the blond grown woman, whirling around nevertheless.

"You can do it, Joyce. I'm the worst dancer history has ever known and even i manage." Reassured
the smallest girl with a brownish bob-cut.

"You two will be the death of me."

"More like we're your holy saviors! You need a break from your boring routine, mother."

"Thanks for the high disregard toward my pointless life..."

From inside the Price household, right behind the door's pane giving view to the usually tranquil backyard, Blackwell's security chief was observing the three dancers jiggle around with a dumbfounded eye, rocking his head left and right.

I hear a voice calling
Calling out for me
These shackles I've made in an attempt to be free
Be it for reason, be it for love
I won't take the easy road

Rachel Amber was sitting on the edge of a secluded cliff, basking in the sunset's glow, invisible to the eyes of the rare passerby. She watched the downing sun's reflection flicker across the water down below, the sky turning into a dazzling orange hue, the seagulls soaring through the air to join the darkening clouds above her head, and she smiled.

Arcadia Bay seemed ready to fight back.

She didn't miss Seattle, but she yearned and dreaded to see her parents again. To apologize for the poor behavior she exhibited the last time they were reunited, in a previous timeline. An alternative one. They wouldn't understand anything of what she would babble but, she felt the need to make amends. Her mother's sensibility, her dad's cool personality and reassuring presence that nearly always made her feel safe... she craved them all. The girl's hands caressed the bright red cushion her and her mom had sewn together, admiring the white little flowers embroidered into the pillow, reminiscing its confection with melancholy and her matriarch's fair features with a smile. Max may not find herself really attractive, but she was proud to have inherited some of her mother's assets. She lets the fluffy item fall back on her bed and grabs the butterfly picture left on her closed and unused diary, examining it with a dejected eye.

"Maybe you should go back," urges the mean representation of herself who had been prowling her room since the beginning. "You'll have to forget this dim-witted fantasy to save everybody sooner or later, y'know." She presses on.
The real Maxine wholeheartedly ignores her and stores the polaroid in one of her many drawers, before taking a peek at her ringing cellphone.

Thanks again for the WoW session of tonight Mad Max! I really needed that. I still can't believe i got a B- in science :o
10/12 11:12pm

That's your biggest concern at the moment? ^^ You big nerd! It was a pleasure. I know i'm not as available as i should these days, sorry about that.
10/12 11:12pm

It's okay, it's the thought that counts. And i'm hyped to see the results of what you're plotting Dr. Caulfield! I hope it'll leave me baffled with awe...
10/12 11:13pm

I don't think that's the first thing that'll come to mind sincerely... Talk to you later Warren. Have a good night :)
10/12 11:13pm

Stopping in front of her investigation board, she spins the cardboard around to conceal all her clues and notes until only the childish drawing her and Chloe had crayonned becomes apparent. Caulfield then touches the colorful rainbow depicted on it with a frown, her and her best friend's juvenile voices echoing in her ears remotely.

"One more thing!"

"What? We've been at it for hours..."

"Please, just one more! I want a rainbow in the background, there. Right over the ocean."

"A rainbow? Isn't that, like, really cliché?"

"Max. I want a rainbow on this. So it's gonna happen."

"Alright... No need to turn so scary, Freddy krueger."

"I'll haunt your nightmares until the day you diiiiie."

"Stop it! This is gonna end up like that time we watched Jaws."
"You're so skittish, Max. I love it!"

Tales and legends always sound awesome, until you're part of it. Then it's just plain ridiculous. It felt like all the people of Arcadia were connected by fate somehow. The concept was beautiful... but scary.

"How can this place think you can be its savior? That would basically mean everybody's fucked." Her petty twin sister snickers, butt leaning on Alice's cage with her legs and arms crossed.

"...

"Ignoring me again? It's okay." She shrugs. "You may have powers, but i got tricks under my sleeve." Her intonation is full of elusiveness and dangerously sounds like a warning.

Under her confusion, a crease forms where Max's eyebrows meet when she glimpses at her vile double. A warning to what exactly?

Her bedroom door creaks in a long and continuous squeak, so she shifts her attention toward the noise. It sends her heart racing for a reason only her subconscious may know. Slowly, a person appears behind her door as it opens, allowing entry into her private safe haven. A person that should not be here, under no circumstances. Jefferson. He doesn't need to speak, his eyes do it for him. This isn't a cordial visit.

Her torso heaves as they stare into each other's eyes. Panic creeps up on her so sneakily she doesn't feel it coming, nearly paralyzing her with fear when she finally sense the emotion clawing at her chest. The man scoots forward with the gait of a predator, letting the door shut by itself behind him. As soon as the seal clicks to signal its engagement, she knows she has to run.

Maxine lunges to the side. She knows it's a useless move since he's obstructing the entrance, but that's all she can manage. The blasted fucker had her trapped. In a matter of seconds, she feels something clasp her left arm to push her aback.

"NO!" Her cry vibrates along her walls.

She collapses into her bookcase, its content wobbling under the impact, and perceives the little green plant that was standing atop of it until now tumble to the ground. Her ribs ache from the collision but she wastes no time dwelling on the pain and successfully wrenches herself from her aggressor by shoving him away. Her victory is short-lived though. Just as she dashes in the exit's direction, Mark's arm encircles her waist and hurls her delicate figure unto her sofa, the man letting a groan escape him at the exacting effort. Her feet briefly brush the discarded pair of converse near her bed before her back hits the furniture. She whines the second her shoulder blades forcibly connect with the arm of her couch. Their fleeting scuffle already has her panting heavily.

He tugs on her ankle, the motion sliding her across her drab rug and burning her skin, even through her shirt. The freak's on her before she can blink, pinning her down forcefully. She wriggles desperately and miraculously manages to flip on her stomach, pinning her down forcefully. She tries to use it as leverage to hoist herself from his weight, but he's too strong. Way stronger than her. Jefferson is also wheezing at this point. He turns her back around to her original position, and she uses the opportunity of his hands being busy to violently scratch him across the face, all the while growling wildly. The assault gives him pause, and the adolescent witnesses angry red scrapes caused by her nails tarnish his cheekbones.

That's right motherfucker, i'm not going down without a fight.
She'd like to laugh in his face but sadly, this isn't a good time. Heseizes her throat with two hands, fingers squeezing her supple flesh agonizingly. He's going to kill her. Max's small fists strike him repeatedly but the blows are completely inefficient. She can't use the lower half of her body because his thighs are blocking it, so this is her only option. And what a useless option it is. She tears her gaze away from his incandescent one and looks up, discerning only her wall of polaroids and the ceiling as she whimperisin discomfort. Evil Max is suddenly looming over her, hands resting on her knees while she examines her closely, not bothered one bit by the lunatic currently strangling Caulfield.

"Do you like my little gift?" she questions, a gloating smirk gracing her lips.

Maxine can't comprehend a word of what the bitch is blabbering since she's struggling to free herself from her assailant, who never loosens his grip. The famous photographer doesn't speak, doesn't open his goddamn smart mouth to taunt her like she thought he would. Because he was the type who couldn't resist giving a good quip before he fucked you over, right? But it doesn't happen. Instead, his tepid hands tighten even more around her neck while he leers down at her. Air is rapidly missing from her lungs, the girl suffocating, her powerless form writhing on the ground.

"How does it feel?" Starts her imaginary twin once more. "Constricting much? Deanna would know..." Her toothy grin would unsettle her if she could see it properly, her vision turning blurry from the lack of oxygen.

That's it. She was gonna die. That's how she would perish, by the filthy hands of her psychotic teacher. That bastard was gonna be the end of her, literally. She wouldn't even have the occasion to say goodbye to Chloe, or to bring justice to her professor's victims. Or to offer a chance at redemption to Nathan... Why did Arcadia even kept her from drowning herself if it was simply going to let her choke to death in those inhumane conditions? Her eyes roll back into her skull, and she finally notices the empty glass standing on her tiny square-shaped table. In a last attempt at survival, the teenager catches it to toss it at her persecutor's face. The object flies through him, dematerializing her vision of the man in its course, and bumps into the elevated shelves fixated to her wall. Some of the books arranged on it immediately fall down, thudding on her carpet at the same time the sound of glass smashing in a million pieces overwhelms her ears. Jefferson is nowhere to be seen.

Frenzied coughs escape her, searing her raw and sensitive windpipe. Max's trunk raises until she's sitting on her bum, her right hand stroking her sore throat as she realizes she can breathe again. Relief washes over her while she listens to her unsteady respiration. It was just an hallucination. She had to repeat that over and over in her mind to grasp the notion. This one had been the strongest she's ever had. The illusions never had been pleasant at all, but at least they weren't hazardous, until now. The freckled girl bolts up on shaky legs, barely finding support on her limbs and nearly crashing back on the floor. She steadies herself with the help of her couch and staggers toward her mirror. There's no trace of the art teacher's fingers on her neck, but her face is pale and she never looked so sick, even after her daily vomiting sessions. Her labored pants fog the reflecting device, hindering her physical inspection. Caulfield ends up spotting her alternative self observing her from behind her back with a satisfied smile plastered on the features she stole from her.

She seemed satisfied with her handy work.

"You'll never get better, Max. Get that out of your head." Admonished the cruel copy of the student with a playful arch of her brow.
Nathan was treading down the girls dorm's corridor, making his way to Max's favorite refuge. He had sent multiple messages to the weirdo, but she didn't even bother to answer, so he surmised this was his cue to show up, like he had done the previous night. She didn't mind regardless, right? She did say their new sleeping habits were a mutually beneficial arrangement, after all. He wouldn't let her dismiss him anyway, not today. The earlier shit with his father had ruined his mood for the rest of the day and even the drugs he had bought from Frank hadn't really alleviate him. He could perfectly presage he wouldn't get a satisfying rest if the twee bitch wasn't with him, like he was slowly growing accustomed to. He finally attains his goal and his knuckles knock against the “219” number her door displays.

No response.

He had quite enough of the silent treatment for today, so he swings the door open without waiting for an invitation that might never even come. His eyes have a hard time adjusting to the ambient dimness that instantly greets him. The place is plunged into an unusual darkness that doesn't fit the hipster's character. The open door shapes a bright, luminescent rectangle across her carpeting, which becomes the only source of light inside the tiny room. He can barely distinguish her folded form amid the shadows, but his stormy orbs ultimately find her. She has her head buried in her arms, themselves crossed over her knees, and doesn't react to his impromptu arrival. Nathan strolls toward her shrunken figure, peering down at her suspiciously.

"Crackfield, it's me." The rich kid announces, bumping his foot into hers to get her attention.

It works, but he kinda regrets it. The sight drives him to scowl. Her naturally lively, spirited eyes are hollow, empty. The hair framing her soft-featured face cling to her cheeks, where trails of dried tears manifest themselves. She looks pitiful. She looks exactly like he did during a certain part of his life. Despite the overall murk, his glare lends on the anarchy scattered all around her bedroom. Books, sharp looking debris of glass, a knocked over plant with its content spilled upon the floor... This was a pigsty if he ever saw one.

"What's with the mess, huh?"

She doesn't reply. The situation, and her demeanor in particular, are starting to get on his nerves.

"What's your fucking problem, bitch?" He snarls, thrusting one of his hands forward to touch her.

She flinches, blinking as if the lighthouse's beam was right into her face, and aggressively slaps his intrusive digits away. Max angrily exhales a quivery yet loud breath, similarly to a raging bull, and proceeds to viciously glare at his innocent person. Her snappy mood would almost convince him if he hadn't already learned that she was incapable of hurting a stupid, worthless fly. Hippies don't hit people after all, they're pacifist.

"Hey, i didn't do shit to you, okay! So you better not take it out on me!" He hisses warningly, a finger pointed toward her.

Her rosy eyelids flutter close as she turns her head away, ignoring him once more. The bitch looks ridiculous, trying to act condescending when she was dressed in that laughable pajama shirt
rendering three yellow little chicks. Hipsters clearly possessed no fashion tastes whatsoever.

What a looser.

Nathan gives his surroundings one last lookover, and sighs profoundly. She wasn't going to reveal shit any time soon. He had only one option left if he didn't want to spend the night alone.

"Fuck it."

The exhausted boy grabs her wrist in a careful grip, forcing her to lift her depressive ass from the ground it was rooted into. Without further explanation, he wastes no time getting them out of the gloomy location and leads the way down the hall, the girl bound to trail behind him since he's tugging on her arm. They avoid a lorn full roll of toilet paper before descending the stairs to the lower floor, where the boys dormitory is located. The Prescott drags Caulfield to his room and makes her sit on his bed as soon as they enter, cautious to not be too forceful with the unnerved adolescent. He fishes for something in the bottom white drawer of his wardrobe while she fixes the monochrome images parading his retractable projector screen absentmindedly. He soon finds what he's searching for, retracting from his crouching position and walking back in her direction. He snatches the wooden chair standing in a dark corner, in front of a miniature desk, alongside the diploma his father had awarded him and which was pasted to the wall. The furniture grates along the floor, stopping in front of her as he plops down onto it.

"I'm not doing this for you." He mumbles grumpily.

Her blue orbs finally outline the object in his hands. A small bluish book with a cute whale on its cover. Nathan opens it and skims the pages until he stumbles onto the right one.

"Deep in the ocean, there was a little whale..." he starts his tale with a gentle voice, fluctuating his tone like a parent would when reading to its child.

And all of a sudden, she understands what he's doing. The realization hits her in a powerful blow.

Her pink lips part and begin to tremble under the emotional turmoil. The muscles of her face spasm, every little twitch showing how much the girl is trying to maintain control of her features, yet fails miserably. And she cries. Rivers of tears stream along her cheeks of their own accord without asking for her permission. She shakes and weeps, and her eyes can't shift from the young man beside her who's doing something she never thought possible to witness from someone like him. Because in that small, trivial action, he proves that her loneliness may be unfounded. That if she takes the trouble to look around her, she'll find a hand ready to help her off the ground. He's not repeating one of the acts of violence or anger that was perpetrated against him during his younger years, but one of kindness and compassion. He's not spitting insults or aiming a gun at her, and instead chose to use words that —however irrelevant to the situation they may be—once brought him comfort in his most agonizing moments.

It reminds her of her maternal grandmother's funerals. She didn't cry when her parents told her the news about her death. She didn't cry when she saw her pale, inert body inside the open casket. She didn't cry during the priest's speech, or when she watched them put her dear grandma into the ground. Max had been a strong child. Until her grandfather had squeezed her against his chest in a consoling way and told her she had the right to let it out. And she did. Her eyes had watered and she had wailed hysterically for the rest of the afternoon, incapable of controlling her sobbing. An embrace was all she had needed to realize that no, everything wasn't okay.

And now, a simple story written for children was all she needed to fathom that it was okay for her to feel unwell.
"It felt so out of place in its immense body, always swimming around in the depths of the sea..." he continues, completely engaged in his storytelling, never raising his head from the little booklet to look up at her.

She purses her lips in an effort to cease their constant quivering, her mouth forming into a grateful smile that she cannot stop nor control. Her tears gradually dampen his sheets, but she knows he doesn't care. Her eyelashes are beginning to cling to each other from the colossal amount of pure liquid draining from her lacrimal ducts. She listens, and listens, and listens, enraptured by the words he recites in such a soft manner. Max's gaze is hooked on the Prescott boy as he never cease his soothing reading. She swallows with difficulty, a visible lump gliding along her throat at the action. The freckled girl would like to thank him, but nothing can come out of her mouth at the moment. Plus, she doesn't want to interrupt him. So she worries her bottom lip with her teeth instead and concentrates on the endearing deed.

Maxine sees real progress in his behavior for the first time this week. Nathan Prescott, the most angry, hated, unloved child she's ever met is bringing her comfort. Not with a touch, or a hug, or a shallow speech of optimism, but with mere sentences and rhymes.

She had to keep fighting. She was at the bottom of this fucking insurmountable summit called depression, and she had a much needed rope of hope in her hands. Now she just had to climb.

Chapter End Notes

Poor Max...

I hope this chapter didn't suck ass guys! We're finally starting to seriously dip into this goddamn plot. The first week comes to an end into the next chapter. Frank will have some more "screen-time", and his blood oath with Rachel will be explored.

Oh, and of course, thanks again to all the amazing people who leave kudos on this, take the time to leave a comment or even read the chapters until the end <3 I appreciate all of it!

Pan Estates' protest poster -> http://imgur.com/Oua0Thu
First of all, i love you guys <3 You beautiful people make my heart melt everytime i read your comments. URG! Wish i could grab you all and squeeze you until your eyes pop out! Okay, i'll stop with the psychotic affection now.

Hope you have a good time reading this and that it won't be too boring!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bf9rhAxNrlc ]

It's like she was sleeping on a fluffy, airy cloud. The covers were warm, not too hot, just the right temperature to lull her back to sleep. She hadn't felt so well rested in months, yet she'd definitely be game for another round of cozy napping. The hush floating around the room was only interrupted by a soft respiration that resonated at regular intervals.

The recognition that the comforting warmth narrowly pressed against her side belonged to a human being drove her to recall the last events of yesterday. Flashes of a little blue book, an adorable drawing of a whale on its cover, and a soothing masculine voice rushed back to her mind. Prescott hadn't faltered from his tale and read the entire thing. Didn't took long since it was a book for children after all, but still, knowing his perpetual failure with anything related to patience, she could seriously commend him on that. As soon as he was done with the childish rite, he had put the object back in its place and climbed into bed with her. He hadn't said a word, and neither had she. There had been no need for it. Though she had noted one small detail that differed from all the other evenings... They didn't spend the night as far away from each other as they possibly could, like they were used to. Granted, they didn't exactly cuddle or touch each other but, proximity didn't seem to bother either of them anymore. Not that much.

This is soooo good... I could totally fall asleep again...

When the girl's eyelids fluttered open, Nathan was already staring at her face. The area around her nose, in particular, which normally displayed nothing apart from her freckles. Why was he so interested about them suddenly? Their bodies were turned toward one another, her right hand resting next to her face while his left one did the same. The instant he sensed her eyes on him, his gaze darted back to hers. He looked quite peaceful, a blank expression plastered on his face, and no reaction whatsoever to her awakening...

This was the first time she woke up next to him since they began this sordid little ritual. Max was shocked to discover he had stayed in bed with her until she roused. Maybe he had important matters to discuss with her...
"Hey..." she croaked tentatively, throat dry and a bit sore from all her crying of the previous night.

He gave no reply, just continued to peer at her almost without blinking. His washed-out red shirt had rolled up, his fidgeting throughout the night probably being at cause, and was now exposing the lower part of his belly. His hipbones and thin abdominal muscles formed a "V" in that place, an attractive shape she couldn't help but let her gaze linger on. The boy didn't strike her as the athletic type at all, so it was certainly due to the impressive lack of fat in his body. A prickling sensation emerged in her fingertips as the desire to touch his bare flesh arose.

Nathan didn't need a magnifying glass to notice her explicit ogling since it was so patent. His brows furrowed as he tugged on the hem of his shirt to hid his pale skin from her prying eyes, the two cerulean pearls drifting back to his once denied of their visual treat. He didn't expect this kind of things from Caulfield. Yet again, she always managed to surprise him one way or another. An alluring pink hue spread across her nose and cheekbones, telling him that she at least realized her inappropriate leering. Catching the prude red-handed filled him with an amusing satisfaction that eventually forced him to relax his facial muscles until a smug smirk appeared at the corners of his mouth. The charming flush worsened. He had nearly forgot he was perfectly capable of getting her all hot and bothered. This was a nice reminder.

But certainly not for Max.

Cocky bastard.

"Thank you for last night..." she tried once more after clearing her throat.

The complacent smile disappeared.

A second passed before he opened his mouth, his full attention still solely on her person. "...Are you finally gonna tell me what happened?" He questioned in a low, hushed tone.

Apparently, he was ready to nod off anew too.

Her response delayed as a result of her not being sure if it was a good idea to admit her mental deficiencies, but considering the Prescott wasn't exactly lacking in that department either, she decided to be honest.

"I... had an hallucination." She admitted in a tired, quiet voice.

The disclosure didn't appear to disturb him. "...What did you see?" Nathan inquired calmly.

She inhaled deeply to give herself a semblance of bravery, and exhaled in a similar manner. "Jefferson breaking into my room... We fought and... he pinned me on the floor and... strangled me."

"Fuck..." He breathed out. The distant glint in his eyes indicated he was probably wondering what he would have done in her shoes, but he didn't seem to find an answer to that scenario. "How did you stop it?" A crease formed between his eyebrows on account of his confusion.

"I threw my glass in his face, and it went right through him. It made him disappear, then i could breathe again... I didn't think my own brain would try to kill me one day... Maybe i should see a professional..."

Yeah, then you two can talk about your superpowers and have a bonding session over how cuckoo you are. Maybe you'll become best friends after he's thrown you into a mental hospital for severe schizophrenia. Oh, what a great idea, Max!
True. She couldn't really picture herself on a sofa, recounting every fucked-up things that happened to her recently to a complete stranger, her regular time-trips included. But perhaps she could find a way to twist her insane life story and be able to get help without mentioning every incriminating details of her past. She could take the liberty to say that a lot of her friends had died, or that an evil man had hurt her, she needn't say more than that. These were very common incidents that happened to anyone, right? Everybody had loved ones who passed, and the majority of the population had already suffered from the hands of a cruel person in the course of their life.

"Don't think it's just gonna go away because you talk to a psychiatrist. They're not good at anything apart prescribing drugs." The boy replied bitterly, no doubt from experience.

"Yours seems pretty caring to me... He obviously wants you to get better."

He scowled. "How the hell would you know about my shrink?"

"I was in the dark room, remember? I read the letter he sent to your father." She informed matter-of-factly.

"Shit, always sticking your nose where it doesn't belong." Nathan reproached resentfully.

*I wonder how he'd react if he knew i'm meeting his doctor tomorrow... He'd probably throw a tantrum.*

"If Jefferson traumatized you that much, why spend so much time with him?" He started again. "Are you that reckless or just plain retarded? You still attend his class, Vic even told me you took Kate's place as his assistant. And i saw you in his car the other day, what the fuck were you thinking?" He reproved, looking at her like she was dim-witted.

Her tongue darted out to lick her parched lips, gaze wandering to the ceiling as she rolled on her back. "It wasn't my fault. We crossed paths at the gas station and he offered me a ride to school. I can't afford to act too weird around him or he'll know something's up."

His ruffled hair produced rustling noises as he shook his head against his pillow. "Then don't complain when you get psychotic episodes, 'cause you're not doing anything to avoid it you stupid bitch."

*I never did, jackass.*

A sudden realization hit him. "Wait... What were you doing at the station? You don't even have a car."

Caulfield sighed tiredly, right hand stroking her stomach. "I needed evidence of Kate's kidnapping. He used your car to go to the barn for a good reason, Nathan. He's trying to set you up. I have footage with his face on it now, so we can prove he was involved. He won't get away with it this time."

"What the—And he didn't question why you were there? You're lucky you're not dead yet, Caulfield!"

"The owner helped and fed him a lie." She recounted.

"So what now? You're gonna keep playing friends with Jefferson? You're fucking bonkers." His mouth formed a lopsided rictus.

"I don't have a choice. If i can gain his trust, he might spit more informations, things that could make
it easier to put him behind bars. I'm gonna play him at his own game."

He cracked up, entirely unconvinced by her resolution. "Yeah, right. He's a lot more experienced than you when it comes to manipulation, dumbass."

She ignored his mocking tone, not wanting her rare morning serenity to slip away from her fingers by getting peeved.

"I never claimed it was going to work. But at least i'll try." She pointed out.

Silence promptly followed that sentence. But only for a short moment.

"Doesn't he scare you?" He looked genuinely curious.

"I'm not afraid of him. I just... hate him with a passion. I want to punch his stupid face everytime i see him. He disgusts me." Maxine divulged, features scrunching up.

She didn't feel like Max Caulfield anymore, not completely. The freak had said he was going to capture her soul with his camera... Well, that's exactly how it had felt. He took a part of her that night... A part she'd most likely never get back. It stayed behind, in that infernal place, with all the other souls of those girls he had mentally tortured in the past. It was like something was missing inside her, like she wasn't the same person as before. The bastard had stole her dreams, her innocence... But she got Chloe back. And among all the significant things that shaped her tiny trivial life once wrapped together, the blue-haired girl was the most important one. She just wished her fever to take images could return. Because, if it didn't, what would she do with her life? She had no other drive, no other qualifications, nothing else—apart from her friends—to provide her with the will to get up each morning and deal with her mess of a life. To seek a purpose in that glum future, that road laid out in front of her which seemed bereft of an end since its path was obstructed by a dense mist of doubts and uncertainty... Where would she be in ten years? Five? Hell, where would she be right after all this grueling ordeal had finally found closure? Would Arcadia let them move on, at last? Would all those kids be able to achieve peace without their onerous pasts and inner demons haunting them at every turn?

In any case, the two teenagers definitely needed to talk about something else or the rest of her day would suck just as hard as it had last night.

"What time is it?" Max requested innocently.

The King of Sneers shrugged idly. "Who cares? It's Sunday."

They shared an apprehensive look, Nathan trying to get her to stay fixed and Max attempting not to rile him up further. He didn't seem like the good-humored type in the morning. It's like he feared the moment she’d try to roll out of bed to get on with her day, if his stiffness was any indication. But like he pointed out, it was Sunday. She had no classes, no commitments to honor, no exciting schemes to follow throughout the next twenty-four hours... For now.

His stare wouldn't leave her slumped form. "Got somewhere to be?" He quizzed, albeit the question sounded more like a caution to stay precisely where she was.

"No, not that i know of..." she murmured.

The light tension in his shoulders vanished. "Then relax. Let's laze out." The boy coolly proposed.

The brunette cocked an eyebrow. "You plan to stay in bed all day?"
"Why not?" He finally looked away.

Her pupils sauntered around the room before settling back onto him. "Do you want me to leave you alone?"

Prescott seemed ready to facepalm. "You are so dumb, Max. Did I tell you to leave?" he rolled his eyes, who were already fixed on the ceiling.

"I'm glad I have permission to stay with you," she responded with a mischievous smile that traveled all the way up to her gaze.

"Retard."

"Asshole."

"Shut your mouth," he declared as he curled his left arm around her waist to get her a bit closer.

Her nose bumped delicately against his shoulder, his hand remaining on the small of her back. She could feel the discreet puffs of air exiting his nostrils blowing across her hair, since his face was basically looming directly above hers, resting atop his pillow.

She took the opportunity to inhale his scent, closing her eyes in utter contentment. She never thought such a small insignificant thing would be able to put her at ease with so much facility. Staying in bed sounded like a great plan.

It didn't take long for Nathan to notice her inhaling his fragrance, no matter how discreet she thought she was.

"You a dog Caulfield? Why are you sniffing me?" he asked with a funny expression.

"You smell nice." She replied sincerely.

He seemed taken aback by the admission, though it only lasted a second. "What's next?" he snorted, "You gonna bark?"

"Prick."

"Bitch."

She could have easily thrown another bunch of insults at him—she had a humongous bundle of it in stock—yet resolved to stay quiet. That decision didn't persist for long however.

"I'd still like to know what time it is though..." her subdued voice broke the silence.

A guttural growl came out of his throat, demonstrating how irritating she was to him, and he twisted around slightly to take a peek at his phone's clock. She heard the gadget brutally hit his nightstand once he was done.

"It's fucking 8:30am. Happy? Now, can we go back to sleep?"

"Fine with m—hm—hmf—" her words were cut off by a large pillow colliding with her face.

She hummed her disgruntlement, her muffled speech not making any sense until he got the fluffy thing off her head. She didn't bother opening her mouth again this time, the adolescent arranging them back to their previous position so he could feel her hot breaths crash repeatedly against his shirt. The two fell back into slumber in no time.
Heavenly chants traveled along the walls of the church to end their course on the ceiling above their heads, echoing even more graciously when reaching its peak. The stained-glass windows of the building filtered the light coming from outside, divine rays illuminating the place with the help of the abundant golden candles placed on the different altars surrounding them. People were wholeheartedly singing in tune, tomes with dark covers clasped in the hollow of their hands. Kate's book was left on her wooden bench, right behind her. She didn't need it, she already knew those lyrics by heart. Father Lamont, standing behind his altar like every Sunday morning, was leading the chorus.

The scenery was beyond beautiful, as well as unmistakably more warm and welcoming than the hospital had appeared.

She felt at peace here. She was safe in her church, with her loving family, and tomorrow, she'd be able to see her friends again. Especially Max, whom she couldn't wait to hug until she couldn't breathe any longer. The thought brought a blissful smile to her lips as she continued her chanting. The freckled photographer had been so adorable during her visits to the hospital...

Her turquoise irises landed on the Brewington family, who were more engaged in their mantra that anybody else in the vast sparkling room. Mark, head of the family, had cordially told her she looked more hale and hearty than ever the instant he spotted her entering the religious edifice with her folks. Everyone seemed earnestly delighted to see her well and healthy anew. She had feared some of her peers would have seen the video and wrongfully judge her for it, maybe even treat her like a "jezebel", as her dear auntie had so spitefully compared her to. But no. None of that. Only encouragements and prayers for her well-being.

The moment didn't remain flawless for long despite everybody's good intentions. A weird sensation, like dozens of tiny needles stinging her flesh, surfaced out of nowhere along her nape. She recognized this feeling. She only experienced it when someone was staring at her while she was unaware, or when she witnessed something disturbing. And there was absolutely nothing disturbing occurring in this church.

Until her seeking eyes met the insistent, leering gaze of a man amid the standing crowd.

She remembered seeing him attend Mass before, he was a regular if she recalled correctly, although she never talked to him and knew zip about this guy. At first glance, he seemed like a wealthy, normal and highly-regarded individual. The shameless way he was scrutinizing her on the other hand, was strongly upsetting. His piercing look was coercing her insides to wring violently, for a reason she couldn't grasp. His disgusting stare made her feel naked and violated, something she clearly didn't need to experience right now, in the middle of a congregation.

The celestial chants of the people around her became more and more distant, while a distinct, particular voice reached her eardrums, similarly to a disembodied, echoing memento. Meanwhile,
blinding flashes of white overran her vision and perturbed her singing.

"Shhh, everything's okay. Don't move so much."

"I promise this won't hurt. There we go..."

A familiar sharp sting poked at her neck, sending shivers all the way down to her spinal column. She slapped her hand against her skin, trying to get rid of the awful sensation. She clearly remembered hearing Nathan's voice when she was knocked-out, but like Max had pointed out, who was the other one? The one she had mistook for a doctor at first... The merry sound of the singing religious group present at her sides came back to her in full blast when a comforting hand placed itself on her shoulder, tearing her away from her unpleasant retrospection. Her eyes shot out to her left, meeting her father's gentle gaze.

"...Katie?" He called out softly, applying a bit more pressure with his fingers when he discerned her alarmed state. "Are you feeling alright?"

*I'm safe. Everything's okay. Dad is here. And mom, and Lynn, and Rose. Just breathe.*

"I'm okay, dad." She lied, catching her breath as she glanced at Richard Marsh, the most loving man she had ever encountered.

He didn't look very reassured by her answer, but dropped the subject nonetheless, warm palm retreating back at his side.

"Do you want to go to the amusement park this afternoon? Your sisters keep nagging me to drive them, we could all use the distraction i think." He proposed with a goofy smile that forced his large glasses to hike further up his nose.

Her mouth spread out in a thin smile. "Dad, we shouldn't talk during service, mom's going to throw a fit." She cautioned knowingly.

"Oh, yes. Sorry..." He straightened comically, like a child whose mother had just chided for his bad behavior, returning his attention to the ongoing ceremony.

A breathy, mute chuckle escaped her as she did likewise. "I'd be happy to go." The blond teen informed in a loving manner.

Her patriarch definitely seemed satisfied by her response. The student glanced over her shoulder one last time to check on the rich man who was still busy staring at her, lips moving about while he sang along his peers. For the first time in her life, Kate wished for her service to end promptly.

"I'm so close to catching the people who hurt you, i just need more time and then you'll be able to get justice. We'll make them pay!"

She hoped it wouldn't take much longer for her friend to find what she needed.
The next time Max wakes up, they had swapped places, the brunette now laying close to Nathan's broken lamp, while the boy was sitting alongside her, cross-legged on the bed. She shifts a bit, gratified that no fatigue is blurring her vision, until her blue gaze falls onto the cellphone resting on her sheet-covered lap. She doesn't remember grabbing it when her comrade dragged her to his room last night, so why is it here? The Prescott remarks her spontaneously glaring at the device the moment she heaves from the mattress.

"I brought it so you'd stop bothering me with your useless questions every five minutes." He explains, fiddling with something in his own lap, drawing her eyes to his grey sweatpants which hanged dangerously low on his hips.

She swallows her nonexistent saliva, her mouth totally arid considering she hasn't drink anything since the previous day. His back dimples leave her speechless for a short period of time, but she quickly gets a grip—abashed by how perverted she was gradually becoming—and notices the object in his hands is a cigarette pack. He extracts one of the cancer sticks and a neon blue lighter from the white package.

"You're really going to smoke in here?" She calls out with objection.

His unwillingness to fight with her shows through the composed gust of air escaping his nostrils. "What's the problem?"

"The room is small, it's gonna smell gross. If you really have to do it, at least open the windows." The hipster demands, like she has a right to dictate what he can and cannot do in his room.

A growl reverberates from his chest. "You're such a fucking cockblock." He grumbles, dropping the items on his covers in defeat.

After barely three seconds of absolute quietude, his head lifts from his folded limbs like he's just been struck by lightning, and he turns around with a ruminating expression before glowering at her face. Nonplussed, she scans the vicinity in search of what's causing the teenager to scowl so hard.

"...What?" She wonders when she spots nothing abnormal.

Stormy orbs scud over her left shoulder. His body springs in her direction so fast she closes her eyes, thinking he might be lunging sideway to attack her. To her relief, he doesn't. What's not relieving at all however is their suffocating proximity. His face is right next to hers as he fishes for something in his nightstand's drawers. The heady smell of his cologne fills her senses, turning her brain to mush. She can feel the curve of his ear tingling her brown locks as he rummages through his stuff, her body taut in consequence of the young man's closeness. Max knows she only has to wait, yet it's literally torture when he's centimeters away from her twitching fingertips.

He slips something in her palm and before she realizes it, he's back to his original place. She catches a sly grin at the corner of his mouth as he recoils, but it's gone in a flash, driving her to ponder if it was just another hallucination. The novice photographer eyes the note he left in her care, a delicate brow arching behind her tousled bangs.

"What's this?" She inquires, beginning to read the sole phrase scribbled across the narrow page.

"I found it at my house yesterday. It's for my dad." He explicates, scratching his thigh.

"Um, "I burned the list"? Do you think it's..." She brings the piece of paper—stuck between her index and middle finger—higher in the air to get his attention.
"Yes, that's probably what you're looking for." He deadpans.

"We. We are looking for." She corrects strictly. "This concerns you too, you know."


She listens to his dismissive reply with only one ear, focused on the reemerging souvenirs of what she glimpsed at inside the hick guy's head she met Friday morning.

"This has to be distributed before the end of the week. I slipped a list with addresses among the packages. I'm counting on your usual discretion and effectiveness here."

"Come by the house to leave me a note when this is done. No phone calls or emails. Understood?"

The list the Blackwell totem had requested for her to find and the task Sean Prescott had gave to that Bobby Fallon fellow must have a relation with each other. She'd bet her life on it.

"That's not how it works, Nathan." Maxine finally lets out.

Her cerulean pearls follow his movements across the room as he crawls toward the end of the bed and walks up to his nearest, smallest desk.

"I... I have to tell you something." She admits with difficulty, anticipating his incoming irascibility.

"Then spill it already."

She bits her bottom lip. "You're going to get angry."

"Just do it!" Nathan snarls, exasperated. "You always piss me off anyway." He adds roundly, playing around with the valuable camera he had just snatched from atop the wooden furniture.

That's not true!

Even in a quandary, she went for it. "Were you... aware that Jefferson's pictures are being sold to other people?"

"...Yeah, i surmised it was the case. I don't know who if that's where you're going with this. The only thing he told me about it is that it was a business, and that it brings in mad cash. He never said anything else, but you'd have to be dumb as fuck not to understand business means trading."

That's all? He never questioned it further?

Her features turn sullen, forehead creasing. "You think Jefferson is the one who sells them?" she presumes.

"I don't know. Yeah, who else?" He shrugs. "Maybe he got minions to do the dirty work, but it was his idea in the first place."

She nods her disagreement. "Well, that's where you're wrong."

He briskly places his gadget back in its previous spot and swings to face her."Okay, this is getting annoying, stop beating around the bush!" He urges, feet tramping in her direction until he is standing next to the bed and staring down at her, an untidy strand of chestnut-hair ebbing onto his right eyebrow.

"Alright, alright!" She yields, palms raised up in resignation, then exhales loudly. "Your father is
behind all this."

When his brain processes the information, he looks ready to rant, aristocratic features contracting in a fuming expression. He barely has the time to suck in a breathe before she cuts him off.

"Hear me out before you start blowing up!" She gets up, forcing him to recede a little. "Jefferson has been doing it waaaaay before the two of them met. It was just a hobby. Then him and Sean get acquainted, and for some reason it clicks, right?" She snaps her fingers. "They got a particular taste for art after all..." Max insinuates scornfully.

"The fuck are you implying?" Nathan boils.

"Oh come on, this," her index finger points to the bound woman plastered on his wall, "didn't fall from the sky, huh? It came from your dad." She frenetically waggles her hand in his face. "No, no, no you shut up, and let me finish." He looks on the brink of explosion after her bold words. "They become friends, and at some point, Sean puts pressure on Wells to get Jefferson to teach at Blackwell. You follow?"

"Yes." He seethes, reminding her of a serpent waiting for the perfect chance to bite her savagely.

"Well, that's where the itty-bitty detail you don't know about comes into play. Your dear daddy made a proposition to Jefferson to make money out of this. He's the one who handles all this shit from behind the shadows."

"You're fucking insane." He glares at her as if she belonged inside an asylum. "I think you're right. You really need to see a shrink."

"Think about it, Nathan. Why would your dad agree to pay a million dollars for a fucking high security bunker under an old decrepit farm without even knowing what you're doing in there?" She taps her index finger against her temple three times in a row. "You never wondered?"

"I told him i wanted a photo studio and that Jefferson was teaching me photography. He bought it." He snaps back, wrongly confident in his amateurish bluff.

"Jefferson probably told him he could use it for their business. I bet he's the one who gave you the idea!" The bewildered look on his features shows her suspicions are spot-on. "Shit, are you really that naive? Your father explicitly asked Jefferson not to include you into this business, he only wanted him to be your teacher, well how did that go? That maniac didn't listen and brought you into this, and now, you're in deep shit because of him." Max nears the befuddled Prescott, determined to make him see the light. "He's been playing you both for months, can't you see that?"

"This is bullshit! You're spilling so much bullshit by the second, i can't even keep up with you." His jerking hands take hold of his head as he withdraws toward his other desk, the larger one supporting a valuable computer. "How would you even know all this? One of your stupid ass visions again? Huh? How do i know you're not lying? Do you fucking hear yourself? You're off your rocker, Crackfield."

"Why do you find this so hard to believe? You're always the first to say your dad is a piece of shit! It shouldn't surprise you."

"But that's something else! Holy shit! Yeah he's a fucking asshole, but spoiler alert, he's still my fuckin' dad!"

"I know that! What do you think i'm asking you exactly? To stab your family in the back? I only want to help. I need you on this, Nathan. And you have to be aware of his actions. Would you prefer
for me to hide it from you until the trial comes up?"

"I'd prefer if you started to say coherent shit, you dumb cunt!"

*Oh no, you did not just call me that.*

She’s getting riled up. He’s so insufferable, him and his execrable temper. She wants to growl like a tiger and pluck some hair out of her skull from all her pent up frustration. However, her phone chooses this inopportune moment to vibrate irritatingly upon the boy’s bed. Huffing like buffalo, she rapidly checks its screen, Chloe’s name splayed across it.

"I have to take this." She affirms, leaving no place for argument.

"This isn't the moment! We're having a conversation!"

"That's not a conversation, that's called yelling at each other." Maxine rectifies wittily before swiping her thumb across the cellphone. "Chloe?"

"Max, Justin just texted me to invite us to a derby game with him and his crew. It's out of town."

Device glued to her ear, Max decides to look anywhere but the angry teenager in front of her. "Oh, today?"

"Yes, today! I know you wanted to be a derby girl, so don't say you're not interested." Reminds her Chloe.

She attempts a small smile in order to sound relaxed. "I won't. I'm coming."

"Yes, girl! I'm picking you up at one. And take your camera, you might get great shots out of this. You better move your ass hella fast cause it's thirty minutes away from Arcadia." Warns the blue-haired one.

"I'm on it." Caulfield promises.

"See you, Super-Max."

The brunette hangs up and begins to stride across the room when Nathan quickly blocks her path, arms crossed over his chest.

"What do you think you're doing?" The query is stiffly articulated.

"I'm leaving." She reveals curtly, as if it wasn't obvious enough.

His eyebrows furrow deeper than she thought conceivable. "Why?" He fulminates, holding her gaze with a vengeance.

"I'm going to a derby bout with Chloe and Justin."

"Justin? The skater fuck?" His sneer is the epitome of pompous.

The mousy adolescent raises her eyes to the ceiling in aggravation. "Let me guess, you don't like him."

"No, he doesn't like me, except when he needs to get blazed, then he always knows where to find me. Like the rest of those Blackwell suckasses."
"I know Nathan, everybody hates you, i heard it aaall before..." She rolls her eyes.

"So what? You drop the bomb and leave me alone just to go see some dumb bitches on rollerblades?"

"Actually, i think it's the best solution at the moment. I can get away from your complete denial and delusions, and you can mull over what i said. Perfect."

"This is my room, bitch. You're not getting out of here until i decide." Nathan takes a menacing step forward to prove his point.

She sighs. "Can't you stay sweet for more than one night? You were so kind yesterday..." Maxine evokes mournfully.

"I'm not your fuckin' dog. You don't get to control how i behave or how i feel, okay?! I don't have to live up to your expectations!"

Her pink lips part, the young woman dumbfounded by his remarks. "That's not what i meant. You're playing dumb on purpose, right?"

His finger jabs at her, right below her collarbone. "Don't push me, girl." He warns ominously.

"What are you gonna do, Nathan? Kiss me?" She challenges provocatively, hands on her hips. "Seems you only have the balls to do it when you're mad at me..."

He looks ready to throw her back on the bed, to ravish or kill her, she doesn't really know. Her breath hitches when he shoves her back against his desk, her rump forced to lean against the furniture. Nathan is too close for comfort, towering over her smaller form as he stares her down haughtily. Images of their unplanned dalliance in the locker room reemerge forcibly across her mind. Arousal engulfs her entire being, the two students looking into each other's eyes, chests heaving immoderately as the temptation to jump each other's bones sinks in, spooking them both simultaneously. She is centimeters away from a pleasurable repeat of the fondling session they had shared on Friday.

You can't do this Max. Think about Chloe. This is betrayal, not friendship.

"I... I have to go..." she whispers, winded despite the fact that she hadn't moved an inch.

He blinks at the speed of a sloth, glimpsing at her pudgy mouth, ardent flames flickering athwart his darkened orbs. He makes his decision the moment his face swivels to the side, away from her entrancing doe eyes.

"...Whatever, have fun with your deadbeat friends." He ousts her sourly.

She extricates herself from their suffocating proximity, pushing past him to the exit, sending one last glance over her shoulder when her hand wraps around the door's handle.

The sight of his stiffened back turned to her, plunged into darkness, a sad, perfect picture of loneliness, prods viciously at her heart. For an instant she actually hesitates to depart, doesn't want to leave him by himself with his demons. Wants to slide her arms around his middle and hug him, tell him he's not alone anymore, that he can count on her, that she'll be here when everything crumbles under their feet, because it will, very soon, and that no matter how many times he and her bicker, she'll never let him fall down this dark pit of solitude once they lose their footing. But she knows this is eventually for the better. He needs to meditate on what she disclosed, needs to comprehend what his dad's implication in all this twisted shit could mean for him in the future.
Maxine steps out of the tenebrous bedroom, ready to leap toward her own refuge before stumbling onto a rather crucial complication.

"Max? Did you just come out of Nathan's room?"

*Shit.*

Warren. Of all the times they could have bumped into one another, it had to be now. Of course. The clock is ticking, she has to tidy her disordered room, shower, and dress up before Chloe arrives. But no, let's put Warren on her path just as she gets out of the room of someone he despises.

"Um, no." She's always been terrible at lying, but she gives it a shot anyway.

The way his features split up tells her it didn't work out. "I'm not an idiot y'know. I don't like when people lie to my face either, especially when they're supposed to be my friends." His voice is still gentle, even when he lectures her.

Because Warren is just a big softy with a warm heart. And he's absolutely right. She shouldn't lie to a friend, yet things are more complicated than he could ever understand. Maybe he will, one day, when all of their disturbing secrets are finally exposed.

She sighs, shoulders flopping wearily. "Alright, i'm sorry. I just... I needed something from him for my photography class and i thought you'd immediately jump to conclusions if i told you."

He seems a lot more convinced after this fib. The second he opens his mouth to question her further, raucous noises erupt from Nathan's room. Like objects crashing onto the floor, or fists bashing into the wall.

"Did he hurt you?" The brown-haired nerd can't help but worry.

"No, he's probably having a fit by himself. Nothing unusual, am i right?" She says in sport. "I'm so sorry Warren but, Chloe is waiting for me and she'll pester me all day if i don't get a move on."

He hums dubiously, eyeing his nemesis' door with skepticism. There's only concern in his gaze whenever it refocuses on her though.

"Fine, i don't want to cause you trouble, Max. But you better eat with me tomorrow."

"For lunch? Duh, naturally." She accepts, hands shyly linked in front of her thighs.

He bestows his goofiest smile to the girl before carrying on toward the bathroom, his original destination.

*That was close, Max.*

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7bYgcwyfb4U ]
The entire setting was just a big ebullition of trepidation, exhilaration, and euphoria. The crowd was hyped beyond reason, cheering like this was the event of the year, filling Max with a feeling of rapture as she strangely appeared to get infected by the ongoing frenzy around them. Skull Crushers vs. Rabid Cannibals was quite the bout to witness... Chloe had been pumped since they were on their way here, screeching madly in the car for almost the entire ride, like a four years old who had too much sugar. Caulfield was in her own little bubble as her eyes took in every detail the spectacle generously offered. She positioned her camera in her line of vision, snapping a pic of one of the players jumping over a knocked down adversary, then took a peek at her handywork before shaking the freshly acquired polaroid and putting the aging device back in her bag. She did commit to make the effort of getting back on track with her photography, after all.

"Finally, Max Caulfield and her trademark retro camera. You've been stalling on the pictures, artist." Stated her wired best friend over the bursting backgroud music.

Embarrassed, the brunette glanced at their skater friend for the sake of avoiding her associate's perceptive blue gaze. To say Justin was entranced by the game, or most likely girls, would be an euphemism. He briefly removed his red cap to thread his fingers along his dirty-blond hair. This must have been the first time in history the boy didn't bring his board along.

"Yeah... i know..." whispered Maxine with a feeble voice.

"Max, relax." Eased Chloe, reaching an arm around her frail shoulders. "Consider this your day off, okay? You hella deserve it. Stop worrying, and enjoy." The injunction was vocalized in a bubbly tone. "Plus, i seriously needed that too. I... had trouble sleeping last night, after what i learned yesterday. I think i understand why i don't really see you running around with your camera anymore..."

Oh Chloe... I knew she'd be troubled by this.

She didn't have the opportunity to console her partner though, since a masculine silhouette emerging from the raging audience interrupted her.

"Oh, here comes Trevor!" Exclaimed the punk.

"You're late bro!" Scolded Justin, while the newcomer stopped at their level.

"Sorry, had a little problem on the way." Apologized the young man.

It didn't take long for the photographer to catch on the imposing splint holding his right arm in place.

"Woah Trevor, what happened to you?" she asked immediately.

"The moron fell on his elbow doing a 360 flip nosegrind. Epic fail!" Recapped the slightly bearded blond.

"Ouch!" Chloe commented, wincing at the black contraption.

"Don't worry girls, dude's alright, he got his Princess Dana to heal him with sloppy smooches." The tall skater bitterly jested while making a kissy face at his friend.

That got him a nasty glare from Trevor.

"Careful... I see some venom dripping." Max sarcastically indicated, tracing an invisible line from the
corner of her lips to her chin with her index finger.

"He's just a jealous dick, don't listen to him." Advised the cheerleader's boyfriend.

"Those guys must be in love." The blue-haired girl noted with a facetious grin, squeezing her childhood mate closer against her.

The eccentric band returned their attention to the match in progress. The Skull Crushers' jammer was attempting to rush past the pack of blockers from the opposite team, which she did, after successfully giving a good hip check to their jammer when she reached her level, sending her flying into the middle of the banked track. She effortlessly dashed past her remaining comrades and scored four additional points for the girls clad in black and white. That seemed to piss off the other team, whose girls were wearing mainly red clothing. At least, all that color made it easy to distinguish the opponents from one another. A particular move caught Justin's eyes at the ensuing jam, the young man bouncing on his spot like a kid who had just been promised a fabulous brand new toy by his genitors.

"Man, check this out! Wouhou! Did you see that?! She grabbed the other babe's leg to go faster!" Hurrayed Justin, gleeful to the brim.

He wasn't the only one agog from the view, if the roaring audience was any indication.

"It's called a leg whip. They can do the same with their arms too." Clued in the hipster in her typical nerdy tone.

"You even know the terms?" The guy chirped, regarding her with approval. "Dude, you're really not a poser!" He elbowed her ribs playfully.

"Max wanted to be a derby girl when we were younger." Informed the Price teen.

"That's so cool! What happened?" He inquired, ever the curious soul.

"Let's just say my feet and rollerblades have the same kind of relationship Chloe has with school." Winked Max.

"Ohhhhh..." he drawled in comprehension.

"Heeeey!" Interjected the huffy individual.

"Sorry." Caulfield shrugged, batting her eyelashes ingenuously although she knew her friend wouldn't fall for that.

"Girl, you aren't. And just because you suck at something, doesn't mean you get to trash-talk me for it, hippie."

"You know i love you."

The punk let out a disgusted grunt. "Ugh, you brown-noser."

This is why she loved Chloe so much. Her morning quarrel with Nathan was already out of her mind by now. Spending time with her buddys was a good therapy in itself. The situation had evolved so drastically over the course of one week. Seven days earlier, she was still stuck in another timeline, where anything related to social interaction would have been off the charts. It felt like a million years had passed between the moment Rachel had hauled her out of Arcadia Bay's sea and the current instant she was sharing with her classmates and a very lively Chloe. Now, all she wanted was to
make the most of it.

"Holy shmoly, those girls rock! You should have stick to your dreams, Maximus." Encouraged the blond, eight years too late.

"Yeah, Max. You could be down there right now." Appended Trevor, also captivated by the bout.

Throwing up or covered in bruises. Or both...

Maxine's eyebrows curled upward. "I'm surprised you guys are so into this. Don't you prefer skate?"

"Max, look at those beauties! It'd be a crime not to give credit to that." Declared Justin.

"Hell, yeah! Kudos to the booties!" Chloe whooped in response.

The brunette crossed her arms over her chest, eyes drifting to her right to look at her best friend. "Chloe... He said beauties, not booties."

The latter proceeded to stare at her blankly for ten seconds before muttering a small, "...Oops?"

Some things just never change...

Out of the blue, one of the players violently collided with the guardrail encircling the track, the thud the impact produced snapping the teenagers out of their banter. The poor woman grunted in pain yet, not one to quit apparently, quickly steadied herself and returned to her purpose, her steadfast expression never wavering.

"Oh my god... That must have hurt." Cringed Joyce's daughter, rubbing her stomach in empathy.

Justin blinked as he seemed to recall something essential. "Yo Chloe, i got some good nugs in my car. Wanna split it after the bout?"

"Why not? My step-ass won't get off my crack this week. I can never find time to unwind with him hounding me."

"That sucks! Man, remember the bad trips we had with Rachel? Speaking of Rachel, any words on her?"

Two abashed blue gazes met each other, just to drift shamefully to the floor a moment later. Rachel wasn't such a touchy subject when she was still missing and the two of them were ignorant of her... well, death. Lying about it to her former friends made Max feel like shit. But when didn't she feel like a big pile of dung anyway?

"Uh, no. Nothing yet." The blue-haired girl replied.

"I hope we'll hear from her soon..." gently soughed the young guy, readjusting his camo slacks.

Chloe and her didn't comment further. Maxine sensed the grip her friend had on her tighten discreetly, a sign for her not to worry and that she'd better not start pondering over dark things when they were supposed to have fun. Even if she tried to follow her companion's inaudible order, the image of Rachel's decaying body came back to mind, entailing her to picture how the popular girl's funerals would eventually transpire, including how her poor oblivious parents would react to the news of their daughter's tragic decease.

Caulfield rocked her head vigorously to clear her thoughts of this fancied dreadful vision.
Focus on the bout, Max...

The girls had a good time. Chloe was right, Max badly needed a break and she required this dope excursion with her friends to realize it. Their little ride back to Arcadia is pretty much quiet, sometimes punctuated by a little phrase here and there. Her associate is focused on the road while she's busy listening to the sad weather unferling onto the Bay's landscape. She doesn't mind rain, but the windshield wipers kept screeching annoyingly, distracting her from her meditative contemplation of the clear drops trailing down her window. The latter felt cool against her burning forehead, the soothing sensation combined with the sound of the drizzle almost lulling her to sleep.

"The fuck do you think you're doing? Get out!"

She blinks erratically as a disembodied voice infest her ears, sending an addled glance to her friend, who's still too absorbed by her driving to give it heed. The strange manifestation doesn't stop there.

"I told you you'd better watch out."

"Are you serious motherfucker? Out!"

"Give me what i want and i'll go."

"Seriously Steven, i'm gonna cut you, you little bitch."

"No. I'm gonna cut you, Frank."

Please, not now. Couldn't she have one fucking day without any supernatural shit happening to her or her friends? Did life really wanted to beat her down that much?

The poor girl turns to her oblivious friend for reassurance. Perhaps she was just hallucinating again. Like with the Jefferson episode of yesterday.

"Did you hear that?" She queries.

A deep crease grows between Chloe's eyebrows. "Hear what?"

"Shh," Max hushes, "listen." She beckons, placing her hand on the girl's shoulder blade, careful not to touch her arm since it could easily impede her driving.

The tall chick obliges, an awkward silence expanding inside the car. Nothing occurs.

"There's nothing, Max. What the hell are you hearing?"

"It sounded like Frank's voice. And some other dude." The student pinpoints, looking positively creeped out.

"I—Shit!"
The tires screech gratingly as Chloe brakes brutally, avoiding collision with an unknown beast that appears out of nowhere and scampers across the road. Max's heartbeat madly pulsates against her ribcage as the action projects them flat into their seat.

"What the fuck was that?!" The conductor's palms hit the steering wheel in outrage.

"I think it was an animal. We didn't hurt it, right?" Frets the passenger.

The two adolescents get out of the car after hastily unfastening their seat belt, slamming their respective doors shut as they scope the area for a sign of the creature. It's not under the truck at least.

"Max... Look." Her partner points to something behind her.

When the chestnut-haired girl spins around, she perceives a familiar deer in the distance. Its right hoof is hovering above the asphalted ground, ready to dash somewhere, but waiting for them first. Like in all its past apparences, the critter is partly see-through. It continues to stare at them significantly.

"Rachel?" souhgs the punk.

As soon as they advance, Rachel's spirit takes off in the beach's direction. They weren't far from the sandy parking lot where Frank's RV was habitually parked. The fact that Caulfield had heard the older guy's voice minutes ago adds to her stress. She casts an hesitating glance at the distant but not so far lighthouse, trying to decipher if this is another sign sent by this cursed place. Her concerned blue eyes bore into her companion's ones shortly after.

"This is weird. We have to find her." Decides Chloe.

Max couldn't agree more. They dash to their destination in perfect unison, light feet racing as fast as they can in urgency. They don't spot Rachel again, but stop dead in their tracks when a running Pompidou comes up to them, tongue darting out under the exertion. He halts right in front of them, panting unevenly.

"Pompidou?"

The dog barks in response, bouncing up and down unrelentingly. This isn't excitement. This is tension.

"What's the mutt doing outside without Frank?"

"Chloe, something's wrong."

The brownish animal keeps barking as it sprints toward the immobile vehicle.

"I think he wants us to follow."

"Let's go." Says Maxine.

They race to the RV quicker than ever, breaths short and anxiety rising beyond a manageable level. They turn the corner, finding the pup waiting for them in front of the door, tail wagging wildly.
They're already drenched at this point, the rain converted to a downpour the instant they left Chloe's car. Voices erupt from inside the large ride.

"Too bad. You're fleabag's outside, he can't defend you this time. So, where's your stash?!"

"F-Fuck you!" A violent thud resounds along the inner walls. "AGH!"

These are Frank's grunts. There's no doubt about it. The guy was being assaulted and there was no one around apart from the two adolescents.

"Fuck! Max, what do we do?" Panics Chloe.

"I... I have an idea."

"You always do."

"I'm gonna unlock the door with my powers, okay?" Chloe nods. "Then we make some commotion to lure him outside and hide on each side of the door."

"Got it, what next?"

"Once he's outside, we jump into the RV, close the door behind us and help Frank."

"What if he's armed?"

"I don't know. I don't know Chloe, this is just a plan to get us inside, we'll have to improvise after that."

"Okay..."

"Ready?"

"Yes."

Max's eyes snap close. She mentally pictures the insides of the lock and imagines its mechanism sliding in the opposite direction until the contraption unlocks. Nothing. Concentrating further by attempting to clear her mind from all her stressful thoughts, she keeps trying diligently. Still not working. Anger and frustration begin to rise in her body, the blood flowing through her veins heating up progressively. A blaring noise rings out instantaneously, making her flinch.

Her eyelids flutter open. The lock is completely busted.

"Fuck, i broke it." She bemoans.

"Did you hear that?" Suddenly inquires the invader's voice from the other side.

"H-Hear what m-mother... f-fucker?"

"The door unlocked! Don't tell me you called the cops you piece of shit!"

"Y-You stabbed m-me s-stupid cunt, how c-could i?"

"Stay here! I swear if you move, you're dead!"

Max quickly grabs her friend's hand and tugs on it until the girl is plastered against the vehicle, right next to her. The two press their backs into the RV as much as physically possible while the raging
guy's steps draw near. The door swings open savagely, and the faceless man walks out of Frank’s property, searching for the cause of the ruckus with a blade in his hand. He doesn't seem like the hesitant type when it comes to violence. The teens waste no time and Maxine drags Chloe inside, Pompidou slipping between their legs to join them. The girls forcibly push their bodies against the barely closed entrance in an attempt to keep the freak outside.

The bastard is already banging his fists onto the door, shouting for them to open it.

*Shit, shit, shit!*

Caulfield detaches herself from it, compelling her best friend to apply more weight against the entry.

"Keep it close as long as you can!" She requests, approaching a curled up Frank who appears a second away from coma.

His shirt is smeared with blood, as well as his hands which he obstinately keeps close to his stomach. It was certainly the zone where he got stabbed. Pompidou is sitting alongside his master, whining pitifully.

"C-Chloe?" The dealer slurs, looking at the blue-haired punk before focusing on the brunette crouched down in front of him. "W-Who the fuck are y-you?"

"I'm Max. Chloe's best-friend. We're gonna help you Frank, don't worry."

"T-Take th... the gun."

"What?"

"T-There's a g-gun in the... cup... board." He groans in pain, barely able to articulate. "Above me..."

Max's soaked head lifts up, spotting the container looming over them. She promptly bounces on her feet and retrieves the weapon, scouring her mind for remembrances of her shooting lessons in her alternate timeline. She runs to Chloe, beckoning her to place herself behind her for protection.

"Chloe, come here. Stay behind me."

As soon as her friend retreats from the door, the crazy guy barges inside. But to her relief, her side kick is already safely concealed behind her.

"Who's this, huh? Some of your clients?" Spits the shitface, addressing Frank while he's staring at the young women.

He's covered in perspiration, beads of sweat stagnating onto his forehead. His face is deathly pale, and his entire frame is quavering.

*Withdrawal symptoms. Clearly.*

"Stay back. I have a gun." Cautions the photographer, gun correctly aimed at the corpulent trespasser.

"You don't scare me little girl. You don't even look like you know how to use that."

*Stay calm, Max. You've been in fucked up situations before. This isn't any different.*

"Wanna bet? I've been told i'm a pretty good shot actually."
"Yeah, right!" He mocks, advancing toward them, knife recklessly jutting forward.

The second he hurls himself onto them, adrenaline surges inside her, time seems to decelerate, and everything appears to occur in slow motion. She knows it's only in her head, but she also knows she has to make a decision. Fast.

"Hold your breath."

Her past instructor's voice resounds in her mind, Frank's attacker getting closer...

"Aim."

And closer...

"Shoot."

The gunfire bursts as loudly as thunder, the bullet scraping the mugger's ear to rip through the sun shade blocker and crash into the windshield, just like she intended. But no time for congratulations.

"AH! FUCK! You fucked up my ear you stupid bitch!" Yells the guy, pressing a shaky hand onto his throbbing, bleeding ear.

She had only needed to show him she was capable with a weapon, so he didn't get the idea that he could f*ck with them, or try to escape the situation before the cops arrived.

"Next time it will be your brain." She promises coldly. "So stay back, you jerk. Understood?"

"Y-Yeah... Please... Don't shoot..." he begs, toppling onto the floor while raising his hands in surrender.

"Chloe, call 911." She asks, never taking her eyes from the dangerous individual.

"On it."

Max eyes the knife laying on the floor and quickly pull it toward her with the help of her powers, the pointy object sliding along the ground in a hushed rustle. Her right boot ends it course abruptly by stepping onto the blade. The junkie is too preoccupied by his injury—and probably his newly acquired deafness—to remark the unnatural phenomenon. The young woman's gaze never deviates from the man as she listens to her friend pleading the emergency services to come at once. With her call terminated, Chloe hangs up and informs Maxine the cops and an ambulance are on their way.

"What do we do now? Frank's abdomen's bleeding." Worries the punk.

"We need to take care of Frank but, somebody has to keep an eye on him." Caulfield nods in the assailant's direction.

"Give me the gun, i'll do it." Offers her friend, extending her palm.

"Never touch the trigger unless you intend to kill, got it?" Warns the brunette, handing the weapon over.

The tallest one of the two agitates her head up and down in affirmation. Max grabs a clean small towel from the dealer's cupboards and rushes to his side. As soon as she presses the cloth onto his wound to stop the blood from gushing out further, Bowers' hand lands onto hers to accentuate the pressure, like he's used to this sort of occurrence and already understands what to do.
"Oh Frank... How do you feel?" she whispers, perturbed by the sight.

It looks like he has a hard time finding his voice. "It's g-gonna be a-alright... But y-you need t-to m-
move my t-things..."

"What do you mean?" Scowls the teen in bafflement.

Fortunately, Chloe is there to translate. "He's talking about his drugs." She very briefly glimpses at
Frank. "Right?"

"The m-money too." He specifies.

Of course, if the cops came here, they were gonna start asking questions about why all this shit
occurred in the first place. Why was Frank suddenly threatened by that guy, what did he exactly
required from him? Things like that. Even if the dealer was the victim here, he could get in trouble if
the police found his stash of drugs and bills. The girls were here to help, not put him through even
more trouble.

"Where should we put it?"

"J-Just hide it."

"Is it fine if i bury it in the sand? Beneath the RV?" The Price girl submits her idea.

"Y-Yeah."

Chloe returns the gun to Max, who instructs Frank to keep pushing onto his injury on his own while
she guards the nutjob.

She leans in to discreetly mutter something in her associate's ear. "While you're spring-cleaning, grab
his account book, we might need it later."

In other words, they might need it for the trial. Caulfield wasn't a hundred percent sure she'd come to
use it because she didn't want Frank to get into a serious predicament with the law, Rachel's death
wasn't his fault after all despite his indirect implication, but if it had a chance of contributing to their
cause for justice, then they'd require it.

"Got it."

Nathan's been stuck in this fucking corridor for several minutes now. It looks like his dorm's hallway
but deep down, he knows it isn't. For starter, the blasted thing never ends, no matter how many steps
he takes forward. Moreover, abstracted voices are bouncing all over the passageway. Voices uttering
words he had already heard previously, during the entire week. Voices that belong to Caulfield,
Rachel, Jefferson, and even his father. They sound distant and unnervingly echoey.
"...Those visions of the storm... they're real. I had them too."

"You need help, Nathan. And certainly not from your family."

"Are you going to let him kill me, Nathan?"

"Are you going to play your part?"

"They're not going down without a fight, Nathan."

"All this will be yours to own one day. You just have to let me guide you. If you'd only listen Nate, you'd make your forefathers proud."

"I swear to you Nathan, if you don't get a grip and things turn bad because of you, i will haunt you until the day you die."

"Remember this promise."

"You have to free yourself of your father's influence, so you can start over..."

"Maybe you're here for a reason, Nathan. You may have a purpose that you don't know about yet..."

"This totem... thingy is trying to tell us something, and i think we should listen..."

"You have to meet with your lawyer. You need to prepare your defense with him."

"Don't you want to feel better? To finally sleep at night, to not wake up drenched in sweat because you have those horrible nightmares? Don't you want the hallucinations to stop?"

"I didn't know you were pals with Max."

"Be careful, Nate. You don't want to repeat the same mistakes, right?"

"He doesn't trust you since Rachel's death. He wants another protege, i guess."

"Your dad... What is he planning for the Bay? Why does he really want those estates built?"

"Will you ever stop being a source of disappointment to this family?"

As he finally finds the door leading to his room and opens it wide, greeted by a bleary milky gleam instead of the expected scenery, everything disappears.

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9uPHidaKyLg ]

Cries. Feminine cries. And whimpers. Of discomfort. Of anguish. That's all he can hear. The dark room materializes around him step by step. It's not exactly the same as he remembers though. There's no furniture, only black and white walls, not even a single sign of all the equipment usually decorating the place. The more clear his settings become, the more loud the distressed noises ring in his mind. A myriad of young women is filling the nippy locale. Some are standing in a corner, others right in the center of the room, doing nothing but staring into space like mindless zombies. Their
faces are blurred. He can't recognize any of them. Except for one. She's sitting on the floor, rocking back and forth like a maniac, head buried in her arms. From her hair and clothes, he knows who she is. So he approaches, in a prudent pace.

"Kate?" He calls, voice weak.

The lump in his throat threatens to make him gag when she lifts her face to peer at him. She looks as miserable as she had that horrible night of October Fourth. All the lamentations violating his eardrums came from the girls scattered all around him. Kate's lips quiver, part and finally word a reply.

"They're watching me." She moans, tears streaming from her turquoise hollow orbs.

"...Who's watching you?"

He doesn't fathom why, but the religious teen's presence eases his disquietness.

"Not just me. They like to watch." Her head turns toward the nearest wall, compelling him to follow.

Dozens of portraits are hanging there, displaying moving, rotating eyes scanning the place until they decide to settle onto his person. He had nightmares about those in the past. He even draw them on a disturbing sketch about Rachel once. A flash of light hinders his vision and he randomly gets teleported to a new location. Some sort of mix between a maze and an art gallery. Monochrome photographs proliferate on the walls. Nathan identifies some of the faces they exhibit yet can't put a name on all of them.

Kate, Rachel, that Kelly girl he's never seen again after her transfer to another school, and even Max.

The females breathy sobs continue to resound all around him. His uneasiness keeps growing while he progresses slowly throughout the alien site. He stops anew the moment his eyes spot a delicate silhouette facing one of the ashen dividers, crouched below an umpteenth dark portrait. This chick is scraping her nails up and down along the wall in a crazed manner. All he sees is sickly pale skin, long raven hair, and a simple black dress. Until she halts her harmful motions to stand up and turns his way. The sole things he can perceive are the angry purple fingerprints around her neck.

The environment changes over again. He's in that filthy junkyard this time, precisely in front of Rachel's improvised grave. He's frozen in place, incapable of stirring his limbs from their unexplainable lethargic state. A hand suddenly jolts from beneath the earth, making the boy flinch. He notices the black star tattooed on the inside of its wrist straightaway. In no time, a decomposed Rachel is crawling out of her deplorable tomb, slithering in his direction. He senses movements on his left side, forcing him to glance away from his undead former friend, just to find another meandering corpse. The only reason he recognizes his prior governess is her bold head. Nathan shivers, an irrational fear seizing his heart, his lungs, his guts. He can't escape them. He can't run from his mistakes anymore. When his face leans a bit to the right he discerns a rotting Kate next to him, as well as Max's best friend—who has a bullet hole in her stomach—in a similar taste. The girls —the term seems inappropriate as of now—are encircling him, creepy grins glued to their nonexistent lips.

"You'll be just like him, Nathan. Everything that crosses your path will die." Their voices echo in flawless synchronization.

Right before Rachel's hand can connect with the Prescott, he's conveyed to yet another area. The lighthouse. In the distance, he doesn't find the customary houses, stores or edifices which normally occupy a good part of the city's space. Instead, Arcadia is full of factories. Its ordinarily dense forest
has reduced by more than half its original size. A gigantic smog is covering the borough. The very air smells foul and is almost unbreathable compared to what he's used to. Nathan darts his attention back to the cliff supporting his feet, only to catch something strangely resembling Caulfield at its end. He walks up to her, gaze fixated on the back of her dainty form. When he ultimately reaches the fellow student, she's too busy staring at the horizon to give him any kind of heed.

"Okay, this is definitely a dream." He asserts, eyeing the uncanny antlers adorning her head.

"Since when are you able to discern illusions from reality, child?" Max speaks, at last.

She never used that tone on him before. She doesn't sound like herself. Something's off.

"Child? You're younger than me, crackpot." He remarks defensively.

He has calmed down a bit presently, feeling more safe in company of this odd version of Caulfield than the undead girls he met earlier.

"How can i have an age if i'm just a phantasm?" she retorts cleverly, her blue eyes plunging into his.

"Shut up. What's wrong with this place?" The rich kid inquires, scoping their surroundings suspiciously.

"This is your father's doing. Your heritage is a sickness to Arcadia."

Nathan scowls, ready to counter her claims with some of his trademark offensive curse words. She's quicker though, not giving him the occasion to open his nasty mouth.

"Things could be beautiful again, if only you'd listen..." she soughs absentmindedly, engrossed by the murky water of the sea that used to be clear blue.

A defeaning sound ensues her sentence, a colossal whale emerging from the water to waft into the air, akin to what he had witnessed in his last "vision", when Frank had found him on the beach. Unless it had only been some sort of hallucination from delirium... The show renders him agape, but not for long. No matter how thrilling the sight is for him, the atmosphere shifts fast, an invisible dark veil coating the location. Anxiety clutches at his chest. The unforeseen sensation feels wrong. Terribly wrong.

"He's here." The half deer half Caulfield thing next to him states, twisting around to fix her gaze on something.

He replicates the motion. Remotely, a fox is propped on its hinds, studying them scrupulously, tail swaying unhurriedly from left to right like a pendulum. The action seems so controlled that it looks unnatural.

"Everything he touches turns to ash." She continues, not making any sense.

"It's just a stupid fox..." he deadpans.

A familiar owl flits across the air, perching itself on the ginger creature's head, its yellow eyes penetrating into his soul.

"You will do the same if you follow in their steps. If you don't change your ways."

He faces her slowly, hesitating, always nervous when he had to deal with strangers. Because this isn't Caulfield. Definitely not.
"Who the fuck are you really?" He demands, tone mistrustful.

"Does it matter? There's not much time left for you to take a different path. The choice is yours."

"You're not Max."

"No, we're not." A sinister smile appears at the corner of her mouth.

He senses various kinds of presence around him, forcing him to look away from the "girl". Animals of all sorts are surrounding him. Wolves, birds, deers, coyotes, and so much more. Something clenches around his ankle, driving him to lower his eyes to the ground to see an onyx snake sneaking into his pants.

"W-What's this?" He fearfully questions.

They get closer, and closer, and closer. The simulated Max does too.

"Are you going to play your part, child? Are you going to save yourself?" She wonders, her otherworldly voice echoing all over the place.

He wakes up with a startled gasp, a part of his face feeling clammy. A quick glimpse around him tells Nathan exactly why. He's laying on the ground, on his stomach to be more precise, amid a glade inside Arcadia Bay's currently humid forest. The rain has freshly stopped, leaving a glossy, soggy mess behind. He laboriously lifts his body off the mossy floor, nearly tripping on a rocky cairn in the process, which makes him swear out loud. How did he end up here? He has no memory of driving all the way up to the forest. He sincerely hopes he at least took his car to come here. The boy rids himself of the leaves and twigs clinging to his clothes, then wipes the wet splotch of dirt on his cheek. The ethereal whispers he's been hearing since he was a kid whenever he was in those woods are still invading his thoughts.

But he's awake this time, and there's no animals, no corpses, no danger in view. He's simply drenched, alone, without any idea of what really happened to him prior to his rousing. He determines it must have a meaning though, and that's what scares him the most. That, and the fact that he took his prescriptions pills not long ago, eliminating all theories of his little mind trip being a trick of his sick brain.

 Fuck.

She thought she wouldn't have to come back here now that Kate had vacated her room, hopefully for the rest of her life, but as it seemed to often be the case, fate proved her wrong. Her tired ass is stuck in an uncomfortable chair as she and her childhood best friend are waiting for a report on Frank's condition in one of the numerous corridors of this damned hospital. Maxine's currently trying to dry her damp hair with the towel a nice nurse gave them earlier. She must look like a wet dog. And smell like one. Her straightened bangs are impeding her eyesight and turning into a real peeve, which Chloe seems to notice since she tangles her fingers through the dripping strands to push it away from her forehead. Max thanks her silently with a smile that the punk returns without delay, snatching the
cloth from her head to use it for herself. She doesn't have her beanie on for once, and the ends of her blue locks curl prettily against her jaw.

"What's eating you, Maxi-Pad?" Pries the Price girl, who obviously knew her well enough to see through her "all the shit i've been through lately is not affecting me whatsoever" facade.

Where to start? She aimed a gun at someone, pulled the trigger, had been inches away from ending his life in a very violent and gory manner. It may have been self-defense, the guy was armed with a knife and ready to use it a second time after all, but that didn't make her feel any better. Although she was glad her little journeys to the shooting range had served some purpose and contributed to saving Frank's life, she didn't feel proud in any way. She didn't consider herself a hero for her deeds.

"He could have died because of me..." she murmurs dolefully.

"But he didn't. And you're wrong. Frank could have died because of him." Rectifies the other young woman.

"I nearly killed someone..."

"No. You saved someone." She reiterates, before settling the now humid towel on her knees and angling her body to face her. "You're a hero, Max. You're my hero. Ever since we were kids, i always wanted to be like you."

Max scoffs. "Don't be ridiculous."

What was there to envy about her? Chloe may be rash and impulsive, even a little acerbic from time to time, but she was mostly brave, extremely supportive, honest to the core, daring and strong. The teenager was the dopest girl the Blackwell student had ever met. So why would she want to be akin to her? Especially now that she had changed...

"I'm not. Ask Joyce. How many times have i told her, "mom, i wish i could be more like Max, she's so cool"... I've always been jealous of you, y'know. You have dreams, you're talented, you're strong and kind. Even after everything you've had to deal with, you're still selfless and you put other people first. Look at me... After my dad died, i... became this. A good for nothing, raging brat." The blue-haired teen laughs bitterly at the degrading term she employs to describe herself.

"You're perfect the way you are, Chloe. I wouldn't change you for the world." Confesses the hipster sincerely.

"I know. Because you love me. So does my mom. So did Rachel... That doesn't mean i didn't give you all a hard time with my punk ass behavior. She was so scared of my reaction that she couldn't even tell me about Frank..."

Yeah, Maxine had told her everything about the deceased girl's relationship with the drug dealer while they drove behind the ambulance. The fact that Frank had been close to death—including the adrenaline still flowing in their veins after the struggle—must have drastically shocked Price because she didn't bother making a fuss at the revelation. Her disappointment had been clearly palpable, sure, but she reacted like a level-headed person, proving that Nathan wasn't the only one who was evolving bit by bit.

"Max, nobody could ever have a better best friend." The nineteen years old declares, her elbows resting on her thighs as she leans forward to plunge her sky blue gaze into her friend's.

A pang of emotion strikes Caufield at the familiar words. "Chloe... I hope you'll still think like that in the future."
"I won't ever change my mind. But what makes you think i could?"

"...You'll have to... deal with things that may not make you happy in the following week..."

"It's about your plan, right?"

Max nods slowly. "Yeah... You'll have a very important role to play, while i'll... be busy."

"You think i'll be mad because you want to give me an epic task? You know i want to be part of Rachel's revenge, that actually makes me grateful."

"No, it's just... The conditions in which you'll have to do your part... may not be very enjoyable for you. Stressful..."

"Well, that's why i'm here. I'm your partner in crime, hippie."

"No. You're my partner in time." Her lips shape in a smile of overflowing affection.

"Look at the beat poet here." Chloe friskily shoves her shoulder against her arm. "Max, whatever you're doing that you think will make me angry, i'll try to understand. I know you don't do anything without a good reason. Plus, you know me... I'll probably throw you some shade and crawl back to you once i've cooled off."

"That's... pretty much how you roll. I have to applaud this very accurate description." The freckled girl congratulates with irony.

Just as the punk is about to smack her in retaliation, light steps resonate in the hallway and cease their route next to them. Forthwith, the two wind around, greeted by a grim-faced Officer Berry who's readjusting his slipping pants by retightening his belt.

"How is he?" questions Max, anxiety gyrating inside her belly.

"Stable. The knife didn't pierce anything vital, so with a bit of rest, he'll be doing just fine." He relays, the mole on his right cheek temporarily distracting her.

"Thank God." Both girls exhale in relief.

A respectful smile crosses the man's lips. "Super-Maxine comes to save the day, again. You know, at this rate, we're gonna have to buy you a cape." He jests.

"Arh, please, Officer Berry..." Her modesty forces her to look away from his lauding gaze.

"No, Max. I'm sorry, but you're not getting out of this one. What you did was really heroic. You too Chloe." He nods at the concerned party. "If David isn't proud of you after this, then i can officially say he's the biggest douchebag of the universe."

"You can always say it now..." the blue-haired teen purses her lips, hopeful.

The older man ignores the jibe.

"Frank might not be a good example to follow, and he has his flaws, like all of us, and granted, he's a creep that dips into all sorts of shit, but that doesn't mean he deserves to die. Some people in this town might think so and would probably have done nothing to help in your shoes, but i'm glad you girls are better than that. I... just wanted you to know that you two did a really great thing today. You rock girls."
Max wants to crawl out of her skin to escape the praises. Contrastingly, Chloe's loving it.

"Thank you, Officer. That's a nice thing to hear... Do you think we can see Frank now?" Quizzes the youngest of the three.

"Oh, um... Yeah. The staff said it was okay. But keep in mind, he's a little dosed up right now. Y'know, pain medication... So don't be surprised if he doesn't make a lot of sense." He forewarns.

"Will do." The mousy adolescent promises, her and her companion leaving their seats to walk toward the patient's room.

"Max, before i forget," Officer Berry calls out, stopping them, "this is yours." He hands her the polaroid she had gave him on Friday. "I can't keep it on my desk forever, that'd be strange."

As soon as their skin come in contact the second she seizes the picture, her environment shifts with the speed of light. Without any warning, she's standing on the sidewalk of a street that seems strangely familiar. This is still Arcadia Bay, but she's not herself.

Fuck, another memory insight...

A man in a suit is standing before her, or more likely Berry, facial expression quite condescending as he sternly scribbles something on his notepad. He has a strict and superior air about him that Max comes to despise straight off. A woman is situated beside her current host, possibly his wife from the way she's looking at him, but what draws her eyes the most is the modest house adjacent to them, in which two children are glued behind the door's pane to observe the scene curiously.

*Might be his kids.*

"You can't do this! We said we'd pay you back. You can't kick us out of our own house, we have kids for God's sake!" The words breakout from her transitory mouth.

"You should have think about that before indebting yourself, sir." Mercilessly replies the pedantic douchebag.

"But without that credit we wouldn't have a home. We didn't have any choice!"

"That's not my problem, Mr. Berry."

"Oh this is so easy for you, huh? All you care about is your money." The officer denounces.

"Anderson, don't upset him." Advises his spouse, her soft hand on his arm.

"Is there a problem, gentlemen?" A new voice emerges behind them, Maxine recognizing it from somewhere.

Everyone turn their attention to the newcomer.

"Ah, Mr. Prescott, what a great surprise." Rejoices the guy she now identifies as some sort of bailiff. "You know how things work. Maybe you could explain to Mr. Berry here that a debt is supposed to be repaid, or else there may be predictable consequences."

Sean's grey stare attaches itself onto the man she's stuck into, and it's the awkward Bigfoots' game encounter all over again for the poor teenage girl.

"Aren't you that brand new officer of Arcadia's police department?" The Prescott surmises, head already full of ulterior motives, no doubt.
"That-That's me, sir."

"Nice to meet you, my name is Sean." The two grown-men shake hands politely, before the wealthy one pivots a bit to face the stuck-up asswipe. "Mr. Dorman, perhaps we could find a middle ground here. You could make the effort of closing your eyes on Mr. Berry's debt at the moment, and i'll be sure to pay his dues in the following days." He offers, stretching a few dollars he just pulled from his wallet toward his interlocutor.

"I-Uh... Pardon me, but..." stammers the astonished guy, who's still alert enough to grab the bills.

"Is my offer not adequate enough for you?" Wonders Sean.

"No, it's-I mean yes! It's more than enough, Mr. Prescott. I just have trouble understanding the gesture."

"Really? Do you think me incapable of benevolence, Mr. Dorman?"

"That's not what i said. I... will refer of this agreement to my superiors. Thank you, Mr. Prescott." He bows his head lightly, more out of submission than for pleasantries, then asses his former victim with contempt. "This seems to be a lucky day for you and your family. I'd use this opportunity to not make the same mistakes again, if i were you. Good day to you all."

The dickhead strides away, leaving the small family alone with what would soon become their worst nightmare.

"I don't know how to thank you, sir. You saved us from a whole lot of trouble." Thanks Anderson gratefully.

"It's okay. May i speak to you privately?" Sean demands, staring at his wife meaningfully.

Berry grasps the implication right off the bat. "Oh, uh, yes. Honey, could you get back inside the house?"

The brunette's gaze travels between them warily, yet she subsequently consents to the request with reluctance.

"I guess this wasn't for free, huh?" The policeman theorizes the instant she's back inside the house.

"No need to worry, Mr. Berry. I have but one little service to ask you."

The business man's smirk doesn't bode well for the Berrys.

When Max returns to her original surroundings, her face is lowered to the floor and her bangs are luckily hiding her eyes.

So that's how those two came to make a deal...

How manipulative and cunning of the rich bastard. Helping people who desperately need it just to be able to exploit them later on... A perfect depiction of Sean Prescott.

She glances back at Officer Berry. "Yes, thanks again." She finally answers.

He nods, smiling gently, before proceeding on his way.

Chloe's face sneaks over her shoulder to peek at the object in her hand. "What's that?"
The hipster swallows the tad of saliva present in her mouth to moisturize her dry throat. "There's something i need to tell you."

This drives her friend to frown. "Alright... Go on."

"When i was waiting for you at the diner on Friday, i bumped into a guy, and i accessed his memories."

Her eyebrows raise to her colored hairline. "This is getting juicy. What did you see?"

"Him talking with Sean. He works for the Prescotts. He had those huge envelops in his hands... I think Nathan's father hired him to distribute the pictures to his clients."

"Okay... What else?"

"Remember that weird vision the Tobanga gave me? Inside Nathan's house? I told you it asked me to find a list, right?"

"Yes." She confirms, impatient to know the details if her jerking leg is any indication.

"Well, in that guy's souvenir, Sean said he had slipped a "list" of addresses among the packages. I think it might be what we're supposed to get our hands on."

"Alright, i get what you're hinting but, what does this polaroid have to do with it, Max?"

Maxine taps her fingertip against the car displayed upon the photograph. "This is his license plate. I asked officer Berry to run it for me. The man's name's Bobby Fallon."

"Bobby?" A flash of recognition twinkle in her eyes.

"You know him?" Inquires the brunette with hopefulness.

"Yeah, he's that hillbilly prick who lives near the forest. He's like the town's hermit, he mostly keeps to himself. A lot of people dislike him in Arcadia."

_Can't Sean ever hire chummy people instead of those kind of jerks?_

"You know where he lives?" She interrogates anew.

_Please, let her know where that weirdo abides._

The punk shrugs, head acquiescing with confidence. "Hell yeah, i can drive us there later if you want." She suggests helpfully.

"Oh Chloe, that'd be great!" Exclaims the chestnut-haired girl. "But, how did you get acquainted with him?"

Her best friend cringes at the retrospection. "Urg, long story. Involving David. I'll tell you later. We should really see Frank now, before he falls asleep because of all the drugs they pumped him with."

"You're right." She aknowledges, getting back on track simultaneously with the Price teen.

"I have a question though..." The latter waits patiently for Max to look at her before carrying on. "You and Rachel said Nathan wouldn't have fucked up without the interference of that mysterious son of a bitch... What about his dad? He knows he controls the business, right?"
The adolescents' pace decreases to a certain degree as the photographer begins her explanation. "No, Chloe. Sean asked you know who not to involve Nathan because he was already fucked up enough. But that bastard didn't listen and did it anyway since he presumed Sean could bribe the cops to get off his case if things got out of hand. If Nathan's include in the deal, he has a chance to cheat them both. Him and his dad are completely clueless of each other's involvement."

"That's... insane."

You think?

They finally set foot inside Frank's room. The poor guy looks clearly out of his element in the luminous tiny place.

A hoarse voice escapes his arid mouth the moment he discerns their presence. "Oh look, the Wonder Twins." His brown eyes roll to the ceiling.

Chloe hops to the bed in light bounces. "Yep', that's us!"

"Hey Frank..." Max greets timidly.

"Guess i should thank you for savin' my ass. Now the fucking pigs are gonna ask me questions about this asshole's intentions."

"I'm sure you'll find a good story to feed them." Reassures Caulfield.

"Yes. You wouldn't still be doing "bidness" if you didn't know how to lie." Points out the punk, arms crossed and right hip jutting out.

"I need to get out of this goddamn hospital. I hate those things." The guy complains grumpily.

Maxine doesn't validate the idea at all. "You need to rest. You're going to reopen your wound if you move too much."

"Berry said they plan to release me tomorrow anyway. And who's gonna take care of Pompidou, huh?"

"We can make sure he's properly fed and take him outside when he needs to do his business. It's just for tonight." She offers sympathetically.

"Yeah', we'll see... My dog seemed to like you so i guess it's a good sign..." He murmurs, confused and ready to snooze from the way his intonation kept declining.

The girls share a strange glance, a mental communication occuring between them, then stare back at him with bizarre grins.

"You fuckin' creep me out... It's clear you want something, so spill it." The dealer bids, suspicious.

The Blackwell student takes a step closer. "Frank, we just wanted to let you know that we're doing everything we can to find Rachel."

"Pfff—" He laughs mockingly. "Thelma and Louise are on the case, how promising..." he continues to jeer.

Chloe decides to intervene. "Frank seriously, this isn't a joke. Don't you want to find her? We both loved her. I don't know about you but if somebody dared hurt her i'm gonna do whatever's necessary to find that piece of shit."
"Stop being so fucking delusional. She's gone. She's most likely in California living the life she deserves, get her out of your head." Frank recommends in a cranky manner.

"Chloe's right, Frank. We've got some leads, and it doesn't look like Rachel just bailed out of town out of boredom. There's a good chance something bad happened to her. We only wanted to tell you that, when we finally find what it is, we'll definitely come to give you the news."

He looks torn, like guilt is eating away at his soul. "If some fucker touched her... I'm a moron. I've let her down... I said i had her back and now, i don't know where she is..." his voice is getting weaker and weaker at every syllable.

He tries to blink away his fatigue but his eyelids end up fluttering shut nonetheless. Max's fingers graze his in an attempt to get his attention.

In a matter of seconds, she's back in Frank's RV. Like when she intruded Jefferson's mind, she remarks the difference of height right away, and concludes she's reliving one of the drug dealer's memories through his own eyes. Rachel is in front of her, sitting on the lengthy dashboard, being her usual stunning self, although looking tired and disturbed. She's roughly nipping at her lower lip, like the world was gonna end any minute now. She's clad in her pink bra and black panties, topped by an oversized and unbuttoned grey cardigan that falls mid-thighs, leaving an open view on her underwears.

"Okay, what is it? You've been acting weird lately." Denotes Frank.

"What do you mean?"

"One minute you're here beaming your fucking Hollywood smile at me, then the next you're distant and bummed out."

"..." The blond doesn't answer, head leaning forward to stare at the floor, her feather earring brushing against her collarbone because of the motion.

"It's Chloe, right?" Presumes her boyfriend.

Recollections of David stating Rachel had been cutting class everyday for the entire week and that she strangely avoided her dormitory in his reports cross Max's mind. Also, she reminisces her conversation with the homeless lady, who said Rachel looked way too worried or deep in thought for someone her age. For Maxine, it's undeniable, Rachel must have known something tragic was going to happen sooner or later. To her or someone else, they would probably never find out... From the letter the girl had wrote to Chloe, the brunette knows the deceased teenager was conscious that her little involvement with Jefferson could easily take a turn for the worst.

"I bet you feel shitty about hiding things from her. Just tell her everything instead of always feeling guilty. If she can't deal with it, then screw her. You deserve better friends than that punk."

"Stop it. Contrary to what you all seem to think, i'm not perfect, okay? Even Chloe puts me on a fucking pedestal all the goddamn time. Like i'm some kind of goddess or something. Well, i'm not. And now i'm always scared of fucking up or disappointing her. I don't want her to hate me, Frank. So no, i can't tell her we're seeing each other behind her back. I don't have the balls. I can already picture her giving me the stink-eye, and i can't bear it."

The man gets closer, settling beside her to shortly stroke her back in comfort. "Come on, that's not the only reason." He speculates knowingly.

Her gaze finds his, and Max can't help but note that her face is even more mesmerizing in real life
than on all the pictures she's seen of the girl. "I think i might have involved myself in something pretty crazy..." she confesses anxiously.

"What do you mean? Are you in danger?"

She's rubbing her feet together nervously, shaking her head in negation, digits tightening onto the dashboard's edge. "No, i don't think so. Not for now at least."

"Rach', what the fuck are you babbling?"

"It's just..." she sighs through her nose. "You love me, don't you?"

"Of course i do."

"Promise me... Promise me that if something bad happens, we'll bail out of Arcadia. Together."

"Rachel, what the fuck is wrong with you? Did you do something bad? Is this about the "drug mule" bullshit at your school?"

Rachel briefly kneads her face to relieve some tension. "No, no not that. And i didn't do anything. I only want to make sure i can count on you."

"You can, you know that. I love you. You're the only good thing in my life, Rach'."

"Prove it." She asks, a gleam of determination flicking across her hazel eyes.

Caulfield feels Frank's eyebrows knit. "How?"

The Blackwell beauty strolls up to the kitchen sink and fetches a knife in the drawer beneath it. Before slashing her left palm enough to draw blood. Bowers' concern for his secret girlfriend kicks up a notch.

"Know about blood oaths?" she questions, closing the distance between them.

"Y-Yeah..."

"Those are sacred. You can't break them. This is a promise made in blood." She informs with a serious tone, taking hold of his hand to cut an oblique line over his palm.

"What am i supposed to promise though?"

"If i come to you one day, and request for us to ran far away from this shithole, we have to do it. We have to protect each other, okay?" She's evidently trying to get a message across. "Can you do this for me, Frank?" She extends her injured hand.

He stares at it for a long moment, then finally grasps it, mixing their blood together in the process.

"I swear. I have your back." He proclaims loyally.

A loving and slightly relieved smile outlines her lips, orbs full of gratitude.

Max comes back to reality, Chloe peering at her weirdly like she knew what just happened. She archs a thin brow, waiting for her report. So the brunette tells her everything without omitting a single detail, taking advantage of the fact that Frank is fast asleep because of his strong dosage.
Two young women were seated in a whacked truck, overtly waiting for something to occur, or more likely, someone to arrive. The blue-haired one seemed jaded beyond belief, elbow propped on her car window's edge as she and her brunette companion observed the front door of the house they were patiently monitoring. A man finally came out of the small building, wholly unaware of the little spies hidden in the automobile parked in his purlieu.

"He's here." Chloe hissed lowly. "Quick, bend your head!" She pushed onto Max's skull hastily, following suit until the both of them were effectively concealed from view.

The novice detectives paused till they heard the hick's vehicle pulling off from the sidewalk. Their faces slowly remanifested behind the windshield after his departure.

"He's gone."

"Let's go." Urged Maxine, flinging her door open to exit her friend's truck.

We've got our rope and summit
Got our rope and summit
But we need to wake up
Baby, wake up

The Two Whales diner was almost deserted, the outside dismal weather casting a dull, superficial light inside the restaurant, to the point of obliging its only remaining waitress to switch its interior lighting system on. Bored and tired of scrubbing the same counter with her damn sponge for the last five minutes, Joyce decided to make herself useful by grabbing a coffee pot and walking up to the sole customer tarrying in the establishment at this hour.

"Refill?" she proposed with an amiable smile.

"Gladly." Answered the old woman in a similar manner.

Her long dark hair were hold up in two pigtails, a way for her to make sure it wouldn't drop into her cup. The bright ceiling lights gave a healthy glow to her already golden complexion, while the Price matriarch poured the hot beverage in her plain white mug. Mission accomplished, the turned on TV hanged on the wall at the end of the room retained their attention the second the two women heard their town being mentioned. A mid-thirties female journalist was displayed on the screen, mic in hand.
"This poor beached whale isn't the only problem Arcadia has had to face recently. For months now, the integrity of its sea life has slowly began to either vanish, or die. The local fishermen have been complaining about the lack of fish inside the Bay's waters for quite some time, but no one has deemed necessary to heed their warning, until now. The Prescott Foundation has vowed to provide extra research funds given the local scope of this eco-mystery. Ironically, the majority of Arcadia's citizens are pointing fingers at the Prescott family, judging them responsible for those uncanny events. Mr. Sean Prescott himself has kindly agreed to answer to those accusations for us in a recent interview."

The concerned party suddenly appeared, his perpetual apathetic expression spreading across the apparatus.

"I can assure you those rumors of pollution are simple gossip. What we are doing in the city does not affect its eco-system in any way. It's called growth, development. People may see it with a bad eye right now, but it won't last. I'm certain the residents will be more than satisfied to witness the results of our hard work once Pan Estates' construction and all the other projects we have in progress are finished."

"This one lies with every breath. I swear, that man has no shame at all." Joyce shook her head in consternation.

"He'll get what's coming to him. Everybody does." Bode the Native patron, sipping on her coffee.

"I sure hope it'll happen before he completely destroys this town." Sighed the blond.

The restaurant doors violently bolted, a man clad in a blue uniform barging inside to flounce toward his wife.

"David? What are you doing here?" she questioned immediately.

"It's Chloe. And Max."

"What is it? Please, don't tell me—"

"They're alright." David interrupted. "The scumbag, Frank Bowers, he got stabbed by one of his little "clients". The girls saved him."


"They're safe, Joyce. They're not harmed." He reassured, trying to soothe her concern. "I don't know how those two pulled it off but... Berry called me from the hospital to tell me what happened. They... did a good thing."

"How the hell did they got involved with a drug dealer? Are they still at the hospital?"

"No, Berry told me they left after making sure Bowers was fine."

"I need to call Chloe." She said with a frown, already treading in the landline phone's direction. "Those girls are gonna give me a heart attack one day."

Neither of them saw the old woman smirking knowingly at the mention of the girls names.
Nathan Prescott was watching the head of his family spewing his usual two-faced verbosity on the television screen of his dormitory lounge, his one and only mate Hayden toking sedately aside him on the couch, eyes blazed.

"Man, your dad is one lying motherfucker." He laughed.

Nate could easily remember the first and only time he sneaked into his father's special room. His dad had summoned him to his office after learning about his little clandestine trip and was about to deliver him a good dose of physical correction when the teen suddenly declared wanting one his art piece for himself. Sean's hand had halted halfway in his journey to his son's cheek. He had assessed him for what had seemed like an eternity, uttered no further words, turned on his heels and left his office. Days later, Nathan had found his request placed in a corner of his room. Exceptionally, his genitor had conceded to his appeal, no doubt thinking that maybe he had finally found a way to control him efficiently. His father obviously had similar tastes to Jefferson. He was a business man, possessed an unquenchable thirst for power and money. Nothing was ever enough for the Prescott overlord. So why was the rich teenager so uninclined to believe his patriarch was, in part, the source of all the horrors the boy had witnessed for months?

Perhaps he needed to get his head out off his ass and stop spitting sad excuses concerning his family's reputation.

Caulfield never made sense whenever her stupidly attractive mouth opened, yet all the crap she gushed about all day long always ended up being accurate, somehow...

What if she was right about this too?

Max Caulfield and her faithful partner were standing awkwardly in front of the door blocking their path. Chloe was attempting to force it open by vainly mistreating its handle.

"Wanna redo your little trick of this afternoon?" she suggested, a roguish glint kindling her eyes.

"No way. If i blow up his lock he's gonna know somebody broke into his house. He might alert Sean. We can't take that risk."
"You're right. Let's take a look at the backyard."

The photographer nodded in agreement and the two trespassers proceeded to the man's garden, searching for a possible back door that miraculously wouldn't be locked. They found none. Instead, the Price girl delved her nose in an iron barrel while Maxine attentively scoured the area. She eyed the fishing rod placed against his bleached fence, thinking the guy must not have been able to give it a lot of use this days considering the dearth of fish around the Bay.

Chloe abruptly extracted a small charred note from the barrel, her fingers soiled by soot.

"Max, look. There's still a piece of paper with numbers on it. The moron didn't grill it completely."
She extended her discovery to Caulfield.

The hipster cupped it, analyzing its scorched content. "Those are GPS coordinates, Chloe."

"Yep', buuuut completely useless in this state." The punk pointed out, hand grasping her jutting left hip.

She was right. The only part still readable indicated a miserable "latitude : 45.5", everything after that had been burned to a crisp.

"We need to find those locations to be able to find the buyers names." Lamented a moping Max.

"And how do we do that?"

"I think we may need external help on this."

A certain Prescott student came to mind.

Her punkish associate groaned, grazing her fingernails along the sides of her face. "I'm gonna need a beer."

The trickle of water splashing onto her arm is pretty anesthetic at first, but washes away as soon as she retreats her limb from the liquid. Her crimson marks stung harshly whenever her sleeve grazed against her skin, so she had decided to appease the sensation with something cold. She wonders if Nathan is going to seek her out after their heated exchange of this morning. Seems like he required her presence to be able to fall into slumber. So did she. Yet the boy was too proud and stubborn for his own good, so there was a high chance that she would not be seeing him tonight. She refused to linger on why this prospect saddened her. Period.

As she exits the bathroom and ambles down the corridor, her eyes settle on the yellow caution tape still barricading the access to Kate's room when the girl was supposed to be back tomorrow. Nobody even took the time to rip it off. Insensible bastards. The last thing the poor sweetheart needed was a
reminder of the past events. Max shreds the offensive thing, internally pondering if her friend would start to play the violin every morning from now on, like she was accustomed to before that terrible night.

Just when she shakes her palm to get rid of the sticky tape clinging to her skin, a dainty blond head pokes out from the room next door.

"Max, can we talk?" the snotty girl asks in a surprisingly polite tone.

...What could she want at this hour?

Maxine coves in, Victoria's puppy eyes affecting her more than she'd care to admit. Her classmate opens the door wider to let her enter her exorbitantly furnished shelter.

"What do you want?" Inquires the mousy adolescent, plopping down on her comrade's white couch.

She was wiped out, so she wasn't going to discuss anything while standing on her sore legs, whether her interlocutor liked it or not.

"I was thinking that, maybe... We could partner up on the last assignment Jefferson gave us." Suggests Chase, suddenly uncharacteristically demure.

The brunette freezes and stares at her owlishly.

Victoria frowns, her usual bitchy face coming back to the surface. "Don't look at me like that. I thought we were on good terms after our discussion at the party." She mentions, crossing her arms over her pink cashmere.

"Uh, of course. I just... didn't expect you to be friendly toward me so soon."

"It was Thursday night, Max. I'm not a child, i don't spend an entire week sulking."

She joins her on the sofa, sitting beside her former nemesis and placing her left leg over the right one.

"Well, i'd... be happy to combine brains with you. I actually thought you'd bully Courtney to do all the work." Accuses a smirking Max.

"...I tried, she told me to go eat a dick. I think she learned that from me." Admits the blond with a pixie haircut.

Caulfield's chest convulses lightly as she chuckles. "I guess people don't change over night." She comments humorously.

"I'm glad you accepted. I actually like your work y'know... That was hard to say, so don't comment on that please."

An embarrassed hush fills the room for some time, until Victoria decides to break the uncomfortable silence once more.

"I didn't always wanted to be a photographer." She reveals. "When i was a kid, i looooved poetry. I used to write some but, liking something doesn't mean you have a talent for it. I sucked at it. My mom looked like she wanted to drag me back inside her womb to finish my brain's development properly when i read her one of my poems. It was fucking awful."

"Things can't be innate for everybody. Practice and commitment is all it takes. Like you're doing now with photography." Comforts Maxine.
"Maybe i should have tried harder."

"...You know, Alyssa is very fond of poetry. Perhaps you two could talk, learn to know each other. That way, you'd see she's not a loser, and she'd see you're not as bad as everyone thinks... Or as you tend to act."

"Thanks for reminding me how much of a bitch i am, Caulfield." Mumbles the well-heeled teen.

"It's not—"

"Chill. I know what you meant." She sighs, observing Jefferson's art piece hanging on the opposite wall. "I wanted to talk about Nathan too."

"Oh... What about him?"

"I saw you two hugging at the party. Are you... friends? Do you like him?"

No Max. No fucking blushing. You're gonna incriminate yourself like a moron!

"I—"

The rich girl scowls in warning. "Don't bullshit me, Max."

The latter exhales soundly. "It's complicated. All i know is that i don't hate him, and that he didn't deserve to go through what he had to endure. Nathan needs help Victoria, help that his family can't and won't provide. He needs friends like you. I'm sure you'll be there for him whenever the need arises, right?"

"Of course. He's one of my best friends. I'm glad somebody doesn't see him as just a freak. Everytime i talk to someone, even inside the Vortex Club, they're like, "kill the rich kid". It's getting old, seriously."

"Yeah, i hear that a lot around Blackwell. Well, i should go, i'm really fucking tired and we've got classes tomorrow." She stands up, waiting for her new friend's permission to leave. She didn't want to be rude when her ex-enemy was making such tremendous efforts to be nice.

And i've got that appointement with Jacoby early in the morning.

"Okay. I'm... glad we talked, Max. Aurevoir."

The novice photographer nods amiably before exiting her classmate's room. She penetrates inside her own cocoon and muses if she'll be able to find any sleep at all.

Something gives her pause however.

Nathan is standing in the middle of her bedroom, back to her. He whirls around when he hears the door closing. From the somber expression on his face, she can tell he's willing to discuss their issues. Cerulean pearls shift to his trembling extremities, his knuckles covered in purple, yellow and red contusions. They must have been a direct consequence of his morning outburst, when she and Warren were talking in the hallway.

"You've hurt your hands." She mumbles, approaching with deliberation.

He appears fragile, spirit ready to shatter in a hundred spiny shards that will tumble and spread all over the ground. Like a cracked mirror on the point of breaking. His eyes are glazed over, full of dimness.
"My life is hell." His declaration hangs heavily in the air.

That's irrefutable. But welcome to the club.

"I don't know if i'm going bat shit crazy or if all of this is real." He rubs his forehead, damaged fingers finishing their course through perfectly combed strands.

Her right hand grabs her left elbow, a habit she's obtained from her stupid social anxiety. "I know the feeling..." She admires the floor bashfully.

He sucks in a breath, seemingly trying to keep his composure. "If you're right... If my dad gets jailed, what will happen to me?" Two lost blue-grey eyes cut into her.

That's a good question...

Max moves closer to the tormented boy. "This is why you need to see your lawyer, Nathan. I can't give you an answer, but he can." At least, she sounds convincing.

That's new.

He swirls away and sits on her bed, clutching its edge with his digits.

"I feel like a coward. I'd take ignorance over this anytime..."

She copies his previous action, mindful to leave enough space between them so he wouldn't bolt through the door like a jumpy kitten. "Fear isn't a weakness, it's natural. Being scared won't keep you from being brave. I'm scared shitless Nathan, but do you see me running for the hills? No. We have to do this."

He snorts dejectedly. "I'm not like you. I don't save people, i destroy them. I hurt them. Like my fucking dad."

She can't let him torture himself. He was there for her last night, and she'd be there for him right now.

"Nothing lasts forever. You can change Nathan, you already are. I can feel it... Don't listen to your father, or Jefferson. All they do is bashing your head with the idea that you're deranged, and a monster, that it's all you'll ever be, because it's what you really are. But it's not true. You're just a kid, with flaws and fears. We all are."

"..."

"Nathan, that list we talked about has to be in your house. Your father must have it safely hidden somewhere... And i don't think it's on his computer, he doesn't seem to trust those. I can't find it without you."

It seems like an eternity has passed when he speaks again.

"...My dad works all day long, he won't be at the house tomorrow. I'll... try to take a look around." A glowing smile forms on her face. "That doesn't mean i'll find anything so stop grinning, idiot." He protests, grouchy.

She closes her eyes for an instant, secretly chiding herself for finding his cranky nature adorable.

"But it means you're willing to make the effort, that you're on our team. That's all i want, really. I just need to know that you're sincerely sorry and that you'll do what you can to make amends. Even if it implies putting your father on blast."
Her unblemished hand finds his, pale immaculate fingers very lightly caressing his abused ones. The movement is deliberately careful, as if not to frighten him. He doesn't recoil from her touch, on the contrary, it seems to encourage him.

"I... just don't want everybody else to suffer like me..." He divulges.

"I know..." she lets out in a feathery voice.

"...I'm sorry Jefferson hurt you... You didn't deserve it."

"None of us did."

She offers him a small smile full of acceptance, and solace. Even though he doesn't smile back, she can feel the appreciation emanating from his stormy gaze. The two teenagers don't say anything else for long minutes, just stare at one another peacefully. Maybe she wouldn't spend the night alone after all...

Chapter End Notes

Just for clarification, Mark Brewington and Father Lamont are "mentioned" in the game (they leave messages on Kate's facebook page after her suicide attempt). Also, the part where Max hears Frank getting attacked before it actually happens was inspired by the fact that you could hear future events play out whenever you rewinded time in the game. I always loved that detail.

We're nearly halfway through folks! The second week will bring Max and Nathan increasingly closer.

Next chapter, Max meets Dr. Jacoby, Kate returns, school starts again, Nathan fishes through his daddy's stuff, and Jefferson comes back into play. And more Caulscott of course.
Max's room was a complete contrast to his. Full of sunlight, a mix of vivid and pastel colors, possessing that warm peaceful aura you'd never find in his own crib. He should totally feel out of place but, for some strange reason, it wasn't the case. The atmosphere engulfed him and managed to tone down his typical hostility. Like a growling dog that you'd grab by the skin of its neck and rolled onto its side until it ultimately calmed down. By now, he was addicted. He basically fucked himself over by getting into the habit of sleeping with the girl every night. Nathan would have one hell of a time sleeping alone henceforth, yet it'd only been a week since they've started this weird nightly routine. After their short discussion of last night, they had decided to call it a day and hit the sack in hopes of getting the well-earned rest they deserved.

Caulfield had still been in her daily apparel though, so she'd had to change while he was in the room. The boy had turned over so his back was to her as he listened to the rustling noises the stripping of her clothes produced, accompanied by the small thumps reaching his ears whenever her shirt and jeans fell onto the carpeted floor. He'd had to gather every ounce of internal strength he owned to not steal a peek, however tempting the idea had been. He was surprised she trusted him enough to not regard him as perverted. Because he was. He had hormones after all, and it wasn't like his uncanny relationship with Max was devoid of physical attraction. He was perfectly aware that the girl suffered from it too, so he wasn't alone in his annoying torment at least.

And what a torment she was putting him through...

The minx was snuggled against him as if he was her teddy bear. Her sleep seemed troubled, the way she kept mewling in complaint and the crease between her eyes were evidence enough. He had to find a solution before the noises forced his imagination to run wild and caused an unwanted reaction in his pants. Plus, to his dismay, he had woke up from another inappropriate dream about the pixie hipster, so he could do without further stimulation. He didn't know why his sick brain was so prone on picturing the girl as such a wanton little thing who liked to erotically grind her pelvis against his—He grunted, shaking the lewd image from his dirty mind.

A rebellious wisp of hair was clinging to her skin, swaying lightly as air puffed out of her nose everytime she exhaled. He pushed it away from her face so it wouldn't disturb her slumber, thumb brushing along the softness of her right cheek, lingering there to relish in the velvety sensation springing at the tip of his fingers. She felt way too hot. Feverish. From her body temperature, she
should already be sweating by now.

Did she catch a cold? His hand budge to her forehead, digits entangling with her soft chesnut bangs. Yep', definitely burning hot. The girl must have been sweltering all night long. Maybe she had stayed under the pouring rain for an extended period of time yesterday. He couldn't see how else she'd managed to be ill frankly. And he remembered her looking like a wet dog that had been clumsily dried when she got back to her room last night. The nagging hippie wasn't even capable of taking care of herself. What an unnerving twee bitch.

You're a lost cause, Caulfield.

The concerned party cuddled closer, her face meeting his clothed torso as he withdrew his adventurous hand. He had to admit growing fond of this. Having a warm body pressed against yours wasn't such a bad feeling, like he used to imagine. Or perhaps Caulfield was just a great pillow. He found himself absorbed by the contemplation of her delicate features, nearly missing the flutter of her dark eyelashes when she opened her sleepy eyes. Even in her dozy state, she had no problem catching him staring.

"Something wrong with my face?" she asked, rubbing her grogginess away.

Waking up to someone leering at you was pretty creepy. Particularly when your lucidity lagged a few seconds behind.

"Why do you have freckles? You're a brunette."

As her senses awakened, her fever became more and more tangible. She whined, finally grasping the meaning of his sentence.

"Freckles aren't restricted to redheads you know. Just like some redheads don't have them at all. I thought this was common knowledge..." She squinted at him, making him feel like an arrant idiot.

"Whatthefuckever. It's still weird." He sulked.

She let a whole minute pass before opening her mouth again. "My father's Irish."

"Explains a lot." He snorted mockingly. "You got ginger blood running through your veins, Caulfield."

She glared at him, propelling herself to get out of bed, but was cut short by one of his arms blocking her route.

"What are you doing?" He interrogated.

"Getting up." She said.

"Why? You're sick. Just rest, moron. It's not even eight yet, school starts in more than two hours. You got time."

"Nope'. I got things to do, Prescott. Not everybody can have the luxury of sleeping in."

She bolted out of her comfy bed. The air smelled stale, driving her to open her windows. The glare of the sun mercilessly burned her retinas, compelling her to cover her eyes with her arm. Which sucked, because she intended to take a look outside, a morning ritual she acquired after enrolling at Blackwell. No matter, the trees could wait. Her pupils gradually adjusted to the external lighting as she cursed the emerging tickling sensation in her sinus. Stupid ass illness! This was gonna get more
and more annoying throughout the day.

"Frank sent you a text." Informed Nathan, who was busy ferreting through her phone when she turned back to him.

She stomped toward the brazen individual, snatching the device from him. "Can i have some privacy, please?" Her hands met her hips, her thin silhouette forming a bossy posture.

"Whatevs. It's not like your life is captivating anyway." He demeaned.

"You decided to be a bitch the moment you woke up, huh?" The youngest speculated.

"You know me well, Caulfield." He wiggled his eyebrows ridiculously, arms supporting his head lazily.

She rolled her eyes at his idiocy, gaze shrinking to her phone's screen to check on Frank's messages.

Hi Max. Just wanted to say thanks for yesterday. And for taking care of Pompidou last night while i was bedridden.

10/14 7:25am

You're welcome Frank. Are you feeling better?

10/14 7:25am

Yeah, the doc prescribed me a bunch of painkillers so i can go back to zombie mode if my abdomen starts hurting like a bitch again. I also wanted to wish you and Chloe good luck for your search. With what little luck I have left.

10/14 7:26am

Thanks Frank. The bigger our team, the more chances we have to find Rachel.

10/14 7:26am

I see why Chloe digs you. Stop by later if you both want to party.

10/14 7:27am

She had a lot to accomplish today. Nathan too, and she wouldn't let him go back on his words. She wasn't going to harass him about his little mission though, that would be a dumb move. She'd let him handle the situation on his own, maybe give him a little push if it became necessary, but that's all.

Loafing around her room, Max took a peek at her schedule for the third week of October. It was
basically the same courses as the previous one, but sorted into a different timeline. Her classes didn't begin before eleven thanks to Mrs. Hoida still being absent due to her depression. She sincerely hoped she'd be able to see her professor again before the end of the school year, although she knew from experience that depression didn't vanish so easily. On the contrary, that thing was a tenacious little bitch.

\textit{Like me!}

\textit{This isn't anything to be proud of, shitface.}

"Achoo!" She sneezed brutally. "Shit..." She cussed, her nose stinging like crazy.

"Fuck you." Spoke Nathan out of the blue.

Wiping her nostrils with a tissue, she whirled around to have a gander at the odious boy. "What? What the hell did i do?" She queried in stupefaction.

"Nothing dumbass. It's my own version of "bless you"." He enlightened her, his tone matter-of-factly.

\textit{This guy really has a problem...}

He received a funny look for this one. "Jesus, do you kiss your mother with that mouth?" She admonished with a voice that precisely called his mom to mind.

"I never kiss anyone." He denied, heaving from the bed.

\textit{Except me.}

"Max?" Someone called out from behind the door, knocking softly.

"Kate! Shit!" Seethed the girl.

How could she fucking forget? How do you forget your friend coming back from the hospital? She was so dumb!

"What? She's back already?" Exclaimed Nathan, also surprised.

"Yes! You have to hide!" Decided the fidgeting schoolgirl.

"What? Fuck that!"

"Quick, under the couch!" She didn't leave him any choice and started to push him in the furniture's direction.

"Are you bonkers Caulfield?"

"Nathan, Kate knows you drugged her. She can't find you in my room right now, get it?" She panicked lowly.

"Wh—"

"So hide or i'll murder you myself!" She menaced, throwing him under her sofa with the delicacy of a wild boar.

"Hey!" He protested, albeit mindful to keep the noise to a minimum so he wouldn't be discovered.
"And shut up." She accentuated the words.

"Just you wait, whore. You'll regret that, i swear." He promised, vindictive.

The hipster paused in front of her mirror, attempting to tame her relatively scraggly mane, reminding him of a tiny animal trying to preen itself. Once she was satisfied with the results—which left something to be desired in his opinion—she jumped on the door to unlock it and welcomed her friend inside. At first, seeing Kate all dolled up, with make-up on her face stunned her. She had slowly got used to her tired eyes, dark circles, and scarcely unkempt appearance. But here she was, the good ol' Kate Marsh, with her pretty skirts and dressy blouses, smears of darkish purple on her upper eyelids and a smudge of red lipstick across her mouth.

"Oh, Kate. It's so good to see you." She confessed, hugging her friend like they hadn't seen each other in ten years.

"Likewise, Max." Returned the blond, leaning back from the embrace to examine the photographer's disheveled state. "Sorry, i probably woke you up. I know i'm early but i couldn't wait to see you." She added, a light pink coating her cheeks.

"You're so cute." Grinned the brunette. "Come on in." She invited, letting enough space for the religious teen to step through the entrance.

"You did hang it on your wall." Remarked the artist with a smile when she spotted her drawing on the mousy girl's wall. "Oh Alice!" Upon sighting her only pet, she rushed toward the cage containing the critter. "I missed you." She whispered gently, presenting her fingers to the animal so it could sniff it curiously.

Fuck, she's too close to the ground. She's gonna see him.

"Um, let's sit on the couch, we'll be more comfortable!" Offered Max as she mentioned to the furniture, suddenly acting very strangely.

Kate didn't seem to notice the strain in her voice and plopped down beside her, as obliging as ever. Caulfield had no issue imagining the boy cursing her fat ass for crushing him. She couldn't really blame him, but she had no other choice at the moment.

Sorry Nathan, hang in there.

"So how is your comeback going so far?" Demanded Maxine.

"Well, pretty nicely. I had a long talk with Principal Wells. He told me you went out of your way to take my defense while i was at the hospital. And that you even sermonized him." She chuckled at the last part, amused by the idea.

"I... did. I'm glad you're doing fine. Nothing else to report?"

"Well, there's something indeed... Something i can't stop thinking about."

"What is it?"

"I had a weird dream last night."

"What about?"

"Hard to say. I was standing in front of a barn... It looked old and abandoned. And there was that fox
sitting on the grass, staring at me. It lasted a long time. It felt... creepy."

From underneath the sofa, Nathan stiffened. But the room's owner couldn't see that, nor feel it. What did it symbolized? If she had dreamed of the barn, it must have a meaning. And a fox? Who was it supposed to represent exactly? Perhaps Arcadia wanted Kate to know. Wanted Max to let her in on it. She would eventually. But not today. Kate had just came back. She wasn't ready to hear the awful things she'd have to narrate.

"Kate, are you sure you're ready to be here again?" Worried the camera enthusiast, biting her bottom lip in concern.

"Don't worry, Max. I learned my lesson, i won't repeat the same mistake. Whatever happens, i know you'll be here for me, and that's enough."

She exhaled, from relief or the opposite, she couldn't tell. "Yes. Life is a real bitch sometimes, nothing we can do about that except stick together. The pain doesn't go away, Kate. That's a lie. But you can share it with people you trust, and then it looses magnitude, becomes less obtrusive."

A significant pause permeated the air.

"Max, i want to tell you something, but i don't want to scare you." The blond's turquoise orbs shifted to the side in discomfort.

"Tell me. Don't worry about me." Goaded Maxine, placing her hand over her friend's one.

"Yesterday... I was at Mass with my family and... there was that guy... I don't know his name, but i know it wasn't the first time i saw him at church. He kept staring at me. Not the kind of stare you give to someone you're acquainted with, the kind where you have dirt on them and they're completely ignorant to it. It felt gross, the way he looked at me. A sort of... perverse satisfaction. Maybe i'm just being paranoid, he may have seen the video and think i'm a harlot or something."

Don't tell me... God... Those guys are everywhere...

"You're not paranoid, Kate." Reassured her friend.

"I can't shake off the idea that all this is connected to what happened to me. It makes me wonder how many people are actually involved in this..." admitted the young woman, her hair combed in her everyday bun.

A lot. A big fucking bunch. Too much.

"Anyway," she carried on, "i'll leave you to your morning routine. I already feel boosted just by talking to you, Max." She gratefully revealed, lifting herself from the couch.

"So do i. Are you gonna play the violin this morning?"

"Want a private concert while you shower and dress? I'll give it my best then." The blond promised playfully.

"Don't feel obligated to do it. Alright?"

"Not at all, Max. I was planning to as a matter of fact. You just asked the right question at the right time."

It's usually the other way around.
Kate strode up to her bunny, stooping at its level, seizing each side of the cage while Alice nipped at her fingertips affectionately. After bidding each other farewell, Maxine watched her leave the room with a content smile on her face. Finally alone, the freckled adolescent flopped onto the carpeting, scoping out the underside of the her couch. Her sleepover pal was there—Of course, where would he have gone?—flattened between the floor and the sofa. They exchanged a perplexed glance.

Well, until Caulfield dared to burst out laughing.

"This isn't funny, ho." He grumbled from his hiding place.

"I'm sorry." It didn't sound like it. "You look like a grumpy old dog." She continued to guffaw, a hand holding her sore stomach.

Nathan just glared harder.

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Jacoby's office was based in a neighboring town called Tillamook Bay. From what she had beheld during her bus ride, it did possess a few prominent Arcadia vibes, with some twists here and there. Just enough divergence to distinguish itself from its adjoined neighbor. Autumn looked better on Max's childhood town though. Nothing could pictorially rival with Arcadia Bay during October. Fall had undoubtedly been created for the place. Everything took on an a golden hue and glittered at any chance it got. The sun, the rain, the vivid colorful leaves falling from their branches, nothing could stop it from scintillating stunningly, much to every bystander's delight.

Max had dreaded this meeting all week long. She knew she was taking tremendous risks by being here, by opening her big mouth in matters that shouldn't concern her, yet did in some indirect ways. She should probably also stop chewing on her fingernails like a rodent on a chunk of biscuit while she waited for the man sitting in front of her to start the conversation, or he'd most likely begin analyzing her and conclude—accurately—that the girl was one big bundle of nerves. She didn't come here to talk about her feelings. This appointment didn't concern her at all. At least, that's what she kept repeating to herself over and over, like a broken record.

The guy's office was spacious, the wall behind him a true display of professionalism with diplomas and certificates to assert his competency, furnitures of astronomical value adorning every corners to create a cozy, trustworthy atmosphere whose sole purpose was to nudge you toward confession. A real exposure of the kind of clientele he was used to receive. Not her kind. She should have surmised it, Nathan wouldn't consult the cheapest specialist around when his dad was filthy rich. Maxine sank herself further into the leather couch she was seated on. She hated this, had no idea how her comrade endured each of his tics, compulsions and secrets being exposed to the psychiatrist's scrutinizing gaze. It was nerve-wracking. A groan-worthy experience. One she wouldn't repeat anytime soon.

And this goddamn clock filling the uncomfortable silence with such irritating sounds wasn't helping either.

In her other timeline, when she'd do nothing of her days apart from staring into space, clocks became her worst nightmare. Or anything related to time, really. The universe seemed resolved on putting
those damned objects everywhere on her path, so she wouldn't be able to escape them. A cruel way to remind her she had tried to control something that wasn't supposed to be handled in the first place. Those ticking noises would drive her insane, bring her on the edge of dementia, a bit like this old Chinese water torture method she heard about when she was twelve. A slow, constant, insignificant thing which fucked with your sanity until none of it was left.

"So, what can I do for you, Miss Caulfield?" The man demanded, a leg resting over its twin, interrupting her train of thoughts.

His voice was inviting. Calm. Incredibly soothing. She fathomed why Nathan would feel compelled to put his heart on the table whenever he faced that guy. Kindness and benignity seemed to leak out of his very pores. The gentle brown eyes behind his glasses—God, she despised those now, she could thank Jefferson for that—didn't judge. They contemplated you with care, treated you like a human being. Not a bag of problems from which he could greedily suck up money.

*It's time Max. Don't fuck this up.*

"Sorry, but this isn't about me. I'm here to talk about one of your former patients, Nathan Prescott."

A flash of recognition crossed his gaze. "Nathan? Are you friends with him?"

*If you call sucking face friendship...*

*Jesus, shut up already!*

"That's a lot more complicated than that. But in a sense, yes, we're... friends."

She could practically hear her shabby inner self snickering. She couldn't wait to cast that shrew out of her mind indefinitely.

*Keep dreaming.*

Jacoby tilted his head lightly, interest gleaming within his stirred up orbs. "What's so special about you, Miss Caulfield?" he bizarrely inquired.

Maxine was under the sudden impression of sharing her skin with a lab rat being assiduously studied by a researcher. Or a bearded woman in the heart of a fair. An anomaly waiting to be unveiled.

She frowned, not capable of interpreting his question. "...What do you mean?"

"Nathan doesn't talk to people he cannot relate to. So I'm rather curious, what similarities do you share with him?"

Her pink lips parted, a funny look distorting her face. "I don't think Nathan and I have a lot in common."

*Liar.*

What kind of similitude though? Her folks had never abused her, as a matter of fact, they had always been a flawless example of what loving parents should be. Her family had never been wealthy either, they simply had what they needed to survive comfortably every month of the year, and that was enough for Max. True, they shared the same passion, yet the brunette wasn't fond of anything depicting darkness and misery in excessiveness, while Nathan was clearly in love with his tortured subjects when it came to photography. There was one thing the both of them had mutually experienced however. Being used. By the same individual furthermore.
"There must be something." The older man insisted. "Miss Chase for example—I assume you know Victoria?" He paused to confirm his suspicion.

_Hell yeah._

She inclined her head in acquiescence.

"Well, the shitty parenting brought them closer." He carried on. "Both know the feeling of having a family who doesn't care, who doesn't pay attention, and who thinks buying expensive things to their kids will redeem them from their lack of affection. Misery loves company, Miss Caulfield. So, what are you miserable about?"

"Absolutely nothing." She lied overtly. "Seems like Nathan talks to you a lot." She remarked soon after.

Max Caulfield, Queen of topic switching. Remaining undefeated to this day.

"Nathan trusts me." Avowed the brown-haired man, who seemed to be in his late forties.

One of Caulfield's brow arched up. "It won't last long if you give up on him."

An almost imperceptible smile formed at the corner of his mouth. "Is that why you're here? To lecture me for refusing my services to Nathan?"

She slipped closer to the edge of the couch, resolute to win him over. "I'm here to show you you're making a mistake. To convince you to take him back into your care. He's going to need it more than ever in the following days." She alerted.

He used his middle finger to thrust his spectacles higher up his nose, dropping the pen and notebook he had in his hands on his lap. "Then i'm listening. You sound quite adamant, Miss Caulfield."

_I can be when the need arises._

_Oh please, you're a real pain in the ass all the goddamn time._

She sucked in a breath, inhaling a deep gust of air in order to hearten herself, feeling her lungs inflating invasively until it pressed against her ribcage. "Before i get into details, i need to be one hundred percent sure you won't fink any part of this conversation to the police. I know your oath of secrecy stops working when it comes to illegal matters." She imparted knowingly.

She'd done so much research on the matter her brain had fried due to all the informations she forced it to stock up.

"What, spill the Prescotts' darkest secrets so Sean can sue me for libel? No thanks. I may be righteous, but i'm not crazy." He jested, half chuckling, words weighted with veracity nonetheless.

The girl felt part of her tension leave her body as she eagerly played along. "That would be quite the handicap for a psychiatrist."

"Wouldn't it?" He grinned, face retrograding to seriousness a second later. "Listen, i've heard my fair share of horrors from Nathan's mouth, whether about himself or his father. You can confide me anything you deem necessary. Your words won't leave this room. I'd be in big trouble if it was the case. Sean isn't what you'd call lenient in regard to his family's... private affairs." The psychiatrist disclosed, brows furrowed and eyes pensively fixing his ashen carpeting.
Speaking from experience?

"I'm aware. Maybe you should take a look at these." She swiftly suggested.

Max rifled through her bag—still hung to her shoulder—to pull out the disturbing drawings Nathan had sketched at school, the ones she had stolen from Principal Wells' computer during her little intrusion with Chloe. She couldn't stop herself from picturing how each of the boy's meetings with the professional transpired. He must have been hard to loosen up at first. You didn't have to ruffle his feathers a lot for him to throw a tantrum and attempt to claw you in retaliation. She could hear the guy's attachment to the young man in his voice, in the way he spoke about the boy. More than five years of consultations spent trying to mend an adolescent's broken psyche... Giving up on the Prescott must have been a difficult choice to make. Today, she'd give him the chance to fix this unintentional error. Let's hope he'd seize it.

Jacoby grasped the papers she extended to him, gaze skimming over every freakish shapes and phrases he could now observe. "Rachel, huh? Yeah, Nate has shown heavy signs of trauma since her disappearance."

"He told you she disappeared?" Maxine parroted. "He lied. Nathan killed her." She openly revealed.

Her sentence loaded the office with sheer pressure, disquietude creasing the doc's forehead. His eyes pierced into hers, attentively gauging her features after her blunt admission. He'd evidently need more than that to be convinced.

"Miss, I don't think you rea—"

"Realize what I'm saying?" She cut him off. "I do. But you don't realize the extent of the issues Nathan will have to face in the coming week."

He tossed his note pad and patient's sketches to the side, watching it land farther away from him on the red sofa he was seated on before tucking his pen inside his white shirt's front pocket. "You're not making a lot of sense, Miss Caulfield. Maybe you should give me more details." He proposed, his voice never fluctuating from its constant mild tone.

"I will. I know this is going to sound insane, but that's because it is, and it's real. I don't care if you decide to actually believe me or not when i'm done, but you need to know everything or you won't be able to help Nathan accordingly."

"Alright... I'm all ears." He said, linking his hands together around the knee topping his other one.

A ray of sunlight seeped through the large window next to them, perspiration already forming on the area where the sun hit her flesh.

She sighed, mentally preparing herself for what was to come—A myriad of perilous questions most likely. "Somebody trained Nathan to drug girls at his Vortex Club parties, so he could take them to him. That guy kidnaps those girls and takes creepy pictures of them in an isolated bunker near Arcadia. The "dark room"," she formed makeshift quotes with her fingers to underline the terminology, "Nathan speaks about in his drawing? That's this place. He took Nathan under his wings to use him as a red herring in case his little business gets out of hand and the cops catch up his trail."

Yeah, just as she anticipated, his gaze perused over her form like she was an alien entity trying to relay him some weird cryptic code.

"...And who might this man be?" He ventured carefully.
"Our photography teacher, Jefferson."

"Mr. Jefferson?" Jacoby hummed thoughtfully. "Nate told me about him. Has a lot of respect for the man."

Max scoffed. "Not anymore."

Applying friction to his forehead, the man exhaled painfully. "Okay, why would an art teacher—and a renowned photographer moreover—kidnap young women for some... twisted photo sessions? Does he... sexually abuse them?" The notion appeared to sicken him, and she couldn't blame him.

"No! He's just fucked up. He's dangerous. He's obsessed with innocence and "capturing people's fears", some crazy bullshit like that." Her hands were all over the place, performing grand gestures to demonstrate her frustration. "He's sick in the head. Nathan's got nothing on him in this department."

How did you explain the motives of a psychopath to someone else when you were mentally stable yourself? It was impossible!

**Mentally stable? Ah ah! That's a good one!**

"How do you know all of this?"

Here it is, the million dollar question.

"Rachel was my best friend's friend." The brunette conveyed. "We started to investigate on the reason she went missing. Well, we found more than we ever thought we would. Turns out Rachel is dead." Her palms whipped her thighs harshly.

"...You said Nathan killed her, so why accuse your teacher so vehemently?" The oldest wondered, rightfully so.

"Nathan was trying to please Jefferson. He drugged Rachel for a photoshoot, he probably thought it was okay because Rachel had an affair with our teacher and let him do what he wanted. She wanted to be a model, she thought he could take her places. But Nathan accidentally overdosed her. He panicked and called Jefferson for help, and that fucker got rid of the body and started to ignore him after that." Her index finger raised up to signal the gaping shrink to stay quiet until she was entirely finished. "That's not it though. Sean is involved. Him and Jefferson use the pictures, they don't do this just for fun. They sell it to other creeps, make money out of this."

"What?" He exclaimed. "Like an underground, illegal art ring? I know i'm not supposed to say things like this to my patients, but you sound—"

"Crazy?" She interrupted. "I know. Listen, i have proofs of what those fuckers did. We'll give them to the police when the right moment arises. But Nathan is gonna get in trouble for his involvement in this, and he's gonna need somebody who knows what he had to endure since his childhood to support him during this ordeal."

His head rocked from left to right in denial, the man transparently perturbed. "Why would Sean—"

"You know that asswipe!" Yeah, she had obviously given up on social etiquette. "I'm sure Nathan told you plenty about that sick bastard. He's a master manipulator, and Jefferson is of the same caliber. Sean has beat Nathan for so many years, tortured his own son just for some bullshit "legacy"! Can you really look me in the eye and tell me you're sure he wouldn't be capable of doing something like that? You must know about Nathan's weird art tastes, right? Well, it didn't came out of nowhere. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree, as they say."
He blinked unwittingly, licking his dry lips to ease his diction. "...Um—"

"Nathan wanted to be loved. He wanted the affection his father never gave to him. Jefferson perfectly knew that and used it to his advantage. He saw a golden opportunity in Nathan's delusions and illnesses. So he got close to him, told him what he wanted to hear, made him feel special. Turned him into the perfect puppet. This piece of garbage manipulated him, took advantage of his weaknesses to exploit him better."

"..."

"I know Nathan. He can't go to prison. It won't help him, it will only worsen his illness. Perhaps even push him to end it all. Being locked behind bars will destroy him, not make him a better person. Jefferson and his dad belong there, not him. Please sir, Nathan needs you. When his father and former teacher get jailed for their crimes, he'll be all alone. He'll only have me, and Victoria, maybe even his sister... Help him, like you did for over five years. If i have to beg you on my knees, i'll do it."

He hold out his hands, yielding under her determination. "Don't worry. We won't need to reach that point." He stated, shifting to find a more suitable position before continuing their conversation.

Her big, cerulean doe eyes filled up with hope as they probed the psychiatrist.

"If everything you said is true—and i don't necessarily mean you persuaded me—then we might have to declare him insane. Inapt for trial."

"No, he has to get trialed." Maxine rectified. "That's the whole point. All this shit needs to get a conclusion, so he can finally put it behind him and move on."

Understanding lighted his irises. "You want me to help you convince the judge and jurors to send Nathan into a psychiatric hospital."

"Yes."

The professional stayed silent for some time, no doubt internally evaluating all the data she had spewed over the last ten minutes. Caulfield could feel anxiety coiling within her, crushing her insides as she waited patiently for his tardy response.

"Max, i can call you Max, right?" She nodded in affirmation. "Nathan isn't going to like this type of environment. Don't get me wrong, that's exactly what he needs but, it might take a toll on your relations. He'll most likely hold you responsible for his internment."

"And he'd be right to."

"Look, you're very noble. I just want to be certain you know what you're doing. Asking. Things won't be easy, even if this works. Neither for you, nor for him."

"I don't have a choice. I can't let him go to prison, i won't allow it."

"Recovery is a long bumpy road, Max. It may take months, a year, or many of them for Nathan to be able to walk out of a specialized hospital."

"I know. Doesn't change a thing."

"...Do you care about Nathan?"
Of course. But to what extent exactly? Some things about the boy managed to assuage her perpetual worries, others set her blood on fire and almost made her regret ever feeling any sort of compassion for the troubled adolescent. Having Nathan by her side as an ally was becoming more and more gratifying, whether she wanted to admit it or not. He was gradually evolving into a friend, someone she could rely on, a listening ear she could vent to whenever she relived traumatizing events of her past that she didn't want to divulge to her best friend by fear of alarming her. Their new "friendship" was taking an odd, unexpected turn however. Their unsettling make-out session had proved that, no need to mention the fact she had enjoyed it, to top it all. She wished she could deny it, but she did liked it. It would be a sad lie to assure the opposite. And the reaction Chloe would have if she ever discovered that absolutely terrified her.

"I suppose i do." The mousy girl conceded.

"How long have you known him?"

*From his point of view? A week. From mine? An eternity.*

She shrugged innocently. "I can't really say."

"Does he trust you?"

"We're getting there, i think. Step by step."

"He must trust you if he told you about me."

*B...t he didn't.*

His eyes fell on the angry red tails sticking out from her treacherous sleeve. Her skin was still a bit sore from all her frenzy scratching. She hastily covered her marks by tugging on her beige jacket's sleeve to hide it from his astute orbs.

"What's this on your arm?" He caught on without delay.

She acted too late apparently.

"Just eczema." She fibbed flimsily.

"Didn't look like eczema to me." He mumbled lowly, a canny glint passing straight through his gaze.

"Are you a psychiatrist or a dermatologist?" She countered wittily, tangling her fingers together and rubbing her thumbs against one another as she avoided his keen-sighted stare.

"I see these a lot, you know. Nathan had them too at one point."

"And what are these?" she asked, emphasizing her last word.

"Not eczema, that's for sure."

"Maybe i have an itch. It happens to everyone you know."

"Especially when you suffer from anxiety and experience too much stress on a daily basis."

*Tell him to mind his own business.*

*Getting angry? Does he frighten you? Scared he'll make you go away?*
You're the only one who can get rid of me. And it's not gonna happen so easily, believe me.

Unfortunately for the kindly doctor, people taking notice of her neurotic compulsions was one of her biggest pet peeves. "What is this, huh? Did you find a new interesting subject to study? Another teenager filled with neurosis. How fascinating!" Max taunted, body tense as an arrow.

"No neurosis, Miss. Just suffering. Which i am quite familiar with." He reassured the teen.

She scowled. "I'm not here to talk about my pain."

"Perhaps you should. Don't you want to make good use of our hour together?"

"I am. Will you see Nathan? Will you help him?" She got back to the subject at hand, the sole purpose she came here.

"I think i will see the both of you."

"Forget it. I can't afford you. Your prices are way out of my league."

"Then what are you doing here, Miss?"

"Making good use of my pocket money." She bantered.

His eyebrows met his hairline. "What a great sacrifice." She could hear his grin rather than visually perceive it.

"I'm glad you realize that. No more cookies for me until next month." The freckled girl commented with false melancholy, crossing her legs and arms elegantly.

"Damn, you make me feel like a monster, Max." He smiled jokingly.

She returned it unwillingly, pursing her lips as she fought her instincts to smirk at his little quip, in vain. She could see why Nathan liked the guy. He seemed a genuine person. So distinct from all the powerful figures that ceaselessly tried to control the young Prescott.

"Alright, Max. I'll see what i can do. And i won't speak of this to anyone else but Nathan."

Relief overwhelmed her being at the idea of her ex-adversary finally receiving the salvation he dearly required. "Thank you, Mr. Jacoby."

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dLBSpm_HfiE ]

Max had texted her to join her in the parking lot, said they had important things to talk about. Chloe was always glad to get away from her house whenever she could. Since she got expelled from Blackwell, and now that Rachel wasn't part of the mortal realm anymore, she had absolutely nothing
to keep her entertained when Joyce was at work. The Price residence had quickly became the Kingdom of Boredom. Once the two girls were done hanging out, she'd simply ride home and watch some Netflix. How fun...

To add to her misery, David wouldn't stray his eyes from her since their little discussion of last Friday. Oh, not that he was trying to make an outward show of his paranoia, on the contrary, the tool thought he was being discreet. How wrong he was! He must really take her for a blockhead if he believed she didn't catch on his stupid surveillance game. Deep down, she knew he was only attempting to insure she didn't get in more consequential trouble than she was used to, but it was still exhausting to escape from his clutches everyday. Her and Max were on a tight schedule here. She had bad guys to catch for fuck's sake!

She couldn't wait until all this nightmare was over. Who knew? Perhaps once her friend's studies were completed, Max and her would bail from this cursed town and take a flat together in another city. A bomb ass one. With things to do within it. Plus, Chloe could always enter a new school. Bay City College was the closest one to home after Blackwell. The photographer would surely be extra proud of her, even just for trying.

Regarding the brunette, she was sitting in the passenger seat, still hadn't uttered a word, absentmindedly fixing the sassy sentences Rachel had scribbled inside her truck. Especially the "this is much bigger than you!" tagged on the inward side of her car's door.

"Rachel loved writing shit on everything." She commented, jerking her friend out of her torpor.

"She did tag your lair's walls a lot." Remarked Maxine.

Barely had she finished her last words than the mousy girl entered into a violent sneezing fit, pressing a tissue against her face to abstain from dispersing her germs everywhere.

"Got the flu, hippie?" Smiled the blue-haired teen, capturing Max's nose once the latter was done blowing it and applying pressure on her inflamed nostrils.

"Ow! Ow! Stop!" Groused her victim, slapping her offending hand away. "You know i can't stop sneezing when people touch my nose." She further complained.

"Yep'. I know." Grinned Chloe, quite pleased with herself.

"You're evil." Caulfield glared at her, cerulean orbs promising revenge in the future.

The shy student had her feet on the border of the dashboard, the rest of her body fully huddled up, bag carelessly neglected on the floor under her legs. She was acting strange. Why would she ask her to come if she wasn't going to say anything? Something must have been bothering her.

"Come on Max, you look like you'd rather projectile vomit than talk to me right now. Which is weird since you're the one who called me out here. What's on your mind?" She urged, placing a hand on her associate's arm, the texture of her pale jacket extremely soft compared to her own.

Maxine looked at a bunch of squirrels ransacking a poor trashcan a few meters away from the car, hunting for food amid the wastes.

Her partner inhaled sharply. "I need you to meet me at the diner on Wednesday."

Cocking an eyebrow, the punk stared at her in a dumbfounded manner. "...Dude, that's your "very important" thing to talk about?"
"I won't be alone there." Max hinted.

"Makes sense, since i'll be here too." Teased Chloe.

"No Chloe, somebody else will be with us. At least i'm gonna try to make it happen..."

"Max, who? Why are you speaking so mysteriously?" Her feminine hand returned to her side as she wound around to face the cute hipster.

"...It's Nathan." Deadpanned the chestnut-haired girl, frail shoulders abruptly stiff.

...The fuck?

"What?! Why would you want to meet up with that freak?" She burst out.

"It's for our plan, Chloe. Believe me, this is very, very important. I know it'll be hard for you to sit down with us without trying to strangle him, but we have to."

She scoffed, visibly insulted. "Oh, so it's a problem for me, but not for you, huh? You're telling me you don't mind what he's done to Rachel? Or Kate?"

She better not give him any excuses. Chloe had enough mercy to comply at not sending him to prison, but that was it. She had her limits.

Maxine audibly swallowed, clearly nervous about this discussion. "I—"

The foot the taller girl had against her seat's edge firmly stamped the vehicle's floor. "What the fuck is going on Max?!" She exclaimed. "Stop keeping me in the dark all the goddamn time! I don't understand what you're trying to accomplish here. Why would we need Nathan? Fuck him! What does he have to do with your plan exactly? He's not supposed to be a part of it, i am! And you still haven't told me who's that bastard who kidnapped you in the first place! Do you know how it feels to have my best friend keeping secrets from me? I think i'm fucking entitled to know what you're scheming, alright? Everyday, i'm worried to death that this fucker is roaming around you at school or even in town, that you're gonna end up dead, or worse! And i can't do anything about it, i can't protect my own best friend because she won't tell me who it is!"

"Chloe, you'll know everything when you meet us at the diner. I'll even tell you who hurt me. Things are finally starting to fall into place. Please, i need you there." The brunette pleaded, sending her a woeful glance.

Cloe shook her head in disbelief, palms rising in the air to express her incredulity. "I can't believe you're asking me this." She chided.

"This is why i'm telling you now. To give you some time before—"

"Giving me two days to cool down isn't making it any better, Max." She disrupted. "It's not going to make things right."

"I know." Mournfully soughed her so-called "friend".

Why would she do this to her? Was that what she was talking about at the hospital yesterday? Her weird speech about the nineteen years old possibly hating her in the days to come? The reason she looked so down about their impending moves?

"The conditions in which you'll have to do your part... may not be very enjoyable for you.
"You're gonna make me do something with that Prescott bitch, huh?" she speculated, frowning like never before.

"...He can help us. He's the only one who have access to Sean's house. He's going to provide us with what we need to put him away forever. He's a part of this, Chloe."

"Of course he is! He fucking killed Rachel!" She reminded angrily, her voice echoing louder inside the automobile, to the point where if anyone were to pass by it, they'd probably hear her outburst.

"It was an accident, she told you herself." Caulfield defended, compelling the blue-haired teenager to flinch at the affront.

"I don't care! I don't care if she's okay with it, or you are, or everybody else is. I'm not! I can tolerate his existence, on the condition that he stays the hell away from me. And now you want me to partner up with that piece of shit to do God knows what!"

"Chloe, listen to me. I know you're blinded by rage at the moment, but think about it. This is his father we're talking about. Whatever kind of douchebag he may be, it's still his family. And despite all this, Nathan is willing to help. You have to take this into consideration."

"I don't have to do anything, Max! And why would he even agree to this bullshit?!" She seemed to cogitate on the matter for a short moment, until her eyes narrowed in discernement. "...Are you friends with that asshole?" She surmised, and from the shortest adolescent's reaction, she was spot-on. "Oh my god..." She whispered, gliding her extremities along her cheeks till her parted mouth was covered by them.

"Don't you think i want to hate him too?" Erupted Max in her turn, feet falling to the ground while she straightened up. "Seriously? It would be so much easier for me if i could ignore my stupid conscience and not give two shits about what could happen to him! But guess what? That's not how it works, sadly! I didn't plan this, Chloe. It wasn't supposed to happen. But it did, and i can't do anything about it. I understand you feel betrayed, but i assure you there's no reason to."

The Price heir snorted. "Oh, yeah, no reason. Just my best friend shitting all over me." She replied sarcastically, digits slapping the steering wheel.

"Chloe, you said i never did anything without a good reason, and it's true. I beg you to ponder on it."

Is she really that dumb? Seriously?

"Can't you see he's using you to get out of this unscathed? Seriously, Max?!" She chastened the passenger, threading her fingers through her blue locks frustratingly. "I can't even look at you right now."

No, she couldn't. So she chose to stare at the other cars occupying the parking lot instead.

"I can imagine. That's why—"

"Stop it! Okay? Stop trying to justify yourself." She begged heatedly. "You may have good reasons Max, but i can't hear them right now. I don't want to."

"But—"

"You want me to meet you two at the diner Wednesday, i got it. Period. Discussion closed. Now
leave me alone." She curtly dismissed her childhood friend, mentioning the door as a sign for her to depart.

"I'm sorry, Chloe. Really..." Apologized Maxine.

At least she sounds sincere.

"I know Max, you always are." The aphorism escaped her lips saucily, no doubt hurting her friend. Whatever.

She always thought the world would bend to her will as long as she was with Max. She learned the hard way that life didn't bend over for anyone. Worse, it shoved you to the ground whenever you dared to give it a try. Sometimes, it even finished you with a well-placed kick while you were still on the floor. Her blue gaze watered, tears already forming at the corners of her eyes. She tried to fight them, but she wasn't strong enough. How could her confidant think she'd be fitted to deal with Nathan freaking Prescott? She'd more likely murder him straightaway. Playing teamwork with that trash? She'd rather die.

"Don't cry..." implored the sniffling schoolgirl, eyes moistening as well.

"Please Max, just go. I don't want to spit mean shit to you, 'cause you don't deserve it. So you need to leave. Now." She advised, tone imperious.

I don't want to hurt you.

After an umpteen pitiful glimpse in the punk's direction, Max snatched her bag from its spot, fastening it around herself slantwise, and ultimately vacated the car. She sent a burdened peek at her before leaving for good. Her side kick didn't look back.

Everybody lets me down...

Chloe wished her dad was still here. Wished she could simply go home and ask him for advice, as she did as a kid whenever something bugged her. William was wise and a good listener, he always knew what to say to alleviate her. But her father was dead and buried, not available for counsel. She had no one left apart from Joyce—to whom she couldn't talk about this sort of shit—and Max, which she just brutally repudiated.

She glanced at her phone.

Frank had texted her earlier, to thank her for yesterday, and also to remind her he hadn't forget her debt. Smartass. This day sucked ass and it was only morning.

Fuck my life.

The cafeteria was full to breaking point, an extraordinary feat for the start of a new week. Students usually lunched outside on Mondays, their unwillingness to face the end of the weekend pushing
them to stay outside of school walls as much as possible. Max hated crowded areas. The fact that everybody seemed to be glancing at Kate wasn't helping. She felt uneasy for the girl. Plus, their curious eyes kept drifting to her from time to time since she was sitting in front of the blond. She noticed her friend was aware of the stares, yet appeared determined to ignore them, which made Maxine even more sad. She shouldn't have to feel uncomfortable after what occurred. It wasn't fair. Gulping down a portion of her mashed potatoes, her fork left her mouth to plunge back into her puree as she basked in Kate's reassuring presence. She hadn't throw up at all yesterday and dearly hoped it would be the same today. But her goal would turn pointless if she continued to obstinately mull over the last words she had shared with her favorite punk.

The smallest quarrel with Chloe gutted her extensively. She couldn't tolerate the pain manifesting in her friend's eyes, couldn't cope with the feeling that she was being a disloyal betrayer when all she wanted was for everyone's safety to be ensured. Her heart broke everytime the blue-haired girl was dissatisfied with her, or crestfallen by her words. No matter how many times her brain kept chanting that Chloe's reaction was normal and expected, that the older teen only needed time and would eventually come around, it still hurt like a bitch.

**Chloe won't put up with your shit forever, Max. She'll probably leave your sorry ass once she’s fed up with you.**

"You'll never guess who knocked on my door this morning." Suddenly said Kate, tearing her from her self-inflicted inner torture.

Max focused on the teenage sweetheart to show she was waiting for the answer. Answer she clearly didn't have.

"Victoria. She apologized for her behavior. I thought she was gonna kneel down and beg for forgiveness at one point." Recounted the religious girl with a shy smile.

That's good. Victoria is obviously trying to change her ways.

"How did it make you feel?" wondered the brunette.

God Max, you sound like a freaking therapist. Perhaps Jacoby's rubbin' off on me...

Her interlocutor thoughtfully took the time to swallow her mouthful of food before responding. "A bit embarassed. But it was nice, she was really sincere you know, i could see it in her eyes."

Speaking of Victoria, she was only a few tables away, conversing with an agitated Nathan. One of his knees wouldn't cease bouncing up and down underneath their table. Why was he so nervous? Did something happen while she was away? When their gazes met, he squinted at her suspiciously due to the outside lighting hindering his vision through the adjacent window, whereas her own eyes widened in panic at being caught staring so flagrantly. She should really start minding where her blue orbs trailed, this was a public space after all. Somebody could easily figure out the two of them were getting a bit too friendly compared to their conventional routine of hating each other's guts.

The Prescott flipped her the bird out of nowhere, drawing Victoria's attention in her direction. At least he was good at covering up their association. The short-haired female's eyes briefly broadened like saucers when she realized to whom his rude gesture was aimed at.

Caulfield cleared her throat shyly, nearly choking in her attempt to smother an incoming chuckle. "If anyone could make her see the light, it'd be Kate Marsh." She finally answered her blond friend.

"No. I think it would take more than that, Max." Told the nice girl, oblivious to what was occuring
behind her back.

Sunlight glittered against the girl's golden cross, blinding Maxine in its wake. It only lasted a second though. Just enough for her phone to start buzzing.

I'm on it okay! Stop hounding me!
10/14 12:22pm

I'm not doing anything. What are you talking about?
10/14 12:22pm

I'll look for your stupid list after school. No need to stare at me every ten seconds smartass!
10/14 12:23pm

Brooke and Warren chose this moment to approach their vacant table. The boy looked like he had shoved his hand in a working toaster, or poked at a plug with wet fingers. One of his nerdy activities had evidently gone wrong.

"What happened to your hair?" The photographer inquired curiously, eyeing his roasted brown ends as her two companions sit down.

"Warren added the wrong chemical in his beaker. No need to explain the results..." Brooke disclosed without any mercy for the boy's pride, installing herself alongside Kate while the neophyte scientist plopped down next to Max.

The latter burst out laughing, a hand covering her mouth out of reflex. "You exploded?"

"Alright, mock me all you want. Not everyone has your vast knowledge in chemistry, Doctor Max."

"Knowledge? You mean the large space within my skull where my brain should be? Not that impressive."

"You're such a klutz, Warren." Smiled Kate fondly.

"So, will you go to that drive-in you gushed about all week?" Pried Brooke, not sounding very interested in following her crush in his adventures, for once.

Perhaps Daniel has something to do with it...

"Yeah, had to fight a dozen bullies off to get tickets. Freaking nerds." Cursed the young man, who must have forgotten his own nature all of a sudden.

"You're one to talk." Remarked Maxine. "Which date is the movies' projection?"
"The twenty-fifth. Next week." He informed, noshing on his green beans eagerly.

"Oh! Well, maybe i'll have time to come with you then. I thought it was sooner."

"Really?" He almost suffocated to death, part of his meal sliding down through the wrong pipe.

"Yes. A friendly excursion, just the two of us." She proposed with a coy grin, slapping his back to assist him in coughing his food out of his throat.

The boy's face downright crumbled at the word "friendly", making the entire table cackle.

The merry band of misfits continued to nibble on their meal and discuss trivial matters of their teenage lifes. Maxine had expeditiously emptied her lunch. She's been famished almost since she woke up.

Fifteen minutes later, Evan Harris arrived at their level, one of his hands casually wedged in his jeans, the other holding an oblong item which Caulfield could not identify from that distance. The student perpetually looked zen, uncaring about the rest of world gravitating around him unless you managed to entice him by saying something smart or showing interest for one of his pastimes. Like photography, in Max's case.

"Hey Maxwell Smart, i finally brought the Robert Capa book i told you about the other day." He handed the object to her with a charming smile, fixing the blue scarf around his neck.

"Cool! Thanks Evan. This will brighten my day." She thanked, storing the book inside her brown and navy bag without wasting any time.

"Anything for the quiet hero." He captured her button nose between his knuckles and squeezed for a second, turning his attention to Kate soon after. "Nice to see you up and about, Kate."

"Thank you, Evan. I'm glad to be back."

Max went into a sneezing frenzy, snatching an overused tissue from her pockets to avert grossly sputtering on her friends. Evan departed after three minutes of small talk with the Marsh girl, the entire table chatting in high spirits, meanwhile the freckled eighteen years old was too busy wiping her nose clean. She growled in annoyance.

*I've finished my plate anyway.*

"Nathan's staring at you again. Fuckin' weirdo." Mumbled Graham close to her ear.

A sneaky glance on the side told her the Sci-Fi enthusiast was right.

"Are you sure he's not harassing you?" Insisted Warren, forever the persistent mother hen.

"Yes, Warren." Her eyes rose to the ceiling in exasperation. "Nathan isn't causing me any trouble. Stop worrying so much."

"You're acting like a jealous girlfriend." Ribbed Brooke.

"Or boyfriend." He obscenely implied, tone barren of finesse, his eyebrows performing weird figures over his forehead.

"Stop daydreaming, you failed Casanova. You're going to drool on the table." Replied the spectacled girl as she threw her napkin in his face.
Okay, i love that girl. Cross out Warren. Brooke is my new favorite nerd.

Maxine was in dire need of fresh air. The place was becoming too noisy for her anyway. She was already sick, didn't need a headache on top of it.

"Alright, i'm done. Gotta go guys. See you later." She stood up, sweetly kissing Kate on the cheek before heading off.

"Bye Max." Said the rest of the crew with fleeting waves to bid her farewell.

Clearing up her tray on her way out, she then progressed out of the cafeteria to wander the halls.

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RkNvCvydvCU ]

The faculty's corridors never failed to put her on edge.

Rachel's face was plastered everywhere she went, no exception. She wouldn't be able to take down her missing posters without looking iffy, so she stayed as faraway from them as possible. Even dead, the popular teen managed to haunt the place in sizable measure. Her presence tended to linger all over Arcadia, specifically Blackwell. Thoughts, pictures, habits, clothes, bounds, everything about the Amber girl tarried to vanish, as if her perennial spirit dallied on purpose, ostensibly awaiting in the midst of an invisible plain, stuck between life and death itself.

The brunette reached the school's front yard, taking in the scenery appreciatively. Autumn suited the town more than any other season, indeed.

Arcadia Bay could fool anyone with its boring, harmless appearance, when in reality, it was a town full of death. A town full of liars. Its marvelous esthetics were only a lure for the tourists who came every years but never stayed. Who would? The city seemed stuck in time, its residents forever trapped. Every corner of the place could be compared to a coin, two-faced, shining at every ray of sunlight but corroded to the core, used but everlasting. A paradox made of houses and buildings. A darker side for every dazzling sight you encountered there. Like an old homeless woman concealed behind a cute, inviting diner. Or the misery hiding behind each little artificial smile the locals shared with you.

Or the innocuous artworks of a prominent photographer, displayed in front of a campus that secretly served as his hunting ground despite the fact that it was supposed to be a safe place for students. This school was the biggest sham in history. It could easily get awarded for all the thwarted expectations it provided.

"Hey Max." A breezy voice sundered her from her musings.

Speaking of the devil...

She turned on her heels until she could discern her professor halfway onto the small pavement cutting across the grass.
Wowzer, look! It's our old pal Jefferson. You should thank him for his last visit. It left you quite... breathless.

Fuck off.

She would have gladly rolled her eyes at her inner demon's sniggers, but Jefferson was getting closer, pace sprightly. Once he was standing in front of her, his height dominating her, everything came back in sporadic successions. His hands around her neck, ready to make it snap. The lack of oxygen, blurring her vision, quelling her thoughts. His unwavering face, devoid of emotions. Her last ruminations, prior to her alleged death. The end that never came. That she was never granted.

Life didn't want Max Caulfield to end apparently. Not yet. Everyone around her though? Not a care in the world.

Oh, and let her watch it. It's funnier that way.

"How was your weekend?" The faculty member pried. "I trust you used the opportunity to rest properly."

My weekend? Turbulent.

"I did, actually." She confirmed, omitting to mention she spent a good fraction of it in Nathan's bed.

"Feeling better i assume?"

Actually, she was pretty sick. Her fever had barely cooled down since this morning, but it would be wrong for her to complain since she had been in much worse conditions in the past. She must have caught something by staying under the rain too long the previous day, when her and Chloe rescued Frank from that doped up loony.

"I'm doing just fine."

"Good. Listen, i wanted to speak to you about something." He began, eyes scoping the area in detail, as if their imminent exchange of words was of utmost secrecy.

"I'm all ears." She asseverated, realizing he had took a step closer.

"Just between you and me, i think you should be careful around Nathan."

She suppressed the need to blink, or express any form of shock that could give away the fact that she knew exactly what he was warning her about. "What? Why?" She played dumb perfectly, recognizing she was smoothly mastering that art.

"I saw him taking pictures of you from afar the other day. You two aren't friends, right?" She denied the notion with a mere nod, noting how pleased the bastard appeared by her response. "We all know the boy's not exactly stable, even if he's more bark than bite. Still, i want you to be cautious, okay? Nathan seems to have obsessive tendencies. Don't hesitate to come to me if he bothers you, deal?"

Fuck, i hope Nathan doesn't get in trouble for this.

"Yes, of course. Thanks for the warning."

"No need, Max. And i didn't mention this to scare you, so it'd be pointless to panic. I'll see you later in class." He avered, a manly hand gently touching her shoulder in his course.
The world twirled frenziedly without any warning, and Maxine materialized in the middle of a cramped kitchen. A breathless woman was situated on the cold tiled floor, blood trickling down her nose, chest heaving with each of her inhalations. Her face looked damaged, multiple bruises coloring her rosy skin, and parts of it swelling into several bumps that appeared extremely painful. She sniffled, azure gaze ascending to bore into hers. Who was that girl to Jefferson?

"Fetch me a towel, would you?" She demanded indistinctly, features shifting toward the ground in what Max recognized as shame, her long brown hair framing her discountenanced expression.

Jefferson didn't move, but the student could feel something between her host's palms, something he wouldn't stop clenching securely in his hold.

"Mark, a towel please." She requested again, louder this time.

Said boy raised what she identified as a camera, aligning it athwart his field of view.

"What do you think you're doing?" Frowned the abused woman.

The flash of his device illuminated the room.

"Stop it!" She shouted, lifting herself from the floor with great difficulty.

The perceptibly younger Jefferson lowered his camera. "You know, i'm beginning to think you actually have a taste for abuse. Is that one of your kinks, mom?"

Abashed, his mother delivered a well-earned slap across his face, forcing it to spin sideway under the strength of the blow.

Her index finger jutted in his direction, pointing at him reproachfully. "You have no right to speak to me like this. The only reason he never touched you is because i protected you all this years." She justified, sounding close to tears.

"If you really wanted to protect me, you shouldn't have brought that barfly home." He emended, strolling toward the room's threshold.

"Your father... He was sick." She disclosed while prolonging the words meaningfully, urging the teenager to stop dead in his tracks. "Schizophrenia. I heard those kind of things can be genetic. Maybe you should see a doctor..." she alluded cautiously.

"Why?" He peered at his genitor over his shoulder. "I'm not the one who enjoys being beaten."

Her head swung sluggishly from side to side. "There's something wrong with you, Mark."

He sniffed. "That's like the pot calling the kettle black."

His disturbing, reproving leer was the last thing she saw—the sight of him reflected onto the oven's door—before being propelled back into her own body.

*Man, that guy is fucked up. You'd make quite the pair.*

Max was starting to learn more about her teacher than she ever wished to.
So, an alcoholic, prone to violence stepfather, an absent, missing father—by choice or death, she had no idea—and finally, cherry on top, an abused mother which refused to take legal action against her persecutor. At least, that's what her tired brain had picked up and muddled up together after her little souvenirs robbery of this former noon. All the flashbacks she had of her teacher's past were unsettling and alarming, unpleasant to undergo. Maxine could still recall reading about him having "experienced some serious shit" in Rachel's letter. As yet, she had presumed it was just bullshit he had blathered to lure the girl in his nets. Perhaps she had misjudged the situation however.

But why would he relate such dark, personal things to a nineteen years old that he had used for sex and deranged photographs? One of his countless methods of manipulation? A cunning "Make her feel sorry for me, she'll be easier to influence" kind of design? Maybe he had been a bit sincere with the blond, at least. Max couldn't ever picture the guy being capable of complex, destructive emotions like love, but he may have found himself attached to the girl at some point in their relationship. Perhaps he even thought he had really felt some sort of paternal affection for Nathan. That may be why he was so pissed when he overdosed Rachel. Because he seemed to have no trouble killing Chloe, Nathan and Victoria during their last encounter in her alternative timeline. For someone who preached about professionalism and cautiousness at all times to the Prescott... That had been an awfully bad move on his part. He was downright sick in the head and delusive anyway, especially toward himself. Jefferson was one of those twisted egocentrics who took their own lies for universal truths.

Caulfield could repress her repulsion for the man to a certain extent, for the sake of her plan, yet it was getting tremendously complicated when he appeared to desire nothing more than become closer to her. It sent disagreeable shivers down her vertebra everytime she pondered on it. Sometimes, she wished she could just tie him to a chair and make him suffer the way all those girls had suffered in his hands. Force him to answer her questions with valid answers, not stupid fibs he had thought about on so many occasions before. Mayhap she'd get to see more of her professor's past in the following days, learn more about the origin of his mental condition. The notion pushed her to cringe. No trip inside this guy's head had ever been pleasurable. She longed to finally be able to control her new powers. If it could help her shun those horrible visions, then she'd do anything to attain that goal.

The two of them were once again cloistered inside the photography lab, handling all kinds of tools and chemicals. Max was currently aggressively handling the duct tape in her hands, sending her interlocutor funny looks that he didn't seem to remark as she clenched her teeth around the material to cut it. She had no problem admitting she was imagining it to be that bastard's carotid.

Jefferson was slowly turning too friendly and accommodating toward her. His smoldering gaze would linger on her for too long in class, he'd pointedly stay near her desk during his teachings, his smiles would last way longer when they were directed at her than any other person. He was no longer playing it safe. Every last bit of his mindful attention for her made her feel like an indeterminable amount of creepy-crawlies were having a party right beneath her skin. It disgusted her, to put it mildly. God bless her legendary composure.

"Victoria told me you were working together on the assignment i gave you." Mark told her, breaking the soothing silence hanging in the air.
Of course, the blond couldn't resist chatting up their teacher as soon as the bell had rang, and she wasn't famous for holding her tongue.

"Yeah, it's true." She replied nonchalantly.

"I was surprised. I didn't think you two were friendly with each other." A dark brow rose slightly above the other one's level.

"Well, you should have. I love everybody." She declared with a dulcet tone.

"Even your professors? I'm glad. Not that i ever doubted it..." He smirked, complacent.

The girl wished she could groan right now. She never could put a finger on what he was thinking about. It was frustrating, to say the least. Jefferson was a dangerous individual, he could suddenly go berserk and decide to take what he wanted whenever the desire arose. What would she do then?

*Just focus, Max. Stop overanalyzing everything. You're gonna give yourself the jitters.*

She wasn't the prey here. Not anymore. She was the predator. She had to remember that if she didn't want to loose her mind. If she didn't want to leave some space for her alternate self to fill with dangerous illusions that would eventually try to kill her. Shape her into her own murderer.

The freak had such an overbearing aura though, it was pretty tough to ignore.

"With all due respect, you really ought to do something about that monstrous ego of yours, Mr. Jefferson." She snapped back in a cynical voice.

"Sorry Max, i can't help being a bit pretentious sometimes." He admitted with a charming smile gracing the corners of his lips.

*Sometimes... We don't have the same definition for that word apparently.*

She wrapped the tape around the cardboard box opening—box which was placed on a metallic table—sealing it tightly. The safelight above their heads permeated the atmosphere with privacy. It felt too intimate. The touch of secrecy it bestowed upon the room felt wrong.

Maxine hoisted the moderately heavy container, sauntering to a corner of the room to put the thing back in its initial spot. When she returned to her professor, he was examining the camera and film she had left on a tray table, beside her bag.

"Instant film is so expensive and hard to find this days. But i'm not telling you anything new, right?" He prated casually.

"Nope. Nothing i can do about it though. I can't help it, i'm analog, not digital." She shrugged.

He smiled knowingly, carefully setting her stuff back in place. "I think you were born in the wrong era, Max."

She arched an eyebrow, mouth dishonestly upturned. "Yeah, if only i'd been a young adult in the nineties, i would have had a lot of fun."

That might have been true, but it wasn't why she said it. She knew exactly what kind of cerebrations this sentence would stir within his reeling mind.

*"God... I wish you had been around back in my day."*
And what would you have done exactly?

What would have happened if they had met under those circumstances? Perhaps she'd have been able to stop his insane activities before they even begun. No, not a chance. He was leering at her now, awaiting for her to say something. Albeit she was too lost in her musings to do so. Now that she thought about it, he always had this kind of predatory stance or attitude whenever she was near. It's always been there, but she was too blinded by the perfect image he was constantly projecting at his students to give heed to all the hints oozing out of the man, revealing his true nature. Not anymore. Her eyes got stuck on every little telling detail she kept missing anteriorly.

"Today's the deadline of the Everyday Hero Contest. I'm announcing the winner tomorrow." He informed proudly. "Are you excited?"

"Should i be?" She inquired, her digits caressing her cheek fleetingly, another habit of hers. A stroke to deal with her distress, remind her she was real and not dreaming. Alive. Not stuck into an umpteenth alternate reality.

"Of course! You have a decent chance to win." He vouched, always the first to remind her of her so-called "talent".

Max didn't respond, not wanting to engage in a debate about the potential of her artistic abilities, blowing harshly on a tuft of hair that refused to budge from her vision instead.

The older man chuckled. "Let me help you with that."

Jefferson didn't shilly-shally. She internally congratulated herself for not blenching and shrinking when his hand gently drove her hair away from her eyelashes. His fingers grazed her jugular as they made their way back to his side. She wondered if he did it on purpose or if the gesture had been beyond his control.

Tearing his dark eyes from her smaller form, which he towered with ease, he advanced to a spread out twine line where pictures were hanging, held in place by wooden pins. These reminded the freckled adolescent of her childhood days, when she'd watch Joyce hang some clothes in the garden after completing her laundry.

"So, what do you think?" He invited her to give her opinion on the photographs her class had developed less than an hour ago, gesturing to the area they were hung out to dry.

The teen slinked forward. "They're all fantastic. Everybody did a great job. The monochrome ones are my favorites."

"Really? Your pictures are always so colorful, i presumed you'd have a preference for those." He deduced, black orbs monitoring her anew.

"I like all styles, really. But these have something peculiar to them. I don't know, maybe it's the shadows... The way it seizes people's faces is incredible."

He seemed to approve her verdict, grinning manifestly. Ah, there it was, the perfect occasion to score some points with the madman.

Her hands ravelled behind her. "Y'know, some cultures actually believe photographs can capture your soul... I think they may be right. It's like... a way to ensnare people's emotions on paper. To catch that special instant where someone's personality alters. That moment innocence evolves into corruption. That shift from black, to white, to grey... And beyond." She gabbled, fixated on the photos in front of them with a false engrossment.
Something in his gaze told her he rose to the bait, like a fish biting onto the hook willy-nilly. Stella's assumptions may have been well-founded after all. The fool looked outright... smitten?

*Feel that "connection", fucker?*

"Are you okay, Mr. Jefferson?" She ingenuously questioned the moment his smile faded.

The grown man's eyes fluttered in befuddlement against his glasses. "I—Um... Yeah. Sorry..." He cleared his throat, ostensibly disquieted. "I feel the same, to tell you the truth. It's always a pleasure to meet a kindred spirit." His hand roosted themselves on his hips.

"We should get a move on before David decides to lock everything up with us still inside." The brunette recommended, peeling off her gloves from her extremities and tossing them into a nearby bin.

He nodded in endorsement, still completely lost in thought.

*That's right... Mull over this, bastard.*

Jefferson never got the good fortune to witness the dangerous smirk spreading on her lips as she retired from the photography lab, her stuff back in her possession. If he had, he might have seen all this coming.

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NwlWL1legEQ&t=0m2s ]

It wasn't here. He tried every fucking corner of this stupid office. Nothing. He searched every drawer, every bookcase, even flipped the rug over to see if there was any trapdoor underneath—Yeah, maybe he watched a bit too much movies... In desperation, he ended up sticking his nose up the fireplace to look for a potential secret button that would activate something hidden from view. Fishing for proof was definitely easier in his video games. Plus, his father was a little paranoid bitch who knew exactly what he was doing, so it could literally take him hours to found anything concretely incriminating. The boy was already out of breath from all his crouching and running around, and he only had scoured one fucking room. This fact made him realize how out of shape he was getting.

Exiting the overfurnished area with a despondent huff after ensuring that everything was back in its original place, the corridor immediately reminded him of diverse childhood mementos he would rather forget about, as he was gliding ahead in an absent manner.

Sean didn't let Nathan stay a child for long. He required a successor to his entreprise, so his heir's training began considerably early. The boy wasn't very interested in business talk, yet his dad always found a way to make him listen. Meaning: Beating him. Oh he didn't spent all of his time decorating his son's skin with bruises of course, he knew his methods. If the child behaved accordingly to his desires, then he'd be rewarded. He'd even get a small amount of reserved affection sometimes. Like
that day he had stayed in his father's office all afternoon to observe what he was doing as a ten-year-old, and got out of the room with a brilliant diploma proclaiming him as "the best son in the world".

Clever bullshit propaganda that had been. Even though he grasped this award was just an umpteenth mean to manipulate him, Nathan kept it to this day like one would a precious token of parental love. But it wasn't. It was simply formatting. Sean had strived to mold him into a perfect copy of himself in preparation for his progeny's grand future, a destiny the kid wanted nothing to do with. The Prescott patriarch merely managed to destroy him in the process. Nothing fruitful ever came out of this special "education".

The mental issues rose to the surface in his early adolescence. Nathan knew he wasn't normal the instant his father's radio started talking to him. Or whenever the news reporter on his TV's screen divulged terribly interesting secrets to him and him only, calling him by his name when in reality, he was pretty sure the host wasn't even aware of his existence. And that was nothing compared to the nonexistent voices echoing inside his head. There were a lot of them. Male, female, even asexual sometimes. Sean would give him a good round of bruises, then those freaking words would come to haunt him. They only had one goal. Demean him. Establish how much of a failure and disappointment he was. Always. On occasions, they'd try to persuade him that the dog across the street wanted to chew his toes until none were left, or that the new guy his father hired was plotting to cut off his pinky when he'd least expect it. The worst one had been the day those blasted voices successfully forced him to believe his mother had been replaced by an evil doppelganger, and that he needed to warn the rest of his family about it so they wouldn't be fooled. That didn't go well, especially with his dad. Nathan knew those absurd declarations were just plain bullshit. But did it help? Not one bit. He was perfectly conscious of being delusional, attempted to fight his irrational thoughts everytime they crossed his mind, yet somehow, his sick brain would eventually find a way to make him accept those foolish notions as if they were true.

Recognizing that a stranger was lying to you presented no burden in comparison. But when your own treacherous imagination and intellect were dead set on tricking you, what could you do? Well, not much. Apart from fighting it with all your might. Which didn't guarantee you would be successful. Nathan took on the habit of trying to ignore those inner ravings, an endeavor that mostly didn't work out in his favor.

So his parents had dragged him to multiple psychiatrists to finally determine what was wrong with their offspring. Some things worked. Some didn't. His treatment, for the most part, made his auditory hallucinations go away. Things became a little easier for him after that. The nightmares stayed though, just like the anxiety. The tremors too. And pills sadly weren't a flawless remedy. Because when you swallow something that suppress your illusions, it usually comes with its share of vicious side effects. So they give you other pills to repress those, but those pills end up having their own sorts of repercussions too. So they give you another sort to take with the rest of your portable pharmacy until you turn into the pathetic version of a human drugstore yourself. The list goes on...

Then came Jefferson. The only person who didn't try to convince him that his craziness was a bad thing he needed to get rid of, and encouraged his eccentric propensities instead. That should have been a pretty big warning sign, but Nathan had been too desperate for approval, praises and affection, so he chose to overlook the sirens ringing in the back of his mind whenever he shared a moment of complicity with his mentor. Jefferson didn't mind mental illness, he taught it was perfect for the boy's creativity, a way to see further than the average eye, a gift that would polish his skills and make him better than his other Blackwell comrades. The boring, unoriginal kids of his generation. The art teacher had insinuated that you needed a little bit of insanity to reach into the dark places other people were too afraid to touch themselves. That the world needed people like Nathan, who were capable of displaying life in its raw, realistic cruelty, while many others were too busy depicting its beauty and glory. It had felt good to hear that. Good to feel special. Appreciated. He
found the father he had lost in Mark, the parent he had always wished for. Yet, it had been a mirage. A deceiving, cunning lie that he had gulped down without question to bring himself the semblance of comfort he wouldn't find at home. The older guy wasn't fond of his habits of getting high on drugs however, said this "shit" changed people into incompetent morons. Clearly, he wasn't mistaken. The Prescott learned that the hard way.

The situation completely reversed after Rachel's death. Laudations turned into perpetual criticism, constant blaming and full time reproaches. Suddenly, his mental illness wasn't so appealing anymore. He was a big fuck-up, a giant faux pas into the famous photographer's career. Nathan'd had to deal with the consequences of his friend's accidental overdose on his own, guilt eating away his soul bit by bit, his sanity slowly drifting away day by day. It was only fair after all, since he was responsible for her death.

Rachel had been a beacon of hope in his twisted life. She'd treated him differently from the rest of the students, never landed one judgmental look upon his person. He hadn't been close to her the way he was to Vic, their relationship was too peculiar to describe. Everyone loved the blond. She wasn't just hot, smart or funny. Rachel had those eyes that tore through your very soul and coerced your most wretched emotions to emerge to the surface. One glimpse seemed enough for her to discover your darkest secrets and pierce through the thick armor you had spent years building around your heart.

He knew his feelings for her had always been one-sided, yet it didn't hurt as much as he thought it would as long as she was willing to be his friend. Although learning about her little liaison with Jefferson had rendered him a jealous mess. He hadn't mind Frank because the guy was a loser and had nothing more to offer her than Nathan could. Mark on the other hand, was everything he would never be. He was his example, his aspiration as an artist and a father figure. And that figure was sleeping around with the only girl he had ever really crushed on. The teacher told him he was too young and naive to understand that his feelings weren't love, merely a burst of lust for something unattainable to him. That humans always wanted what they couldn't have. That his affection for the girl would pass, like every other fleeting whim he had accumulated during his young existence. Perhaps he had been right. The boy didn't know if he was capable of love anyway.

The sole concept terrified him.

Particularly since he fathomed himself too inclined to get emotionally attached and dependant on anyone giving him attention or looking at him with minimal interest. Like Max. He couldn't stand the notion of her preferring to hang out with someone else than him. Well, other than the blue-haired dyke, which was normal considering she was her best friend. But the others? Nah. He didn't like it in the slightest. Especially that fucking nerd Warren. God, that whiny bitch was so clingy toward the hipster! The sight was disgusting to the point of giving him shivers. Didn't the guy possess any self-respect? Couldn't she see how freakin' desperate the dolt was?

An intense clatter knocked him out of his musings, the sound similar to something that would repeatedly bonk against a glass pane.

His head shifted to the door leading to the second living room his father liked to dwell in when he wasn't locked up in his office. The one with opulent old-fashioned furnishings and this brick fireplace with that stupid portrait of his grandfather above it. Entering with the caution of a scaredy-cat—he's never been very courageous whenever his safety was on the line—he scanned the zone to find the weird noise's provenance. One of the windows giving view to the estate's courtyard seemed to be the culprit. Well, the bird doggedly bashing its beak against it, that is.

Nathan walked up to the winged intruder in furious strides, opening the window to sho the troublemaker away...
"Get lost, retard!" He appealed, charming as ever.

...Which didn't have the envisioned effect. The animal stubbornly flied into the room, nearly rudely flapping its wings in the frustrated boy's face.

It perched itself on the fireplace's edge, chirping unrelentingly at the Prescott as if attempting to speak about some serious matter. Nathan approached the annoying thing, keeping a certain distance in case the creature was on a rampage and dangerous, taking a closer look at his new unsought friend. It was completely blue, with a touch of white on its belly. It could have been pretty cute if it wasn't so freaking noisy.

*Like Crackfield.*

Focusing on it drew his attention to something else though. The giant photograph of Harry Aaron Prescott that was staring at him with its usual persistence. There was something haunting about his grandfather's hollow eyes... Even Sean made the effort of smiling in most of the family pictures, but Harry... Harry's face was utterly devoid of expression. He looked like an automaton deprived of feelings, his sole existence reduced to signing papers, collecting money, and accepting underhand deals.

Maybe that was what Nathan would turn into if his life went on this shady path. Their "destiny".

He had never met the guy since he had died prior to his grandson's birth. Not that Nate felt particularly enthusiastic at the idea of talking to another Prescott clone. Good riddance. One money-hungry asshole was enough. He wouldn't be able to handle two of them.

Stormy eyes refocused on the small bird in front of him. Its dark pupils were still centered on his person. At first, he thought the critter was examining him, but he cast the speculation aside when he soon realized how ridiculous the notion was. It was just a mere bird, a Blue Jay to be more precise, and if his thin wisdom on the matter could even be trusted. A part of him, his subconscious no doubt, whispered it was probably trying to get an essential message across. Something clicked in his mind.

His hands suddenly reached out to clasp the solid frame of the portrait, the animal smartly hopping to the side to avoid hindering his movements. He unhooked it from the wall, carefully setting it down so he could inspect it closely, twisting it around until no spots were left unchecked. Nothing. Not even a single inscription. The bird chirped again, the sound short and faint compared to the previous ones, alerting the adolescent. A key was dangling from the tiny metallic hook hammered above the fireplace, suspended by a barely perceptible black cord, which ends were tied together like a necklace. He grabbed it without hesitation.

Nathan instantly recognized the object in his palm. The only way to open his father's private room, the one filled with monochrome photographs of bound women. He knew, he had used it in the past. Only once, yes, yet it was engraved in his memory for eternity. After that, his dad had decided to hide the key a bit more efficiently. His heir never found it again. Well, until now. The Prescott boy shoved the helpful item in his pockets, putting his ancestor's portrait back in its place.

His long legs took him outside of the living room and strode to the targeted door. The lock quickly caved in under the key's sharp rotations. He didn't waste any time stepping inside, impatient to either confirm or discredit his fears. He knew his dad would never place cameras around the house. The guy disliked anything that could record or be used as proof of his crooked doings. The Prescott Estate was the only place where he could freely be himself. His controlling, abusive self.

It's been years since the last time the boy had been here, yet nothing had changed apparently. The paintings, photographs, sofas, bookcases, everything was disposed the exact same way he recalled.
He scoped the area meticulously. Meanwhile, Nathan witnessed the Blue Jay—which had followed him here for reasons he'd never comprehend—roost itself on the border of a small drinks cabinet in his peripheral vision.

*Weird... Whatever.*

The boy neared the center of the room, brown shoes padding across the huge, fancy carpet embellishing the floorboard. A strange sensation—ensued by an odd sound—obliged him to halt. Something was off. His steps resonated differently whenever he walked on that peculiar spot. His eyes dropped to the ground. An antique rug with a burgundy background bedecked by gold and royal blue patterns was standing between him and his mysterious discovery. He flopped to the floor, rolling the mat out of his way to peep at what was concealed beneath it. An onyx, metallic safe. It wasn't unusual for rich people to have safes. It was pretty standard actually. But this one had a motherfucking digicode. Which was also normal, yet wasn't really accommodating for the rest of his exploration. This could mean the end of his half-assed investigation.

How would he find the password? It could be anything at this point. He was screwed. Literally screwed.

Nathan seized his head between his palms, massaging his throbbing temples. This shit was giving him a headache. His gaze fell on the winged creature who was still gawking at him from his perch.

"Stop staring at me, idiot. Make yourself useful!" He commanded in a bossy tone.

*Good job, Nathan. Now you're talking to a stupid bird. Just great!*

The eerie critter's dark eyes continued to peer at him for five seconds, before turning their attention to the picture frame alongside it, the bird eventually using its beak to topple the object over. A dull thud echoed as it softly crashed on the cabinet's top.

The short-fused adolescent gripped the frame, studying the photograph stuck within it. A younger version of Sean smiled at his son, arm curled around another man’s shoulders, seemingly slightly older than his patriarch. Both were standing in the middle of a golf course, clubs in hands, radiating bliss in their ridiculous polo shirts. The individual returning his dad's side-embrace must be, in all likelihood, another well-off bastard. In fact, his mind suddenly conjured up a memory of that guy meeting his old man here, in their own house. It hadn't been his first visit, and Nathan bet it wouldn't be the last either. A tiny silver inscription was inscribed at the bottom of the black frame.

"10/21/2003"... *Ten years ago?*

He assessed the blue animal in proximity, head full of questions.

"What? This?" The teenager inquired, waving the object in front of the Blue Jay, which didn't answer—indeed, birds were not supposed to speak human languages, well except parrots—and merely kept looking at him blankly.

*Don't take the trouble to answer, asshole.*

After glowering at the critter for a moment, Nathan turned on his heels, treading back to the safe to enter the date he had gathered as the presumed security code Sean might have chosen to hide his fishy stuff away from prying eyes.

*Come on bitch! Open!*

A mellifluous beep validated his success.
The teen gyrated the lock to open the hatch. Numerous manila envelopes greeted him, along with a piece of paper on which several names, followed by coordinates, laid bare. That must be what Max had been seeking since last week. His attention shifted from the list to the envelopes beside it. He snatched one of them impatiently, flipping the non-glued opening so his quivering hand could reach inside to fetch its content.

Monochrome pictures. Various faces of dosed up young women. Girls he identified all too well.

Fuck no, please...

Kelly, Rachel, Kate, they were all here. All the poor Blackwell girls who had fell victim to Jefferson. His father knew. His father was involved. Screw that, he was the fucking mastermind of all their crazy operations. For a brief second, the atmosphere turned oppressing, and akin to the bird, he could sense the eyes of the girls depicted on the artworks hanging on the four walls surrounding him fixated on him. He understood he was simply fantasizing it because of the shock, but he couldn't stop his throat from clogging, nor his even breaths from transforming into full-on, erratic wheezes. Even swallowing turned well nigh impossible in his current condition.

Heart beating wildly in his chest, he hurried up the stairs leading to the upper floor and ultimately, to his bedroom. Installing himself at his desk, he opened his laptop to check the typed addresses on Google Maps. He entered each coordinates one by one, all types of informations passing before his eyes. Arcadia, Tillamook, Portland, Pacific City, Beaverton... Those guys were everywhere. Encircling them. The Prescott then proceeded to search their names in an attempt to find out who they were precisely. And what interesting results he got! Doctors, lawyers, business men, bankers, stockbrokers, heads of corporations. Those fuckers all had well-paid jobs and were renowned to be good at their respective trades, based on what he was reading.

Hands trembling, Nathan closed his laptop after erasing his browser's history, mentally listing all the tasks he had to fulfill at the moment. Make a copy of the fucking list so he could show it to Caulfield later, put the original back in its initial location, lock the safe once more and rearrange the rug so nothing would look out of place or jumbled. Oh, and of course, replace the room's key behind his grandfather's portrait. He had to move his ass pronto before his dad got back home from work.

Don't panic Nate. Everything's cool. Just count to three.

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dXbJ8-38yHw ]

Nathan Prescott was leaning against his SUV a couple of meters away, back against his car's door, ominously fiddling with his lighter as he glowered at the rest of the world. Even with the wide gap separating them, Warren could discern his bloodshot eyes. He was plainly under the influence of drugs, nothing out of the ordinary here. The psycho looked like he wanted to blast the entire school to bits. Or burn it to the ground. What could possibly be the source of his hatred this time?
His whole frame was twitching without any hiatus, extremities convulsing as he absently turned his lighter on and off repeatedly. If this was a cartoon, a dark menacing cloud would most likely be looming over his head, with a bolt of lightning prompt to strike any potential passerby.

Everything about this guy aggravated him. Nathan was a nasty piece of work, as Max used to say.

To say the boys weren't on good terms was an understatement. Photoshopping pictures of him to turn it into ridiculous caricatures, where the bastard would write things like "Beta Phag Alert" and other base one-liners, seemed to be one of his favorites hobbies. He'd even have the nerve to stick it on Warren's door so the concerned party wouldn't miss it. The last straw had been the day that rich prick had thrown a lighted smoke bomb—don't ask him where the lunatic actually managed to get that, he didn't know—into his bedroom and closed the door before barricading the poor nerd inside with the help of a chair. The entire place had rapidly ended up overloaded by fumes.

Yes, he still wasn't over it. For miscellaneous reasons, the two of them never saw eye to eye. Their childish rivalry started at the very beginning of the year, and since then every encounter between the adolescents would end up in a feud. There was something that irked him about the douchebag. His arrogance, his disdain for those less fortunate than him, his ugly smugness that made him want to punch him in his stupid face, his way of thinking that everything belonged to him and that human beings could be owned just because he had money... Plus, he was such a crass asshole! The amount of tasteless vulgarity his dirty mouth spewed everyday never failed to baffle him.

To add to all of this, the asswipe had now set his gaze on Maxine Caulfield, the most amazing girl in the entire campus. His one true friend.

Fuck that.

Yes, Warren had a massive crush on the freckled teenager, and sadly for him, it was flagrantly one-sided.

He knew he was being too damn passive-aggressive at times. She didn't deserve that kind of treatment, but sometimes, jealousy would get ahead of him and push him to react like an immature brat. He wasn't perfect. Warren was okay with simply being her friend as long as it gave him the privilege to bask in her presence. Not a lot of people had that chance since the girl was of a reclusive nature, on top of her introverted tendancies. And he definitely wouldn't let Nathan share that benefit with him. The little terror didn't deserve it.

If there was one thing he despised above all, it was bullies. He wouldn't let that fiend harass his friend, even if she insisted on defending him by continually denying he was bothering her. Because the boy was being blatantly obvious! Graham caught the Prescott leering at the ingenue on so many occasions this week, he practically lost count. He always seemed to find himself on the girl's path. Warren even witnessed him pinning her to a locker once, yet when he tried to intervene, she had dismissed him. Why was Max so obstinate at lying? Why did she keep rejecting his help? Did Nathan threaten her to the point she felt obliged to cover his ass?

Maxine's friend observed his nemesis take a long drag on his recently extracted cigarette, the smoke escaping his mouth seconds later in a furious huff. He appeared completely disconnected from reality, in addition to his tangible wrath—directed toward God knows whom—heavily discharging in the air surrounding him. The rich fuck looked ready to blow. If Warren's survival instincts were functioning properly, he wouldn't approach him. Assuming that his stormy "don't you fucking dare disturb me" gaze was any indication, it would provide him with a swift death sentence. However, the nerd wasn't any good at listening his innermost intuitions.

To Hell with self-preservation!
The motherfucker might think he could pull off anything due to his family's reputation and influence, but the future scientist wouldn't let him get away with pestering his loved ones. He fathomed resorting to violence was bad, yet knowing Nathan, it was plausibly the only way to get his point across. Maybe he'd get his ass beat in the effort, but he had to do something. He wouldn't stand back and watch anymore. It was time to be an everyday hero. To be more like Max.

She wouldn't hesitate a second if the roles were reversed.

"Hey!" He called, closing the distance keeping them apart in fast strides.

The antagonist's hollow eyes travelled all the way to his person, landing on him with total irascibility, eyeing him up and down as if he was the biggest nuisance the Earth had ever produced. Nathan released his grasp on his cigarette, dumping the item to the floor before stomping on it pointedly to extinguish it. He then proceeded to overlook the nerd's presence by walking away.

"Don't ignore me." Dictated Warren, following suit.

"This isn't the moment, fag." Warned the youngest Prescott, jaw clenched tightly.

His blown pupils focused and unfocused on him in a sporadic frequency, like he actually appeared and dematerialized to the boy's view regularly. One second Nathan was there with him, among the realm of the living, the next one, the guy retreated into his own mind, miles away from where they stood. Every single time his attention came back to the real world though, it literally looked like he had just crawled back from limbo. Or the nine circles of Hell.

"I said stop." Persevered Graham, seizing his opponent's limb to force him to a halt.

"What the fuck do you want?!" He wrenched his arm from the annoying boy's grip, readjusting his denim jacket soon after.

"Leave Max alone." Maxine's friend cut to the chase.

"What?! Get off my crack nerd!" He snarled, brushing his demand aside.

The cranky bastard tried to leave again, but the brown-haired pest blocked his path.

"Are you deaf? Stay the fuck away from me, bitch!" Spat the Prescott heir.

"Not until you promise to steer clear of her."

"This doesn't concern you. What are you? Her fucking dog? Pathetic. Go back to Homoland, loser."

Warren brutally headbutted his rival out of impulse. No regrets though. The douche had earned it.

Nathan rubbed his aching skull, wincing in pain. "Oh, you are gonna pay for that, brah." His breath hitched, hand stretching behind his back to grab something patently concealed in his pants.

Midway though, he seemed to change his mind when a strange glint flashed athwart his steely eyes. A recollection of some sort. His quaking palm awkwardly recoiled from his clothes.

"What were you reaching for, huh?" Questioned the geeky adolescent, brows narrowed in mistrust.

The short-fused kid's fist collided with his face without warning.
Chloe wouldn't answer her calls, nor her texts. What if she didn't get over it? What if she chose to drop everything and refused to carry out her part? Max was seriously starting to consider that option. The one where her best friend let her down and fucked everything up for everyone else. No. She had to have faith in her. No way in Hell would she let what Jefferson had done to those girls, Rachel and Max included, go unpunished. The punk wasn't this type of person. A bit rough around the edges, but loyal. Dependable.

And here she was, zoning out, not knowing what to do with herself.

*It's night already, just go back to your dorm instead of moping around.*

As soon as she hoisted her face up, glimpsing away from the verdant grass she was staring at in profound meditation, she spotted Dana and Juliet running up to her, panting madly, expressions grave. The cheerleader's earrings and the reporter's necklace were waggling all over the place on account of the speed of their sprinting.

"Max! We searched for you everywhere." Juliet informed, out of breath, bending over and placing her hands on her knees once the two girls had finally reached the hipster.

The latter tilted her head sideways in confusion. "Sorry, i was taking a walk. Why are you in such a rush to find me?" She wondered, a bad intuition coiling within her, messing with her stress levels.

"Warren and Nathan are fighting! It's getting pretty bad." Dana reported pressingly, visibly concerned by the situation, which could mayhaps get out of hand.

"What?" Maxine cried out, blinking unwittingly. "Where?"

"The parking! Come, quick!" Urged Juliet once more, tugging on her sleeve.

The three young women made a dash for their destination. The journey didn't last long. Max's heart instantly stopped beating at the abysmal spectacle that greeted her. Warren was violently kicking a knocked out Nathan in the stomach, a disturbing thud echoing everytime his shoes collided with his victim's figure.

"You like to hurt people, huh? Like Max, like Kate, like me."

"Get... off me..."

Soon enough, her friend was hunched over the rich kid, delivering punches after punches. The girl had seen this before. In fact, she had pledged to never see this ever again. And yet, it was occuring afresh, in plain sight. The familiar feeling of walking on pins and needles swelled inside her, bringing back the nausea she had wrongly considered tamed down.

"Please... Please stop!" Begged the injured teen.
Maxine jumped on her brown-haired friend, forcing him to cease his unjustified thrashing. "STOP IT! Are you insane?!" She exclaimed.

**What the fuck? Is this Warren? He would never do that!**

The nerd blinked in complete bewilderment, as if he had just regained consciousness. "I'm sorry, i went a bit too far..." He realized a bit too late.

"A bit?! You triggered him!" She motioned to the adolescent rooted on the ground, who was rocking himself back and forth like a maniac, muttering unintelligible things.

"What? Triggered what?!" Asked the male student.

"Just——" she looked like she couldn't find her words, "...Just go Warren!"

"Why do you care so much? He's a fucking asshole! He treats everybody like shit, especially you!"

She scowled at him furiously, something she had never done until now. "Maybe you should stop judging people without knowing what's going on behind the scenes. Maybe this wouldn't happen then." Her index finger momentarily pointed at the curled up form alongside them.

"I can't believe you're defending him!" Warren blurted out, disconcerted.

She gaped at him, mortified by what she was hearing. "I can't believe i'm finding you here beating him almost to death!"

"I did it because i care for you!"

"No! You did it because you were jealous!" The photographer corrected angrily. "Now, if i was in danger and you had done this to protect me, i could have understand... but Nathan was no threat to me." She took a step closer, looking him dead in the eye. "You're my friend Warren and i love you, but don't try to bullshit me." Implored Caulfield.

She spun around in a trice, eyeing the terrified Dana and Juliet, who had their hands over their mouths, frightened by the scene they had beheld.

*God, we're lucky nobody else witnessed this.*

"Shit man... this really hurts..." Nathan wheezed at her feet.

"Come on, we need to wash your face." She helped him up, a sharp twinge surging in her chest when she noticed how desperately he was clinging to her for support as she dragged him in the dorms direction, not looking back toward her friend's despondent mien.

"I think my face is broken..." he moaned pitifully.

"It's fine. You'll be alright." She reassured after taking a look, just to be sure.

They stumbled to the girls' shower room. Caulfield didn't really care if one of her female roomates walked in on them, but she couldn't risk aiding the Prescott inside the boy's bathroom when she had no idea if it was occupied or not. The freckled girl flung the door open, maneuvering the boy so he could enter ahead of her.

It was empty.

She flipped the light switch, the ceiling lights flickering for a second before illuminating the room for
good. Considering it was night and everybody had finished to shower long ago, the mist ordinarily present on the mirrors wasn't there. She prodded her companion tactfully until he settled on the ground, not caring about the water flooding the dank, reflective tiled floor. The showers had the bad habit of easily ending up out of order. No matter how many times Samuel worked his magic, this cursed lavatory always had a problem. A red graffiti stating "Hole to another universe" was tagged on the wall. She figured Chloe must have been the one to draw it during her time at Blackwell, since the punk had the exact same "art piece" in her bedroom, although scribbled with a black marker.

Marching forward, she grabbed some soft paper towels from the distributor, dampening it with the water running from the faucet she had just turned on. She then crouched down at his level, face to face with the miserable boy, proceeding to wipe the blood off his features, her strokes calculated. He flinched the instant the tissue brushed against the sore arch of his eyebrow. She couldn't describe the feeling that bubbled inside her chest at the sight of him. So vulnerable. Defenseless.

"I'm so sorry... This should never have happened." She apologized, like it was her fault.

The fragile napkin quickly became steeped with his blood, turning a deep shade of red in certain spots. Some of it had started to dry upon his pale flesh. She kept going, cleaning him dutifully, her touch tinged with a tenderness she wasn't aware of possessing. He quailed from time to time, the hurt too much to bear, but otherwise stayed immobile, behaving well despite her invasive ministrations.

"Everybody hates me... Everybody." His voice was getting high-pitched, from the pain or the sorrow, she didn't know.

Her eyes stung as she listened to his unremitting plaints.

"Shhh, you're safe. I'm here."

"Tch—" He commenced weeping in abundance, akin to an overflowing sink.

"Nathan, i won't let anybody hurt you anymore. I promise." Her right hand reached behind his head to guide it toward her, pressing it snugly against her delicate physique.

His nose nestled into the crease of her cleavage, seeking refuge. She'd send him flying across the room under different circumstances, but she was fairly conscious he had no deviant intentions. This was just a child struggling to find comfort anywhere he could.

His hair felt soft against her fingers, not the coarse, sticky texture she expected to find—She thought he used gel to comb his strands. It wasn't the case apparently. Maybe hairspray. His warm tears began to inundate her flimsy white shirt, as well as the flushed skin right above her breasts. Max didn't mind. Let him cry. Let him finally exteriorize his agony. Her slim arms crushed him further into her, increasing the pressure she exerted on his body, her fever warming them both at the same time.

"You were right... My dad... I'm fucked." He whispered, tone clipped.

Had he found something compromising on his father? Or was he just raving? Either way, it wasn't really the moment to ask about this. The boy was currently going through a rough patch, the interrogation could wait. Truth be told, she kinda needed that embrace too.

Yes, she'd question him later. They had all night anyway. No urgency for now.

"I'll be there all the way. You can count on me. I won't let you down." She vowed somberly, lips moving about over his hairline and forehead.
I'll be your friend when the rest of them are gone.

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pFkGvVFdx-o ]

A tired looking young woman was smoking a cigarette amid Arcadia’s woods, feet dangling from the wooden treefort’s edge she was perched upon, moonlight looming above her head, filtered by the dense canopy offered by the nearby reaching trees. The ambient lighting gave everything it grazed an ethereal glow that she couldn’t stop admiring. She grabbed the forsaken cellphone beside her and reread the messages her best friend had sent her during the early evening, to which she had given no reply.

Still mad at me?
10/14 6:42pm

Not gonna answer, huh?
10/14 6:42pm

You’re not crying, right?
10/14 6:43pm

It's fine if you hate me. I deserve it.
10/14 6:45pm

I love you...
10/14 6:50pm

The girl exhaled dejectedly, craning her neck to observe the ether, where stars were sparkingly radiantly, similar to lucent pentagrams. Their luminosity was casting a pale reflection across the lavender part of her hair. Her sky blue eyes lowered to her arm when she felt something flutter
against her skin. A white butterfly shining among the night was resting on her limb, the small invisible hair along it standing tall due to the chill wind blowing across the forest. Expiring her last puff of fumes, she squashed her cigarette butt against a wooden plank before discarding it to focus back on the insect. In a matter of seconds, others met their comrade, seemingly attracted to the blue-haired adolescent. Getting up rapidly, Chloe soon found herself surrounded by a swarm of beaming moths, some of them relaxing upon her flesh and clothes.

She had no idea what was happening right now, yet the scenery was positively striking.

"Butterflies are omens of transformation and rebirth."

The city I was born in, I left a long time ago
And we lost touch, grew apart, my friend
My heart's an old pole dancer, troubled romancer, you know
It's a subway chancer, a question with no answer

Wrapped in the darkness of the boy's room, Max and Nathan stared at each other pensively. She knew the Prescott heir wanted to confess something important from the way he was hunched, bum leaning on the edge of his leather couch, digits drumming against his thighs apprehensively. After a thorough deliberation, he fetched a paper from his pockets, handing it to his female classmate, whose eyes perused the white sheet readily. Her pink lips parted and a pair of cerulean orbs widened.

"You found it." She whispered once her visual review was finished.

Out of the blue, Victoria barged into her best friend's bedroom, the door creaking open in a booming ruckus.

"Nate, I heard there was a fight—" She halted at the sight of the revoltingly battered rich kid.

The habitually snotty blond looked positively sickened by the state Nathan was in, close to tears even.

Maxine hid the note behind her back hurriedly as the three individuals glanced at one another questioningly.

And when we age shed our skin and grow
We shed our layers, spread our wings and go
My heart's an old black panther, corrupted financer, you know
It's a troubled romancer, a question with no answer
Seated on a bench aside his cheerleader classmate, Warren was desperately holding his head between his hands, visibly mortified by his anterior deeds. The lamp post next to the two adolescents was illuminating the vicinity of the dormitory's front yard. Not far from them, a squirrel was vaulting incessantly, striving to capture the brilliant fireflies hovering above its head. The animal seemed unmindful of the teenagers discomfiture. The athletic girl's right hand was stroking the boy's back.

"I fucked up." He admitted solemnly.

"Everything's fine. She said she loved you, i'm sure you're already forgiven." Reassured Dana.

"She's right. It was unnecessary."

"Nathan isn't the easiest person to interact with anyway. You're not the first person who wanted to punch him, believe me. We all make mistakes, Warren. You probably thought you had a good reason to do it at the moment." Justified the ponytailed girl.

"But i didn't. He didn't do anything wrong this time. It was a gratuitous act of hate. Something he would do."

Come meet me by the river, see how time it flows
I'll meet you by the river, see how time it flows
Come meet me by the river, see how time it flows
I'll meet you by the river, see how time it flows

Miles away from here, at one of Arcadia Bay's gas stations, David Madsen was interacting with the location's plainly-dressed owner.

"What do you mean somebody already came for the footage?" Repeated the man with a dark mustache.

"A teenage girl. Told me one of her friends got kidnapped at a party and that her abductors may have stopped here that night."

"Can you describe her for me?" He requested, face scrunched up due to this last-minute complication.

"A little brunette, bob-cut." Described his interlocutor, hands gesturing to the middle of his neck to demonstrate the hair length of the mysterious stranger. "She said she studied at Blackwell. I think her name was Max."

"Shit!" Madsen swore as he nabbed his blue "security" cap and took it off his head.

"Listen, i'm sorry but i'm supposed to close up at this hour... We're nearing nine already." The guy whose tag spelled "James" shooed him out politely, receiving a glare in return.
Oh, now the river runs away but I chase it
Time holds no fear when I turn round to face it
Oh, now the river runs away but I chase it
Time holds no fear when I turn round to face it

A black and white bunny was observing its owner from behind the green bars of its cage.

"Pater noster qui es in caelis..."

The girl was knees deep into the sheets of her bed, facing the wooden cross hanging on her wall, palms joined in prayer, eyelids sealed in concentration.

"Sanctificetur Nomen Tuum..."

The critter was used to this sort of ritual, it occured every night after all.

"Advéniat Regnum Tuum..."

But tonight, the sweet student seemed very determined.

"Fiat volúntas Tua..."

It was the third time the blond parroted her routine latin mantra. That was unusual. Once normally sufficed for the Marsh teen.

"Sicut in cælo, et in terra..."

Perhaps she feared something consequential might happen in the days to come...

Chapter End Notes

So, only eight chapters to go! Nine if i decide to separate the epilogue from the ending chapter (which will most likely happen).

I'm excited to finish this guys! Not in a "i can't wait to get rid of that shit" kinda way, but more in a "i really like doing this" kinda way :)

Next chapter, Nathan goes to his lawyer for help, his feelings about his father's involvement in the dark room are further explored, the winner of the contest is announced by Jefferson, more Chloe, a bit of Sean, lots of other characters, and finally, some Caulscott steaminess ;)

There is absolutely nothing around her but that colossal religious building, its steeple ostensibly towering all the way up to the sky, its bell's shrill ringing erupting ear-splittingly as it sways in haywire fashions. The church's contours are blurred by a glaring light from which the provenance is impossible to distinguish. It seems too white and artificial to derive from the sun though. Samuel is standing on the concrete stairs, alongside the structure's immense entrance, hands linked in front of him passively.

"You're late, young Max. Everybody's waiting for you inside." He informs calmly, as if this encounter had been scheduled beforehand.

His face is shadowed by the large shade the edifice's pointed roof is casting along the ground, the custodian confined amid its trajectory.

The giant double doors open of their own accord, a grating squeak echoing from their motion. After a rattled glimpse at this foreign version of the Samuel she normally loves, she enters with a chary step. The interior is precisely what it should be, at the exception of one or two minor details. The benches are filled to the brim by a familiar, yet rotting audience. All the people who died because of her. Bloody and decomposed. Her last diner nearly travels back up her throat, her entrails wringing around themselves torturously.

Each pair of eyes—for those who weren't missing one, or both—were focused on her person. Their wide grins almost disturbingly reached their ears. Those zombies must be happy to see her. For hearty or ominous reasons, who knew? Warren and Joyce—sitting at the front row—are charred from head to toe, the sight making her eyes prick. Deep down, she grasps their appalling state is due to the explosion of the diner they were barricaded in during the storm, the one she stopped by dispersing sand across a gasoline trail. Not here however. Not in this plane of existence. Or maybe nightmare. Everyone died hither.

"We are gathered here today to pay our last tributes, and final farewells, to the memory of Chloe Elizabeth Price, young daughter of Joyce and William Price, tragically murdered by her horrendous best friend, Max Caulfield."

The girl's heart races madly when she spots the open casket behind the declaiming priest. She can't see its content from where she is, but she has the gnawing feeling she's been a spectator of this scene in the past, under alternate circumstances. Being Chloe's funerals, Max doesn't want to relive this, especially in this twisted and unrealistic simulation of her most precious friend's demise. Or its aftermath, to be more accurate. Her feet proceed onward, and she realizes the red thing under her shoes leading to the altar is not a carpet, but a large trail of blood.

Her sickness throbs harder. Gives her pause.

"But who hasn't she killed, am i right? I think i speak for all of us here when i say she did quite a number on this town." Giggles the old clerk.
The attendees smile never falter, neither does their piercing stares.

"Who would have thought we would die by the hands of a cruel, selfish little girl..." His aged, wrinkled hand elevates, gesturing in her direction. "Why don't you take a step forward, child? Say goodbye to your friend one last time?"

Her body reacts on its own, she doesn't have a say in what happens next. The walk to the coffin is short and uneventful, until she's face to face with the corpse of a bluish, lifeless Chloe.

"Take a good look at what you've done."

The bullet Nathan had shot left a gaping hole in her stomach. Bullet wounds weren't supposed to be that big, right?

"I... I didn't do this." The living teen objects, swallowing the lump blocking her windpipe agonizingly.

"No? Does it help you sleep at night, the denial? You wouldn't be here if it did." He points out knowingly. "You're the one who deserves to be put in the ground. Not Chloe."

Her heartbeat is pounding in her eardrums by the time the priest approaches her, a heavy foreboding aura surrounding him. When she twists around, the audience is on its feet, advancing toward her in a similar manner. A voice she hasn't heard for a long period reverberates in a very nigh circle around her.

"Max... Max..."

A rugged palm on her shoulder drives her to leap in alarm—she thought the old man finally got a secure grip on her—yet when the limb rotates her, the welcoming face of an intact William greets her, simper warm and balmy. She's not in that cursed place of worship anymore. Instead, the lighthouse comes into view, then the oft-encountered cliff. The comforting landscape painted behind Chloe's dad eases the too acute jolts of her most vital organ.

"W-William?" she tries weakly, unsure if this is another sadistic trick of her mind or not.

"Hello there, youngster." He beams, as joyful as the last time she laid eyes on him. "You alright? You look a little pale." His grip stiffens with concern for her well-being. "Why don't you sit down, hm? Get your bearings." He invites her on the bench located in her back.

"You—you sound so real..." She reflects as she installs herself on the large wooden seat, the man following suit.

"That's because i am. I saw your dreams were getting a little too dark so, i thought i'd come to the rescue." He says in a light tone, as if the situation was actually funny. "Damn, how you've grown!" His gentle blue eyes roam her frame with astonishment. "You're an adult now. It's so weird seeing you and Chloe turning into women."

"Oh William, i am so sorry... I tried to save you, but..." she weeps remorsefully.

"You have nothing to feel guilty about, kiddo. I'm glad my daughter has you to protect her now that i can't." He sounds so sincere she almost wants to believe him.

The young Caulfield wipes her face with a trembling hand. "I don't think i'm doing a great job when it comes to saving anybody."
"Nonsense. I'm very proud of you, Max. Don't forget that, okay?"

His sentence sounds so final her angst rises at the prospect of him leaving so soon.

"Oh," he jiggles, temporarily jerking his head away from her to look somewhere else, "somebody wants to talk to you. Time to go."

"Wait!"

Too late. William is gone the next second. Max lingers in the same area, some technicalities diverging from earlier. The very atmosphere seems to be pulsating, her body responding to the call it continuously emits, unsullied air inflating her lightened lungs. She knows this feeling by now. Just like those human shaped shadows that are staring at her from their standing position while her bum is still glued to the lighthouse's bench.

One of them, arraying a feminine silhouette, is right in front of her, upper body slanted toward her own as if to take a closer look at the adolescent. When she opens her mouth, her voice is the same intangible, echoey sound Caulfield kept hearing in her dreams since last week.

"Keep going, child. You are on the right path. And..." The faceless figure leans closer, her dark hand grazing the girl's cheek in a tender manner. "Do not let yourself wander into the dark." She cautions, her index and middle fingers poking the teen's forehead meaningfully.

Maxine's head brusquely jolts from the furniture it was resting upon, desk a mess of notes and papers, Nathan's laptop's screen black from disuse. She must have fallen asleep after spending the whole night searching informations on the list's names. One of them was residing in Arcadia Bay. Someone else than Sean. There was a high probability that guy was the one Kate had encountered at church, which meant this fucker was extremely close to them. That didn't bode well in Max's book.

The first thing she senses is the caustic tingling in her eyes from lack of sleep. It takes some time, but she ultimately remarks the sheet covering her shoulders. Nathan must have placed it when he woke up and found her snoring on his keyboard. The boy proved more and more caring as time flitted. The freckled investigator rises, the black office chair screeching along the carpeting in her wake. She's manifestly gonna have a hard time processing the events of the day due to her somnolent disposition.

Good job, Max. You're gonna zone out through the whole day.

 Conjuring up the visions of her recent dream, a deluge of questions ascend her overworked brain. One in particular catches her attention. The dark place these shadow people mentioned... Was it her own mind?

To state yesterday was eventful would be a euphemism.

She hoped Victoria wouldn't go to war against Warren for trying to disfigure her best friend. The girl could be quite shabby when she put her mind to it. Maxine had no idea what Nathan had told the blond, hadn't asked any question on the subject by respect for their privacy. Last night made her realize that Chase probably didn't mind her hanging out with Nathan as long as she didn't dethrone her from her best friend's status in the boy's heart. Which would never happen. Victoria could rest easy. The two adolescents were barely beginning to enter a stage of awkward—and
unsought—friendship. A friendship sprinkled with strange bits of physical attraction. No. Scratch that. Hormonal would be a better term. Her growing endearment for the pigheaded Prescott was scaring her beyond belief.

Putting Nathan to sleep last night brought her back to the first Monday evening of their actual timeline. Where she had done the same, but with varying methods. She did turn on the whale songs he found solace in, but she hadn't stayed beside his bed to whisper reassuring nonsense to him. No, she had climbed into bed with the teenager and embraced him until he fell into a somewhat peaceful slumber. No protests on his part, which had greatly amazed her. She would have surely joined him in Morphe's arms had she not fight her weariness like a tiger attempting to evade its cage. The Prescott roused protective compulsions within her as of late.

She has no inkling if this is a good sign for their forthcoming collaboration regarding Jefferson's downfall. It could also complicate matters tremendously.

He probably thought she hadn't seen it, but she caught a glimpse of him storing his gun in his nightstand's drawer after discreetly pulling it out of his pants when they had retired to his room. That meant he had it during his fight with Warren. That he hadn't used it.

Her pensive blue gaze strays from the young man's unmade bed to settle on the game changer list overturned on his desk. Their teacher wouldn't be the sole victim of their plotting, his father would be embroiled too. Her phone vibrates against her thigh, gadget rammed into her dark jeans' right pocket.

Nathan.

U awake?
10/15 8:58am

Yes
10/15 8:58am

Shower. Parking lot. Move it.
10/15 8:58am

"Coming..." She drawls tiredly after stretching out, heading for the chamber's door.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fPXDcNhHqlU]
Four men. A downtown office. One of them sitting behind a messy desk, three others aligned ahead of him, similar to pawns ready to be used and sacrificed. Radiance of sunlight erupts behind the business man, filtered by his massive bay window, projecting luminescent glares upon his pink-tinted glasses. He exhales tiredly, evidently fed up with something. A predicament the three galoots before him might have something to do with. The band of henchmen doesn't look what you'd call ecstatic either about this high-strung confluence with the big shot contemplating them.

"You had one job." The latter speaks with the tone of a parent scolding misbehaving children.

A golden name plate with an inscription stating "Sean Prescott" was taking center stage on his mahogany secretary.

"We did as you asked, sir. It doesn't work." Defends a blond hillbilly guy. "The animals, they're too smart. The traps won't work on them, nor the poison. And those fucking Natives keep getting in our way—"

"The Natives?" Parrots their almighty superior, whose words seemed to be law in this room.

"Yes, sir. Those who live in the reserve nearby. You know, the stupid hippies who sued you for the construction. They chased us out of the woods." Tells the smaller one, brown locks falling in his face.

"How many were they?" Interrogates the spectacled boss.

"Two. A boy and a girl. Pretty young." Discloses a redhead, palpably the brain of the party, stuck in the middle of his two simple-minded colleagues.

"You're telling me you took to your heels because you were scared of two little kids?"

"They were armed, sir. We couldn't do anything. You know those savages, they're trigger happy when it comes to their territory." Sums up the towhead again.

"So how are you going to fix this gentlemen?" Wonders their employer, elbows propped onto his desk, fingers tightly entwined, emanating a severe aura of resentment.

"...Should we kill them?" Proposes the most moronic individual.

The Prescott massages the bridge of his nose between a large thumb and index finger, striving to keep his cool. "Do you ever use your brains you dimwits? You really think going around town murdering people is a good idea? I wonder how the police would react..."

"But you own the police, sir." Connotes the dark-haired guy, pulling no punches.

"That doesn't mean i need morons like you bringing more attention to our affairs. Things like this are bad for business."

"What do you suggest we do then?"

"Send them a warning. Scare them. Just get the message across. Simple as that. It shouldn't be so hard, dammit. This is supposed to be part of your qualifications." Berates the oldest of them all, beside himself with frustration.
"We're very sorry for the inconvenience. We'll do our best to make up for it." Apologizes his interlocutor with flaming tendrils.

"Yes you will. You better not disappoint me again. The construction resumes today. If i learn of any more complications, i will hold you personally responsible, do you understand?"

"Yes, sir." The three answer in flawless synchronicity.

"Off with you." He dismisses his incompetent clique with a single wave of his hand.

Subsequent to their departure, the television that had been turned on this whole time gloms his attention, an intriguing morning news broadcast presently on air. An attractive brunette clad in a white button-up topped by an onyx blazer was reporting her latest, juiciest Arcadia Bay scoop without any pause.

"Arcadia's police department has informed your local news channel of an assault that occurred in the course of Sunday's afternoon. A forty-five years old junkie attacked an innocent man who was resting in his RV, near the beach. The assailant was apparently attempting to steal money from the victim, who received a non lethal wound to the abdomen after resisting his threats. The lucky man was saved by two courageous young women who didn't hesitate to fly to the victim's assistance the moment they heard the nearby commotion. One of them was identified as Maxine Caulfield. You might recognize this girl from the Blackwell suicide attempt that occurred last week. The heroic teenager was the one who helped her depressed classmate down the school dormitories' roof, preventing the tragic death of her friend."

The picture of a young girl comes up on the screen, occupying half of its width. He knew this one. He recognized the clothes, and the name. Principal Wells had gave it to him when he asked him who was that teenager with the hoodie who came up to him with a napkin, just to disengage from their conversation with a bleeding nose soon after. He hadn't had a good look at her face though, until now. Sean glanced down at his fingertips, recalling the way the pure red liquid had looked on his skin, how he had gotten rid of it with the help of his embroidered handkerchief once she had took off, how the student seemed to purposely conceal her eyes from view.

She had been the only one to offer him assistance when that drink had been spilled all over his head by a mysterious source, and from what that reporter was saying, reacting fast was an habit of hers apparently. Ray had told him she was one of Jefferson's apprentices, a favorite of his actually. His son had never mentioned this girl as far as he could remember, which was weird. Nathan had a serious tendency to get jealous of anyone that caught the eyes of the people he admired. Like his teacher. He should have nagged him about her by now.

"Seems like Arcadia Bay found itself a new superhero. Latest reports indicate that the victim is miraculously alright and has already quit the hospital to return to his everyday life. Steven, the aggressor, is still being detained by the cops for assault in the second degree."

Nathan is there when she arrives at the parking, back leaning against his car's door, hands wedged in his pants pockets, looking the cool guy cliché to the bone. It brings a smile to her lips. His face is still
bruised, but he appears in better condition than yesterday, both mentally and physically. The area is
deserted by human beings, but suffused with vehicles of students and faculty members, the latter
having their own "reserved" spots to park. She has no trouble recognizing Principal Wells' Dodge
Dart, the seventies automobile fitting the guy's old school vibe, which you could be observe daily in
his office, like that cozy chair Chloe liked so much. Moving past the retro relic, her feet conduct the
student to her awaiting colleague, whose nose is twitching from the plethora of dandelions tickling
his face as they drift through the crisp air.

"I'm going to see my lawyer." He announces casually after she halts two feet away from his
stationary form.

His lawyer? Nathan Prescott actually listened to one of her advices? Was the world ending?

"Now? You got an appointment with him?" She asks, clutching the satchel in contact with her hip.

"Yeah." His gaze is more grey than blue today, the weather maybe at fault. Weird. Max thought rain
caused certain types of eyes to turn greyish, yet the sky was unduly cloudless and the sun was
already burning bright.

Her head transiently dips to the asphalted ground, sheepish under the poignancy of his stare. "Oh...
That's good Nathan." She salutes his wise decision. Things get silent for a short period of time
afterward, the boy internally mulling over something.

"Wanna come?" The overture slips out confidently, voice unwavering.

Her heart skips a beat. The suggestion oddly sounds like an offer for a secret tryst, which is totally
absurd knowing the importance and gravity of the rendezvous. She can't help getting flustered at the
delusive idea anyhow.

Snap out of it, Max!

"Uh... I—You want me to come with you?" She articulates unintelligibly.

His trademark scowl begins to resurface. "What do you think dumbass?"

"But i..." Her fingers tighten around her bag's strap, "i got Algebra right now..."

"Who cares? Skip it." He solves her problem at once, or so he presumes.

Sounds simple coming out of his mouth.

"I don't know... I don't wanna get in trouble. I'm surprised you'd want me to tag along actually..."
That was a very transparent attempt at uncovering why he requested her company of his own free
will. Mental support? A need for someone who could testify about all the insane things he'd lay bare
to his defense?

Her reluctance to comply to his will seems to offend him right off the bat.

"Then go to your stupid classes." He growls. "I thought you said you'd be there all the way... You
said i could count on you." The Prescott's lips contort into a sulky pout, tongue poking the inward of
his left cheek. "Whatever." His shoulders budge up and down in defeat. "S'pose not." His face
turns away as soon as he's finished to peer at the distant line of trees.

Is he... pouting?
"Are you trying to make me feel guilty?" Maxine accuses with humor.

His eyebrows lift up, the young man unruffled. "Just reminding you of things that came out of your mouth. That's all."

*What to do? I wanna go but...*

"...Alright, fuck it. I'm in. Let's go." She decides to stand by her words, strolling pell-mell to the passenger's side to avoid his limpid irises.

They hop in his truck without further ado, silent as a grave as they both make themselves comfortable in their respective seat. They fasten their seatbelts, Max quietly observing Nathan adjust his rear-view mirror. The boy starts the engine and before she can say "wowzer", the red SUV is receding from her school. Soon enough, the panorama her window offers varies into a parade of useless but pretty trinket shops, liquor stores, cafes, restaurants and colorful houses. The nearer they get to the city's heart, the stronger the not so fresh smell coming from the harbor permeates the air. That's what happens when you live in a town whose entire economy relies heavily on tourism and fishing. You end up whiffing unpleasant fragrances while moseying across the streets. Absolutely charming.

The freckled girl fleetingly ponders why the boy appears dead set on going around in circles amid Arcadia's downtown area when they should already be out of the city. As though he's seeking a specific location. Maybe he had some errands to run beforehand. The limp feeling gradually submerging her body was annoying in itself, yet increased by the fact that she was prone to fall asleep during rides, she knew she'd have to battle with her exhaustion all the way up to Sherman's office. Let's hope the combination of fatigue and the pill she had ingested to fend off her fever after her shower wouldn't turn her into an ineloquent vegetable. Even if her poor diction wouldn't be the primary trait the Prescott's lawyer would be able to focus on with all the insane anecdotes they'd have to relate to the man...

Nathan's truck abruptly parks in front of a set of stores, including a fancy bakery—established right next to a gun shop.

*What the fuck America?*

Her stomach growls bestially at the first scent of baked goods—drifting from the small decorated building—making her flush from embarrassment and wonder if her traitorous organ has been doing this for some time without her awareness. The boy surprisingly doesn't tease her, leaving her nonplussed as he opens his door to exit the vehicle.

"Stay inside. I'll be right back." He instructs imperiously, sentence followed by a keen slam.

Two minutes later, Maxine is still waiting for her comrade to return. Her phone buzzes from inside her bag, forcing her to rifle through its messed-up content to retrieve the device. She cringes at the name displayed on her screen.

Sweetie? What's this about you saving a man from a junkie? Are you okay? Why the heck are we learning about this from the news?

10/15 9:48am
Relax mom. I'm fine. Nothing to worry about. And don't listen to the news, they tend to exaggerate everything.
10/15 9:48am

Maxine Caulfield you better tell us what's going on right now! You've been avoiding our calls all week! I thought you'd know a little text here and there to say you're okay and too busy to talk isn't what i'd consider very reassuring by now.
10/15 9:49am

But it's true though. I don't have the time. We'll speak later mom, i got classes right now.
10/15 9:49am

Why are you so snippy? Do i have to call your principal to talk to my daughter? You know i'll do it!
10/15 9:50am

Be my guest. Love you mom! xomaxo
10/15 9:50am

Oh!!! Just wait until i get you over the phone young lady!
10/15 9:50am

Sorry, mom. I promise i'll make up for it once this is all over. I should probably avoid Principal Wells in the meantime... The poor guy's gonna get an earful... At this rate, he's gonna end up cursing the entire Caulfield lineage.

When she lifts her head from her cellphone, three men were strolling past the Prescott's SUV, chatting among themselves. A lanky redhead, a dirty-looking blond, and an average brunet. The group suddenly comes to a halt when they espy the vehicle, a glimmer of recognition shining across their pupils. The art student has had a good radar for bad people since she was born. Yep', that early. And it's been beeping relentlessly since the small crowd appeared in her line of sight.

"Hey look! Isn't that the kid's car?" Exclaims the brown-haired one, checking the licence plate.

"Ohhh yeeaah, and there's a little girly in there." Sneers the ginger, examining her painstakingly.

"Oh no, did he found himself a girlfriend? How cute!" Gushes the towhead idiot while she presses herself further against her seat.

Someone clears its throat, causing them to spin around to see who had broke off their trivial blather.

"Hello, Nathan." Respectfully bids the one with auburn tresses.
"I bet my father would be happy to know his minions are lollygagging 'stead of doing their job." The male teen portends, brows furrowed at the nuisances.

They all share a perturbed look. "Eh, no need to play tattletale, kiddo." The light-haired one essays to mollify his interlocutor.

"Wanna get fired you morons? Get out of here before i loose my patience!" He barks cogently.

Max watches the three idiots cack-handedly scuttle back to their truck, finally noticing the heavy-looking sack one of them is holding in his back. She squints under the blinding sunrays, detecting what she believes to be movements within the container.

Is there something moving inside? ...What the fuck?

Nathan storms in, distinctly pissed off, and restarts the motor. The overwhelming sounds of the outside world wear off as he slams his door shut. The girl still has her attention fixed to the bizarre troop when she asks her next question.

"Who are these guys?"

"My dad's goons. They're dumb as fuck, just ignore them." He says stiffly, engine roaring while he pulls out of the parking lot.

"They look like they're up to no good." She picks up right away.

He snorts sourly. "They work for my father. He's always up to no good." He tosses a brown paper bag she hadn't discern in her lap. "Here."

She barely inspects the object, then chirps. "You bought us food?" Even in her struggle to hide it, Maxine sounds a little too excited at the prospect.

"It's for you. Eat it." It did ring like a behest, not that she minded.

She peeks inside the shopping bag. Two perfectly baked pastries. The smell delicious, winding up her thankfully not obstructed nostrils.

The photography student can't restrain the smile that roves up to her ears. "Croissants?"

"Got any complaints?" The boy's blemished hands contract around the steering wheel.

Max blinks, taken aback by her new friend's thoughtfulness. "No, i just... Nevermind."

After a whole minute of stillness, he remarks she doesn't touch her food, as if she's waiting for permission when he already gave it to her.

His attractive orbs double-check the passenger in his rear-view mirror before prudently darting back on the road. "You finished your plate yesterday. You didn't throw it up, huh?" He attempts to bear out, thinking it was the reason why she denied herself the pleasure of those tasty treats.

She better eat it. Nathan paid a lot for those stupid things. He chose an expensive bakery just to be sure she'd have quality in her guts. And now her wide doe eyes are settled on his person, considerably inquisitive.

"Are you keeping tabs on me?" Caulfield suspects, the corners of her lips slightly lifted, drawing lovely dimples upon her velvety jowls.
"Don't be stupid, Caulfield." He scoffs, negotiating a curve with adroitness.

"I think you are." She says in a feathery tone. "And no, i didn't puke yesterday."

"Then eat your damn croissants and shut up." He dictates, jaw clenching.

Her face slopes a tiny bit to the side as she gauges his reaction. "You know Nathan, you can be pretty sweet at times." The pretty brunette smiles with grateful eyes.

"Tch—" The rich kid gradually turns bright red.

"Are you blushing?" She teases, eyes closed for better impact.

He clucks his tongue, irritated by her slyness. "I'm seriously considering leaving you in the middle of nowhere, Caulfield."

Ignoring his foul mood—which she had spurred voluntarily—she starts devouring the more than welcome viennoiserie that would at last fill her empty stomach. Not fond of the boring hush percolating within the vehicle, she turns on the radio, switching stations until she finally chances upon something tolerable. In her opinion, that is.

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T7OZ3MKJNas ]

Seemingly cheesed off by her selection—which was, she had to admit, completely out of character regarding his music tastes—Nathan peers at her like you'd look at a monkey traversing the azure sky in a spaceship. Bizzarely. She doesn't care, pays no heed to his dumbfounded stare, just enjoys the cute little tune that reminds her of her car rides along Chloe and William when the two girls were younger—armed with the daintiness of an ogre while her grown-ass gobbles down her free of charge breakfast.

**Hmmmm that shit is bomb!**

She fathoms he predictably won't bring up what happened last night with Warren. Was it humiliating for the boy? Because it shouldn't. She could sense his gratitude when they met up on the parking earlier, a reserved, muted sentiment he wasn't able to disclose out loud but could perfectly transmit by way of facial expression. She didn't want him to feel ashamed about yesterday's events. She still couldn't grasp if it was more due to the fact that a nerd he despised had beat his ass or because she had cradled him to sleep.

Furthermore, something Jefferson had unveiled to Maxine the previous day was refusing to withdraw from her mind.

"Creeperson told me he saw you taking pictures of me recently." She informs, mouth full.

Prescott chokes on his own spit. "What?!!"

"Wow, that's what i call a reaction. I guess he wasn't lying, for once. He totally sold you out on this one." The vista she witnesses through her window is radically stunning. They had long since egressed Arcadia Bay, the seaside road they were currently driving along foreign to her.

"I never did that!" He disputes, failing to stay stolid.
"Really? Because i remember a suspicious camera flash the last time we were in the diner togeth—"

"I may have taken some pics, but it was for... homework purposes. Don't flatter yourself."

That's the biggest bullshit she's ever heard.

"Uh, that explains everything." Her dainty shoulders heave nonchalantly. "You photograph me for homework. And sometimes pin it on your bedroom walls for the same reasons, i assume? Weird wonts, Prescott."

"Wanna talk about your overly nosy habits? Or maybe your weird ass behavior and nonexistent social skills? Pff—No wonder you're a loner."

"Oh please, you're not exactly a social butterfly yourself." She laughs, eyeballs rolling around.

"At least i'm not a quirky twee bitch."

"Nop'. Just an attention whore." His ensuing glare is a death sentence in itself. "Don't glare at me like that, i'm just kidding. Jesus..." She hisses, consuming her last chunk of croissant.

One minute later, Caulfield feels his singular stare through the rear-view mirror as she licks her fingers clean. The teen isn't thinking about food, that's kind of blatant. She's tempted to call him a pervert but the boy is the one controlling the steering wheel, and she doesn't want to die today, especially not in a car accident. That would suck for Chloe.

Rubbing her greasy hands against her jeans, she turns to her edgy companion.

"Need a magnifying glass?" Yeah, she couldn't resist for long.

Max giggles breathily at his ineffective glower. Speaking of the punk, the two of them really had to plan a trip along the Oregon Coast. It was indisputably picturesque. Although she's not sure Chloe's battered truck would survive the excursion. The landscape was more than worthwhile, from its exorbitantly saturated pigments to its postcard-worthy scenery. Everything looked so vivid you'd think somebody had painted the vicinity by hand. Meanwhile, Nathan is immersed in the bituminous road ahead of them.

She's too engrossed by the splendid tableau to remark none of them had spoken for a good ten minutes. The soundless ambiance doesn't last anyway.

"You should have slept. You're still sick." He shatters the circulating silence.

"Says the one who fidgeted all night. And i couldn't. I had to look up these coordinates."

He very briefly side-eyes her. "What did you find?"

"Exactly what you told me. All those guys... Man, this is scary. All those perverts, surrounding us from everywhere... I still can't wrap my mind around it. This dark room bullshit has a hella bigger scope than i could ever have imagined."

The teenage boy has no response to her statement. So she decides it's time to get down to business.

"I need you to go to the diner with me tomorrow. During lunch." She says with aplomb.

"I don't do dates, Caulfield."

She rolls her eyes. "It's not a date, twerp. Stop acting like you're irresistible. Chloe will be there."
"What?! Are you nuts?"

"It won't take long, I promise. Think of it as some sort of debriefing. I have to define our next steps, and we'll need her help."

"Don't tell me she agreed?"

"Um... we had a fight," the dead skin on her thumbnail is very interesting all of a sudden, "but she'll be there. Don't worry."

"Uh!" He chortles. "Trouble in dyke paradise?"

"What did I say about your homophobic slurs?" The petite photographer reprehends.

"What did I say about you not being in charge of what I say or do?" He retorts in a pale imitation of her own voice.

She expires air with the grace of a buffalo. "Will you come? Please... It's very important. I wouldn't take the risk of putting you both in the same place if it wasn't."

He sighs through his nose, indecisive. "...Yeah, I'll come. Now stop bothering me with your freaking Chloe."

Before they know it, they arrive at destination. Exiting the car after collecting their respective stuff, they cross the parking and trot toward the entrance of the modern edifice—taller than anything you could find in Arcadia—side by side.

Nathan penetrates the complex like a king marching among commoners, Max hot on his heels, not knowing where she fits in that sordid picture. Was she the lackey? Maybe the jester? Something unimportant and ridiculous nonetheless. From the looks the employees send them, they're clearly familiar with the Prescott offspring. And they don't seem too happy to see him...

The boy exchanges a dozen words with the receptionist for merely an instant before the woman directs them to a nearby set of chairs. A sort of waiting space in all likelihood. Unfamiliar to the concept of patience, the short-fused adolescent spends his time tapping his foot against the wan marble floor. He stands beside his classmate's seated form, cramped to the wall, apparently unwilling to flop his butt down into one of these unsightly olive seats.

Now that she pays close attention to it, he stopped wearing his trademark red jacket since yesterday, trading it for a denim one instead. The other attire probably required a thorough washing. It looked nice too regardless, enhanced the color of his eyes. She could even allow herself the great sacrilege of calling him handsome.

"You're leering again." He tells her proudly, arms folded over his chest.

A snort. "Nonsense. Can't I look at you for even a second without you mistaking it for unconditional love?"

"Admit it, Caulfield. You want the D—"

Her cheeks burst into flames. "What?!

He smirks in a manner that grants her shivers. His pricey right Oxford shoe naughtily glides up her left calf, taking her by surprise. She looks down at their feet, scandalized. Was he playing footsie with her right now? Seriously?
"What the fuck are you doing?" She seethes as softly as possible. "Stop that!" She kicks his roguish foot away.

They were in a public place! Did he have no shame at all? The receptionist kept sending them weird glances!

"Are you blushing, camera girl?" To her misery, his shit eating grin doesn't fade.

She swears his face is a lot closer than it was seconds ago, her theory confirmed by the enthralling scent of his cologne abruptly infringing on her sense of smell. The bastard seems to be enjoying himself. And he looks good doing it.

Excitement pools in her guts, the sensation akin to butterflies fluttering around and turning everything they touch to liquid fire. She has no desire to be stupidly reduced to a sap ahead of a crucial meeting with his attorney. Bad Max! No, cross that out. Bad Nathan!

"This is all just a game to you, huh?" She assumes, gritting her teeth.

"I like games."

_Not when you're the one being roasted, jackass._

The door next to the reception slides open, and what Max assumes to be the lawyer's secretary takes a peek at them behind large round glasses.

"Mr. Prescott? Mr. Sherman is ready to see you."

Chloe Price was not in the mood. The first person to start shit with her today would be royally headbutted without restraint. No fucks given. Since she was at her house, the blue-haired girl thought nobody would have the opportunity to pester her at the moment.

Until a pair of robust hands bang on the table, causing a puny seism that forces her mug of coffee to wobble.

"What are you and Max playing at exactly?"

Mustache man. Of course. Chloe doesn't look up from her perusal of the newspaper in her clutch, not willing to deal with this parasite her mother had glommed onto years ago. It was her home, she could do what the fuck she wanted. If she didn't want to dress up and prefered to stay in her nightclothes all day, she would. If she refused to eat anything because she woke up with a specific desire for french toast but their freaking useless toaster was fried and no one has had the common sense to replace it, it was her problem. If she missed her best friend like crazy but didn't want to crawl back to her like the pathetic needy person she's always been, then she'd wait until she decided the time was right. The
teen feels as emotionally dried as the pitiful plant adorning the center of their table, and just as neglected as its thirsty fallen leaves.

"I just woke up. You know better than to bother me in the morning." She finally settles for a simple, even-toned warning.

"Your friend took important surveillance footage from the gas station! What's she planning to do with it?" Interrogates the bane of her existence.

Understanding he wouldn't go away so easily, she tosses the rag aside her jar of peanut butter, turning toward David to confront the balky man.

"What do you think, genius? She's gonna use it to bust whoever hurt Kate Marsh. And you better not start stalking her or you'll get what's coming to you. From Joyce, not me."

"Are you trying to intimidate me again?" He snarls.

The Price teenager huffs loudly before banging her head against the dining table with fatalism, her face persistently plastered across the furniture to block the exasperating ubiquity of her stepfather. Nope. Morning was not her thing. Nor were overbearing douchebags.

"Chloe," her mother calls from their staircase's last step, somehow managing to appear beside her in record time to hand over a crumpled page she doesn't recognize immediately. "I found this in your jeans pockets while sorting out laundry. You're lucky i always double-check before putting it in the washer."

Ahh... *That* article she had printed out Sunday morning prior to picking up Max from Shitwell Academy. She had lost it soon after and floundered to retrieve it, in vain. She didn't even have time to show it to the key player. Another grand exploit from her clumsy punk ass.

"Oh... Thanks." She eyes the page with earnest gratitude, Joyce's gaze resolutely fixated on her like she has something to say that she hesitates to let out. "Okay, you clearly read it. Don't deny it, i know you mom. Just say your piece."

"You've taken an interest in prophecies lately?" Unearths the waitress, resting her knuckles against the wooden table.

"Prophecies? What prophecies?" Horns in Madsen.

"An old Native one. Some sort of "Children of the rainbow" prediction, something like that." The blond answers studiously, like she spent more than five minutes perusing her daughter's stuff.

"Pff—Rainbow my ass. Kids are dumb as stumps this days." Grouches the security chief.

"It's warriors not children, mom." Corrects Chloe. "And no one asked for your opinion, David."

"Don't start you two." Sighs the matriarch. "Anyway, it's a pretty tale, nothing harmful in that." She shrugs before extending the paper back to its owner. "Here."

"It's not a tale, it's real." The punk differs while snatching it, not liking when people dismissed her interests as invalid drivels.

"Chloe..." The Two Whales employee shakes her head in mirth.

"Give it here." David filches the page from her fingers without asking for permission. "Let's see..."
His dark eyes skim over the text with an unconvinced frown. "When the Earth is ravaged and the
animals are dying, a new tribe of people shall come unto the Earth from many colors, classes, creeds,
and who by their actions and deeds shall make the Earth green again. They will be known as
Warriors of the Rainbow." He recites, his narration ending with a disdainful snort.

Joyce's left brow archs up. "Quite poetic, huh?"

"That's a load of bullshit if i ever saw one." Mocks the jerk, dropping the sheet on the furniture
separating him from his stepdaughter.

"You have not an ounce of fantasy in you, David." Notes her mom with an amused smile.

"Stop making fun of my hobbies you two. And you're too blind to see i'm right. Whatevs." Sulks the
adolescent.

"Don't tell me you believe in that crap? No wonder you got kicked out of Blackwell." Step-fucker
aims his sempiternal dig at her.

Sometimes, she wished she hadn't repressed from stabbing him on her eighteenth birthday. It would
have happened if Joyce hadn't been here to intervene. Chloe didn't know whether to be thankful to
her mother or curse her. She reminisces the cake, the colorful candles, the boiling anger, the knife she
had lifted on impulse, ready to strike. The ruined festive occasion.

"David, no. Be nice." Curtly chides the older woman.

"Really Sergeant Pepper? What about this, huh?" It's Chloe's turn to read her findings. "There would
come a time, when the Earth being ravaged and polluted, the forests being destroyed, the birds would
fall from the air, the waters would be blackened, the fish being poisoned in the streams, and the trees
would no longer be, mankind as we would know it would all but cease to exist." She slaps the paper
down, the sharp noise barely resounding in the air. "Doesn't remind you of a certain situation? A
certain shithole named Arcadia Bay?" She specifies emphatically.

"I didn't take my day off to hear this." He discards, whirling around to face his wife. "Joyce, i'm
going to the store to get more paint."

"Alright. William used "Midnight Blue", if you manage to find it." The woman kisses her husband's
cheek briefly as he ambles by her.

"What? Wait a minute, what the hell are you talking about?" Her daughter butts in, eyebrows knitted
in wrath of grasping the situation.

"David is going to finish painting the house." Informs the Price matriarch.

"Wh—No!" Bursts out the young woman, heaving from her chair. "Dad was supposed to do it!"

Her parent's eyes shut solely for an instant. "Your dad is dead, Chloe."

"I know that!" She roars.

"Then act like it!" Joyce finally breaks after years of hard endurance. "You say you know, but you
refuse to move on. You're stuck in the past. You need to stop, okay? That doesn't mean you have to
forget your father, or that you can't speak about him anymore, it just means you have to let go. Stop
resorting to outlandish ways to keep him alive. You won't let me change anything inside the house,
but what good is it gonna do to us? You don't need an unfinished paint job to remind you of your
dad Chloe, you'll never forget him, whatever happens."
The more words her mother unfurls, the more painful memories surge through her mind.

"Mom? Why are the cops bringing you home? Where's dad?"

"Joyce? Is everything alright?"

"Get inside, girls."

"Why are you crying, mom?"

"Max, please, get Chloe inside the house. I have to talk with the officer."

"Mom! Where is dad?!"

"It won't take long, I promise. I'll tell you everything when I'm done."

"What you've been doing all those years is just preventing yourself from growing. It only makes you suffer more. It makes me suffer more. Please... Stop holding us back." She implores, a sorrowful gleam in her eyes.

The teenage girl remembers the deafening buzzing in her ears as her mom revealed her father's car had been smashed in a terrible accident, that William hadn't survived and wouldn't be coming back, the way Max had clasped her hand under the table as they sat next to each other while listening to the horrible news, how the brunette had shed tears before Chloe even had the chance to comprehend the situation. Or more likely accept to acknowledge it.

"You know what?" Her present self utters with difficulty. "Fuck it." Her sky blue orbs are full of warm droplets that drive her to sniffle. "Nobody ever listens to me anyway!"

The rebellious girl rushes upstairs without waiting for a response she doesn't have the sinew to hear anyway.

"Chloe!" The blond's call rends the charged air.

"Just let it slide. She'll come around." The guy bolsters his wife, shifting on his jacket, keys in hand.

"No, David. It's been five years already. She still hasn't." Murmurs Joyce woefully.

The defeatist sentence is ensued by a loud slam which they identify as Chloe's bedroom door and a raging blast of punk music coming from the upper floor.

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FpHNlX0pPIU ]

"You two are fucking crazy." Officially states Sherman, who's pacing erratically from one end of his office to another.
Max and Nathan look at each other from the corner of their eyes, mentally endorsing the lawyer's statement. Crazy? Yes, yes they are.

"You barge in here with your face all fucked up," his hand gesticulates in whirling motions while pointing to said face, "along with some stranger i've never even met," he feebly indicates the girl on the chair next to his client, "and you tell me you want me to help you put your father behind bars?" He vociferates, flabbergasted.

They had not sugar-coated any of their confessions, to say the least. Hence the dramatic show their interlocutor was pulling off. They couldn't pretend he was making a mountain out of a molehill, their predicament was pretty austere after all, but this was not helping in the slightest. She feared it would push her classmate to retire further into the confines of his perpetual indecision. Maybe those guys were cut from the same cloth, and therefore had a very bad resistance to stressful quandaries.

"Didn't you hear anything we told you?" Rumbles the rich kid, arms folded over his chest, legs spread out and feet crossed at the end.

"Yes! Yes, i heard you! The drugging, kidnapping, picture trafficking, i heard all of it." The photographer's head was beginning to spin from watching the guy walking in circles without letup.

"And what?! You don't believe us?!" Angrily snaps her neighbor.

The man scoffs, eyes traveling to the ceiling. "Please, i've known your father for ten years, of course i believe you."

"Then what's the fucking problem, dude?" Argues the Prescott.

The unceremonious dynamic among them was a bit hard to follow for the female student.

"Did you think about the consequences for your family?" He finally ceases stepping all over the place to concentrate on his two guests.

"That's why i'm here, Einstein!" The lad quips, slapping his sweaty palms onto his armrests.

Maxine's cerulean orbs travel from one individual to the other, head slowly retracting between her shoulders in an attempt to make herself appear as small as possible.

"You don't know how this is gonna play out, huh?" Guesses the oldest of the three, glancing down dolefully at his regular visitor.

The schoolboy bides his time to reply, stormy gaze lowered to the floor. Max studies Scott with a curious eye, his dark receding hairline, his clever hazel eyes, the too long expensive grey pants falling onto his just as costly pair of shoes. He looks barely forty, maybe in his late thirties. She's always pictured lawyers as shady people who spent their days diminishing the impact of criminals wicked acts, lying about abominable crimes just to get food on their plates. But guess what? Someone willing to lie, and on top of that good at it, was exactly what they needed.

"Look, Nate." Resumes the professional. "I'm more than happy at the idea of your douchebag of a father being locked away, but you need to be aware of your options before taking such a drastic decision."

"Just fucking tell me already!"

"Your dad can't do business while he's jailed. Not even a little. Nada. He can't talk about it, he can't write about it, he can't mention it, hell he can probably get in trouble just for thinking about it. So
what do you think that means for all the companies he owns and the people he employs?"

"He's gonna lose everything?" Chips in Caulfield, who had been deadly mute up to now.

"If no one's there to take over, yeah, pretty much. Not right away, just over time."

But this little detail wouldn't blow their plans to smithereens, right? Right?

As that unanswered inquiry gives her the heebie-jeebies, the attorney carries on. "No more work equals no more income. Would your mom be able to—"

"My mom already has plenty to do on her own." Nathan interjects. "She can't take care of my dad's businesses. Plus we have more cash than we can count already, so whatthefuckever." He waves indifferently, face twirling in the window's direction so he could inspect the outside world instead of this narrow room that made him grow claustrophobic by degrees.

"That might not last. Sean is most likely gonna spend as much as he needs to with a team of lawyers to cover his ass if he gets in trouble with the law. And lawyers are costly, i would know." Scott refers to himself with both hands. "Oh, i'm sure it would take a lot more to dilapidate your family's savings, yet think about it... In a few years, without any money to sustain your crazy lifestyle, how much will be left? Who says your mom will even be capable of maintaining a job after all this shit goes down?"

Nathan exhales crossly. "So you're telling me i need to prepare myself for the eventuality of turning into a fucking peasant?"

Could it even happen? Like the boy said, their wealth was beyond adequate. So why fret about a family that has been living in clover for years?

"What i'm saying is, you need to ponder on this properly. Determine what you really want." Advises the expert.

"What he wants?" She interrupts with outrage. "That's all you worry about right now? His family's fortune? Excuse-me but, there's innocent girls who have been drugged, kidnapped and photographed against their will there. Sean and Jefferson have to pay for their actions."

"I never said the opposite, missy." He reassures, kind eyes settled on her. "The boy has to understand what he's getting himself into though. Doesn't mean i'm not proud of him for wanting to do the right thing."

*Then don't confuse him.*

He turns to his client once more, mien stern. "The topic of money aside, this is going to change your life forever, Nathan. Are you ready for that?"

From the miffed peep the concerned party sends her way, Max isn't certain.
A soft-featured miss is staring at her friend's fingertips tapping against her keyboard, fast as lightning, the sound of her typing echoing across the room. After sneaking into the computer lab for some tranquil time out away from the masses, she had stumbled upon Juliet writing an article about Pan Estates and Sean Prescott's recent fishy dealings, and decided to loiter to give her a hand.

It wasn't everyday that someone dared to speak ill against this family. Well, everybody complained about them but no one had the balls to make it public or do anything that could provoke their fury and have dire consequences for them. The camera girl had taken the liberty to get some food prior to her arrival and was currently sharing it with her toiling classmate. Kate was in good hands since she went to grab a bite at the Two Whales with Alyssa, so she needn't worry about leaving the girl alone. The little angel may not have resumed her classes yet, but she still had to eat, which meant meddling with phony student in the cafeteria. Maxine would have to remember to notify the teen to stay away from Jefferson before the freak eventually crossed paths with his latest victim. The mental picture filled her with dread.

"These are bank tranfers." Explains Juliet, pointing at the computer's screen.

Bank transfers that literally came out of nowhere. Or from the reporter's plugged in flashdrive, to be more specific. Transfers she shouldn't have acquired at any rate.

"I see that, thanks. The question is, how did you get your hands on it?" Snoops Caulfield.

Knowing the girl, she had almost certainly resorted to illegal means to obtain it.

"My aunt's a banker. Guess who's her most influential client?" The news writer singsongs.

"...Sean Prescott?" She tries tentatively.

Juliet starts producing bells sounds, which basically meant she had guessed correctly. "Bingo!" She congratulates, cramming one of their french fries into her mouth.

"She gave you access to his bank records? That's not really professional..." Upbraids the hipster with a confounded frown.

"Of course not, Max. Are you crazy? My cousin's a hacker in her spare time, pretty skilled if you ask me. Pretty helpful too, especially when she's her daughter and they live in the same house. She helped me get access to my aunt's personal laptop so i could rout through her documents."

Ding ding ding! Illegal means...

Max's lashes flutter like bats out of hell, eyes out on stalks. "Wow... I'm definitely locking my dorm room from now on. You're fucking scary when you put your mind to it, Juliet."

"Thanks, Max." Her interlocutor smiles boastfully.

It wasn't a compliment...

"So, back to Sean. My aunt said he received an important sum of money from a Norwegian company. See the millions right there?" A finely manicured nail taps against an exorbitant sum full of zeros. "That's it. Pan Estates' construction started soon after. And all the environmental issues that ensued. The fishermen say the Prescott Industry is contaminating the sea on purpose."
Zachary's girlfriend bends backward, her chair resting on only two feet due to her rocking. She stretches her arms high in the air as Max beats her brains out, sifting through her memories in a desperate hunt for solutions.

"I was at the protest Saturday. I interviewed so many people i lost count. I think everything is related to those estates, but... I'm trying to understand what he's gaining from this. It makes no sense."
Cogitates the neophyte reporter, head swarmed with puzzle pieces she's abortively trying to put together.

"Looks like a mini estate."

"For Sean, to our beneficial accord and future partnership. Let's give this town a new birth together, and may our affairs be favorable."

"...He made a deal with some rich foreigners."

"He's supposed to drive you all out of town to make place for them."

"What..." Caulfield begins, fleshy lips parted in reflection, eyes dimmed by internal conflict. "What if the guys who gave him this dough have special plans for Arcadia? Maybe they can't do anything right now because of the population, so they asked him to do them a favor. Some sort of partnership." She infers, submitting her reasoning to her friend.

"So? What kind of favor?" Juliet's chair noisily thuds onto the floor, the girl ceasing her swinging to listen more attentively.

"Sean turns the city to shit until jobs and ressources get scarce, then the residents are forced to find work elsewhere." Continues the wannabe detective.

"Okay but, not everybody is going to conform and move out of the Bay." Points out the blond. "Poor and middle class people probably don't have the savings for that." She underlines.

"Yes, that's why he's building those estates." Maxine swiftly grabs the adverts laying on their desk among a pile of notes and articles they were using for investigation purposes. "Look at the flyers: "Affordable luxury homes". "Coming soon to change the way you live". She repeats. "Cheap residences that common folk can afford to rent or buy. Those things are being build in the forest, or anywhere near the town's outskirts. He's trying to push people out of Arcadia's central point. He's assembling them in the same places. Perhaps those Norwegian guys need the space to develop what they want."

Would it work though? The protest from last Saturday did not occur without reason. People have cause to be angry. After her meeting with the old Native woman, Max had done some research on the matter and found out a part of the forest legally belonged to reserve territory. Including the old burial site the elder had escorted them to. Which wasn't that far off from the construction site... Sean wouldn't be able to get away with violating treaties and impinging on protected lands, right? The locals had filed a lawsuit against the Prescotts shady shenanigans, citing widespread destruction of tribal lands and natural resources, as mentioned the "Great Northwest"—One of Arcadia's local newspapers. Did they possess the wherewithals to win however? In too many cases, money had the propensity to put you above the law.

*I hope the dirt we found on Sean will prove helpful to them... Those poor people certainly don't deserve this bullshit.*

"Wait, how did you come to this conclusion? It's... actually well thought out." Compliments Dana's
best friend.

"I... have a bit more data on the subject than you."

"And where did you get it?" Meddles the journalist.

"...From a good source."

"Is that good source named Nathan?"

Welp' Max, you're fucked.

"...

"It's okay. After last night, I definitely know you two don't hate each other. But it's none of my business."

That's the first time I hear those words coming out of her mouth.

"You're not weirded out?"

"I was more scared that Warren was going to kill him than by seeing you helping Nathan."

When you put it like that...

"I'm surprised you're not more curious about all this. You usually hassle info out of people whenever something strange happens."

"Your reaction was normal, Max. And Warren did turn pretty aggro all of a sudden. He admitted he was the one who instigated the brawl when you left. Plus, I got juicier things to write about than a petty schoolboy fight, as you can see." She gestures to her work in progress with a mischievous smirk.

Max smiles and frowns at the same time, which must be a pretty weird result to look at. "You know Principal Wells is never gonna let you publish that."

"I did get away with that Vortex Club article." Juliet reminds.

Not by Victoria's standards...

"But it wasn't exposing the dirty laundry of the very guy who's been donating money to this school for years."

"Meh, he never sees them before they get published anyway." She shrugs dismissively, finishing with a hand clap that shows her indifference toward the guy's authority. "He'll have a little surprise and then he'll probably beg me to stop distributing them."

"And you'll comply?" Sneers Caulfield, already knowing the answer. Negative answer.

"Hell no! He has no right to expel me or punish me for this. Freedom of speech, Super-Max. And real reporters don't care about consequences, they just want to get the truth out there." Watson shoves her pen into her mouth, mechanically chewing on its end.

The brunette nods her approval. "We definitely need people like you in control of the media."

"I'm glad somebody realizes it. My mother says I'm too much of a snoop. She thinks I'll end up in a
police station one day if i keep following down that road."

"I'll bust you out of there. Pinky promise." Pledges the photographer, offering said digit to her friend who knots it around her own without delay.

"Thanks, Max. I saw you in action, i feel safer already." The redactor lets out a deep, contented breath while her shoulder blades hit the back of her seat anew. "This is gonna make a splash! I can't wait! We make a good team you and i, don't you think?"

"We do, indeed. But i already have a partner for things like this."

"The blue-haired girl you brought to the party?"

"That's the one."

"You two seem really close."

"That's because we are."

"Good for you, Max. Real friends are hard to come by nowadays. Believe me, i'm glad i have someone like Dana around."

Max glances at the line of newfangled computers and desks juxtaposed alongside them, musing how true that last idiom sounded.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c-bvY5xhrqI]

Powerful smashes resounded across the corridor's lockers. Nathan Prescott was furiously kicking the lower part of his own container, finishing with an enraged punch that sharply cracked his knuckles when it wound up near his padlock. He didn't care though. He couldn't even feel pain at the moment, the adrenaline pumping through his veins filling his wrath to satiety.

Everything was crystal-clear now, his insight much more lucid, his perception no longer biased by the flashy array of prestige his family name invoked. His father didn't keep the cops away from his Vortex Club parties to indulge his son, but for his own benefit. A simple stratagem to facilitate Jefferson's task in capturing young women at those little soirees. Without the pigs scouring campus, drugs and alcohol could flow freely, without hindrance. And the unhinged teacher could prowl the school grounds in total liberty, safely shrouded under the cover of his profession. The freak'd been his cahoots with his patriarch all this time! And he had been to daft to realize it!

He couldn't believe his fucking dad had the audacity to perpetually rail against him for his various failures all these years, using the pathetic excuse that he always gave him everything he wanted, including his stupid scholarship in this messed-up school, among other things. Like his little deals of narcotics with Frank, in which he employed that snoop of a cop to follow them around and keep an eye on his ass in particular. The asshole has been disparaging him since his childhood just for what?
Being the same as daddy? Like he could talk, that bastard! He was just as psycho as Nathan, if not worse! All his eccentric fetishes came from him!

His mother had no freakin' clue about Sean's doings. How would she react when she learned all this shit about his sick traffic of photographed schoolgirls? It would be alright if they had agreed to it, but it wasn't the case. Mark didn't want consensual, he didn't want them to fake it, the guy desired realism. Complete authenticity, and he was so picky that even the best actress in the world wouldn't do in his eyes. Nate knew his father didn't care about this aspect of the business, but the more realistic it looked, the more cash his clients were probably willing to pay. At least, that's how he explained it... How his dad came to dive into this unsavory trade.

The boy growled one last time before heading past the empty classrooms. Caulfield was the last rampart he could hold onto in hopes of retaining his sanity this days. She'd better not sever that trust. Not after what she said yesterday, not after her promise. Not after everything she did for him, and everything he did for her, even if those were only trivial gestures, they had done the job. They had brought comfort to both of them. He had tried to warn her at first, to push her away, to be as rude and nasty as possible to scare her off, yet did it work? No. Nothing seemed to work on that twee weirdo. Now he was hooked, and it was all her fault. So she'd better take responsibility, stand by him when he'd need it the most. Not let him down, like everybody else. Or he'd get back at her with a vengeance. That he swore.

Granted, when he looked back at the schmear of troubles they had gone through in only a week, he highly doubted she would betray him. But you can never be sure of anything, right? That's what his shitty life had taught him. Perhaps he would become well-versed in new things with her help now, more positive ones. Hopefully.

He was torn asunder from his pondering when he spotted his do-nothing principal, surveying his domain by idling right outside his office. The impotent guy noticed him straight off.

"Nathan? Come over here a minute." Wells beckoned him.

The concerned party listened and halted his course, knowing this stubborn fool wouldn't leave him in peace until he'd gotten his useless discussion. Raymond's shocked examination of his bruised features was baiting his foul temper to resurface however.

"What?!" Blew up the adolescent.

"Um, what happened to your face? Did you get into another fight?" One of the man's dark hands—both lodged onto his hips—surged forward to attain his face.

Nathan beat him to the draw and swatted his offending limb away. "Don't touch me!" He protested, tugging on the rim of his blue denim jacket to arrange it back to its original neat state. "What do you want?"

The principal's parted lips sealed up. "I wanted to speak with you. This is the second time you cut classes in less than a week." He pried, another unsuccessful attempt to stuck his nose into the boy's business.

"So what? Gonna expel me? The worse you can do is give me a stern lecture. And you don't wanna do that if you care about your subventions, old man." Threatened the teenager unnecessarily.

"Are you having troubles at home? You know you can talk to me, Nathan."

"Why? So you can rat my ass out to my father? Go play do-gooder somewhere else." He spat,
already walking away to flee the pest's presence.

"Have you seen Miss Caulfield?" Insisted Ray from afar. "I can't seem to find her and i have to speak with her too."

"What am i? Her fucking babysitter?! Find her yourself." Rebuffed the kid, from a remote distance.

He rounded the corner, disappearing from Wells' range of vision. He certainly wanted to converse with the girl about the classes she had missed this morning, ignorant of the fact that the Prescott was at fault for this.

Their little appointment with Scott hadn't really eased his worries, on the contrary, the points he had raised further complicated matters. What if all his dad's money evaporated into thin air as time went by? What would become of him? He had nothing else than his studies here at Blackwell, and he sure as hell wouldn't take over the family business. His mom would most likely lose her marbles after the trial's outcome, whichever it would be, good news or bad news, it would downright fuck their already rickety reputation. The Prescott Empire would crash, its long-awaited downfall finally achieved. Hooray! Yes, that's no doubt what all those Arcadia hicks would cheer. And his awesome—but oblivious—sister was too busy being away in her fantasy jungle to grasp that their name would soon be stuffed into a big pile of dung by those hillbillies.

Nathan wouldn't go back though. He'd do this, 'til the end. This option was still far better than staying trapped within his father's grip. Fuck him. Him and all his lies. Him and his nonstop manipulations. Him and all his poisonous gifts, all the beatings he received, the abuse the lunatic would dole out to him while making it seem like he was doing him a favor. He'd get what he deserved. Max—even if the bitch was away with the fairies most of the time—was his safest loophole out of this hell he precedently couldn't run from.

No fucking way would he release it.

The bell rings, springy students leaping from their chairs in haste to exit the room. The ambient light coming through the windows accentuates the cerulean shade of Max's eyes and for a dithering bit, Chase almost succumbs to the tentation of snapping a picture. The diffident brunette approaches her table with deliberate steps, stopping alongside her table as the blond shoves her notebook back in her purse.

"You're not gonna bite my head off, right?" Caulfield's soft voice queries, insinuating the rich girl must be mad about her crushing defeat.

Victoria rolls her eyes like the notion is the most ridiculous thing she's ever heard. "Oh, come on! I'm obviously not over the moon about it, but am i gonna try to murder you?"

She apparently leaves the answer to Max. "...Yes?" Suggests the latter.

The Vortex Club Queen half scoffs, half sighs. "No! Just don't ask me to be happy for you. I may be a bitch but i'm not a fake one." She sulks, bonny mouth pursed.
"Good." Smiles Maxine. "I like authentic bitches."

Chase gives her a funny look, eyebrows bunched together in a strange fashion. "You're so fucking weird, Caulfield."

As soon as she slips her bag over her shoulder, another towhead joins them, taller than the two.

"Wassup, Max?" She asks heartily, her flawlessly cut fringe impeding her view. "Good for you! I dig your picture, y'know. It's really cool." Her chin points toward the framed enlarged version of her submission to the contest, abandoned upon the winner's desk.

"Thanks, Taylor." The camera girl responds, truly appreciating the compliment.

The two trendy schoolgirls excuse themselves, Courtney presumably waiting for them in her car so they could go have a drink somewhere in town. Nodding in comprehension, Max watches them cross the doorway, mind topsy-turvy about the rest of her schedule. She really shouldn't have skipped on sleep last night. She massages her drowsy eyes, recalling how she had dozed off practically throughout the entire day.

She's still sufficiently alert to feel the suffocating presence behind her though, casting a human shaped shadow on the floor that mingled with her own shorter shade. Not wasting any time, she pivots until the overly fevered mien of her professor enters her line of view.

"Congratulations, Max." He felicitates, all sunny smiles and warm dark gaze. "See? I told you to have faith in your abilities."

Yes, because that's totally why you made me win the contest, shitface.

"So, i was thinking..." he resumes, understanding he won't get a reply other than her quizzical stare. "Since you'll need to bring a portfolio to promote your work at the exhibition, and considering i'm certain you don't have any, maybe we could have a drink at the Hip Bean Cafe and work on that. What do you say?"

Um, what?

Her lips sunder from each other, jaw entering an unperceived spasmodic trance. "You want to help me build my portfolio? Why not do it here, at school?" She fittingly interrogates.

She's under the puzzling impression of partaking in an old western movie, hand mentally set upon her imaginary colt—still tucked within its holster, ready to draw. How many holes can she drill into him before the dickhead falls to the ground? Not enough to satisfy her pent up ire.

"Well, i thought your victory deserved a special reward." Jefferson justifies. "Why not mix obligations with a coffee or dessert? Make it a little more fun... My treat."

A mental picture of herself standing in the center of a giant steel-jaw trap comes to mind. Her waiting for the teacher to step inside, until the contraption closes in on him, grinding him to pieces. What an enchanting image. He would be the one to move backward as she'd back him into a corner, this time around.

Caulfield has no inkling which is the best option: refusal or endorsement? "I..."

...Honesty don't know what to reply to that. The psycho is just full of surprises.

Her eyes catch movement behind the male instructor. Evil Max is there, leaning into the doorway,
sarcastically applauding her victory with wide gestures. Maxine hadn't caught a glimpse of her up till now. Naturally, the bitch had been in hiding, lingering in the looming darkness of her quasi-askew sanity.

_I knew you were there, you little snake._

"Alright. That would be... helpful." She finally murmurs, eyeing her other self prowling in their direction.

His self-assured smile proliferates. "Good. Go grab your pictures, i'll walk to the parking lot and wait for you in my car. You know which one." Jefferson implies, leaving the room in his turn.

Max just peers at the egress, lost in thoughts.

_Why do i always put myself in those freaking situations?_

Her cruel twin, who was busy circling her like a predator, halts suddenly at her side, slanting forward.

"What fun we'll have..." she hauntingly whispers in her ear.

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Max won. Whoopee... Now my folks can confirm how much of a loser i am.
10/15 16:02pm

You're not a loser, Vic. Who cares about that dumb ass contest anyway. Jefferson can't judge for shit.
10/15 16:02pm

That's really sweet of you to try to comfort me Nate, but even you entered remember? You're not fooling anyone.
10/15 16:03pm

Whatthefuckever brah
10/15 16:03pm

Don't "brah" me. Now Max is going to San Francisco with Mark, and i'm back to square one. FML
10/15 16:03pm
Nathan shut Hayden's bedroom door behind him, wedging his cellphone back into the back pocket of his pants. Apropos of the mad freckled hipster, he hadn't seen her around after their exclusive excursion to his lawyer's office. He knew she was attending her classes though, Victoria had just confirmed it with a series of resentful texts. He'd have to investigate what the crazy brunette was plotting to do about that San Francisco trip. Maybe she didn't plan to go along with it and he had no concrete reason to turn livid.

The boy pushed the door to his own den open, glancing down at the floor the moment he felt his feet walk onto something that produced weird rustling sounds. A white page, strewed with bits of handwriting forming an insignificant paragraph, was stuck under his shoes. Somebody had slid a note through the entrance's lower gap. He hoped it wasn't bad news.

"Hey, it's Warren. You're probably mad at me—with good reasons—so i thought it would be a bad idea to speak to you face to face. Nothing to do with being a pussy, as you like to call me. I'm sure you're not in the mood to see me right now. So i wrote you a note instead. I just wanted to say how sorry i am for yesterday. It won't make up for my actions, or the state of your face, but i truly feel shitty about what i've done. If you need a service, hit me up. As long as it's nothing illegal or too extreme, i'll do it. There. I did it. Sorry again. Have a good day.

P.S : Max didn't force me to write this if that's what you're speculating. She doesn't even know about it."

"Pssh—Weirdo."

Before he could ponder on the excuses of that pathetic little nerd who had mutilated his handsome face, his phone began to ring aloud. Staring at the name of the caller made him frown. It couldn't be. He hadn't got any news from that turncoat in more than a week.

He swiped his thumb across the gadget, leveling it up to his ear.

"Oh, it's you." Nathan said in a snide tone. "Why do you call? Feeling remorse about dumping your primary client like trash?"

He could feel the man hesitate for a split second. "You know it wasn't my intention, Nathan."

"Then why do it at all?"

His psychiatrist exhaled wearily. "I need your father's permission to take a step further into your treatment. Plus, what's the point of giving you therapy if his "methods" of education just screw you over anew right after? We're running in circles here. And he categorically refuses to meet me, so the situation can't progress. I've already explained my reasons to you, don't play stupid."

"So what's changed now?"

"From what i've learned, Sean will soon be out of the equation. He won't be able to stop me from treating you competently then."

The Prescott grimaced. "The fuck are you talking about?"

"Your friend Max told me everything. Well, assuming she didn't lie about your dad's... artsy
"What?!" He burst out. "That little—Fucking—URG—" He was slowly going on a rampage.

His interlocutor probably sensed it. "Nate, calm down. I suppose she was right, seeing your reaction. Don't hold it against her. She meant well. She was the one who convinced me to take you back."

That interpellated him enough to make him stop pacing in circles inside his confined room. "You're willing to see me again?"

"Of course. This fucked up dark room story changes everything."

The teen rubbed his forehead, head reeling wildly. "I can't believe she had the balls to do that behind my back! That sneaky bitch!"

"Eaaasy." Drawled the doc. "Listen, i called because i'd like to see you tomorrow. Why don't you stop by my office after school? I got extra work, so i'll have to tarry."

"Why? What do you wanna talk about?" He asked with suspicion, even if he already knew the answer.

"Isn't that obvious? I only want to help, Nate. Don't push me away. It certainly won't make things better for you."

"Fine." He mumbled inaudibly, voice strained and tinged with grudge. "See you."

He didn't get the chance to curtly hang up like he had intended due to his therapist addressing him anew.

"Oh, and Nathan... That girl obviously cares about you. Hold onto her."

He heard beeps echo over the line, sign that the older man had put an end to the conversation.

Nathan was beyond pissed at the girl's audacity, yet couldn't help mulling over his shrink's last phrase. His thoughts drifted to all the encounters he's had with the polaroid enthusiast over the course of last week. All the things she did to prove she could be trusted. All the stupid, sappy shit he had done when his precarious instincts screamed for him to comfort her. Why? Why get close to someone who had the potential to utterly ruin him? Someone who tended to throw herself into lethal predicaments on her own volition. He had promised himself to never trust anyone else during his miserable life, and there he was, putting his destiny into this fragile thing's hands.

That annoying, alluring thing that cared about him, like nobody else before her. It wasn't the same kind of support his sister or Victoria would provide. No, it was different. She was different. Perhaps he was too scared of Max turning into another Rachel. A mesmerizing, burning flame dying out in front of him. And he'd be powerless again, as he had always been. Maybe it was the reason he was so adamant at battling the overwhelming urges he had toward her.

This wasn't love though, only lust. At least, that's what he was urgently attempting to convince himself of. He wasn't infatuated with the hipster, so why make such a big deal about the situation? No need for that. Yes, the bitch was attractive—even that simple admission made him want to bite his own tongue—and yes, he wanted her. So what? She was clearly going through the same ordeal. Why fight it? Because of his never-ending obduracy? Her groan-worthy stubbornness? Fuck that!

Why should he keep restraining himself? He was a Prescott for God's sake! He had the right to take what he wanted. And if he wanted to thoroughly plough Caulfield into a wall, then he'd do it! Well,
as long as it was consensual, of course.

The boy took a lucid decision at that instant. A decision regarding Max, who was at the same time both the worst and best thing that had happened to him recently. Nathan wouldn't allow himself to wallow in "what ifs" for the rest of eternity. Not anymore.

Once he'd let the wolf within him out of his cage, she was gonna regret ever igniting those feelings inside him.

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FOLFICROMTA ]

Countless pictures were spread upon the round table of a sophisticated cafe in Arcadia's downtown area, copper sparkles of sunlight dancing along them. A girl with bobbed hair was watching them flicker athwart her teacher's glasses, similar to wavering flames. She was sitting right across the man, who seemed completely sucked up by his appraisal of her photographs. She didn't know what was so fascinating about them, it was amateurish work, at best. Her well-shaped chin was resting in one of her hands, the other closed around her untouched drink. A simple glass of water from which her eyes had not strayed from the moment that charming waitress had served it to her.

Her professor had took a sophisticated coffee, whose name she couldn't remember since she hadn't been listening to anything coming out of his falsely beguiling mouth. The pretty ponytailed server had been hanging on his lips though. That was a sad sight to witness now that she knew what sort of maniac hid underneath his impeccable layer of professionalism. She wondered how many women he had tricked with this fallacious projection of charisma.

"I think this one would be perfect as an introduction." He expressed, showing her a colorful polaroid that just screamed Max Caulfield.

She'd taken it soon after her return in Arcadia, taking advantage of the dazzling weather the sky had shared with her that sad, lonely day.

"You're the expert, just pick your favorites. I trust your judgement." She answered, speech muffled by the digits drumming against her lips.

A thin smile expanded his mouth at the tribute, which never withered even when he got back to his visual perusal, his hunt for the defectless treasure he seemed so sure to find among her crappy work. The only sincere thing about the guy was his esteem for her artistic passion. Her "gift". From his perspective, Max had a natural talent.

If only it were true...
Drag me down to the water  
And hold me down until im full  
Until I struggle no longer  
Until i've drowned in my sinful will

The woods seemed denser than usual. Maybe because the workers had the strange impression of being quietly observed from afar. If it had been the only bizarre thing occurring today, their Tuesday wouldn't be so bad, but the crowded construction site they were vainly trying to empty was just the last straw for them all. At their arrival this morning, they had stumbled upon an assembly of wild beasts that should have been frolicking in the forest instead of obstructing the zone, the multitude of creatures hovering around and staring at them valiantly, as if to challenge them to do something about it. Which they did.

To no avail, of course. Just like the previous group of laborers that had quit their unrewarding job before them. Well, from the information that had been given to them, the animals didn't use to stagnate on this land, they solely randomly attacked the poor guys without reasons. Not the case here. No matter what they attempted, those things wouldn't leave. A lot of them were simply laying on the ground, as though waiting for some mysterious phenomenon to unfold.

Deers, wolves, bears, coyotes, birds... Everything you could find in the woodland was present, from large to small. Such a sight to behold...

"What's the damn issue again?" Blared their foreman who had just drove up here after they had called him, desperately seeking assistance. "Will this ever stop?!"

"I think the scenery is pretty self-explanatory, sir." Replied one of his employees, mentioning to the furry gang after wiping some sweat off his forehead.

"Something must have happen. They look... I don't know, pissed." Said another one.

"I don't give a shit about their feelings. Drive them out." Ordered their supervisor.

"You don't understand. We did everything we could, sir. They won't budge."

"Yeah, we even tried more harming methods, but... If we get too close they become really fucking angry. Like, "i'm gonna tear your head off" angry."

"It's true, sir. It's too dangerous. We've exhausted all our options there, you have to believe us."

Their boss's face turned red from rage and frustration, the man holding his head between his palms in resignation. "FUCK!"

Bound my hands to the stake  
And set fire to the ground below  
Watch my skin bubble and burn  
Beneath the rising smoke


Meanwhile, the head of Arcadia's most powerful family was still at work, enjoying some of his favorite whiskey as recompense for his late hours at the office. The buzzing of the downtown streets outside the building could be heard from within. His most loyal bodyguard was impassively sizing him up, when he normally merely paid attention to him once they were alone and out of harm's way. So the man had questioned his employee about what was preoccupying him.

"I heard about the lawsuit, sir."

"Why does that sound like an apology?" Mused Sean, sipping on the amber liquid inside his glass.

"Well, those Native people are supposedly in their rights, from what i read. Meaning they're probably gonna win..."

The boss laughed, mouth closed but stretched out into a genuinely amused grin. "What do you think rules the world, Harris?" He uncannily wondered, slightly swinging his office chair from left to right.

His interlocutor seemed to reflect on the inquiry for a short moment. "...Money, sir?"

"Of course. And who do you think the judge will listen to? A bunch of conservative hippies, or a respectable, affluent man such as myself?"

"The latter, sir."

"Good answer. You see Harris, there's nothing in this world money can't buy." He explained, as if speaking to a child, hands swaying in the air with grace. "Especially people. Them and their so-called morals."

"Are you saying you never met anyone who refused you bribes, Mr. Prescott?"

"I haven't. My age says it all, doesn't it? Aren't you sad to live in a corrupted world such as ours, Harris?"

His bodyguard smiled knowingly. "It saddens me as much as you."

"That means not at all." Concluded the Prescott, arraying the exact same canny smirk.

"And you may kill me now
And you may hurt me so
But i will haunt you til the end is nigh
And you may hunt me down
And you may turn me cold but i will haunt you til the day"

Amid the pith of a little town nearing Portland's rims, a skinny redhead was patiently waiting for her parents to turn up. Her feminine hands kept trembling, light-colored brows wrinkling under the
oppressive stare of an adult man in close proximity. The shithead wouldn't advert his gaze, his gross green eyes checking her out from head to toe repeatedly. The girl had been told she was cute in the past, more than once, but there was a difference between glancing a bit and downright ogling.

She couldn't roam the streets of this city without seeing perverts at every corner now. Deep down, she knew she was being paranoid, but she couldn't help it. Not after what she's had to endure. Not after what she had learned in the course of last week. The thought of those depraved pictures of herself, hidden somewhere, in a place she would never find on her own, overwhelmed her with dread.

Akin to this asshole who still wouldn't cease his gawking. God, she wanted to smash his face across the bitumen under her feet.

"What?" She snapped. "You like little girls, you freak? Is that it? Why don't you take a picture while you're at it?"

No response. His eyes didn't drift away, only became more insistent.

So she violently kicked him in the balls. "Stop staring at me!"

The schoolgirl with flaming locks didn't care about the consequences of her actions. Even when her two parents materialized out of nowhere, rushing to the teen and her victim.

Her father grabbed her, holding her back from delivering another blow to the deviant man. "Kelly stop!" He chided.

She couldn't look away from her apologizing mother, who was too busy making sure that bastard was alright despite her daughter being right there.

"What the heck is wrong with you? Why did you do that?" Demanded her dad, turning her around until they were face to face.

"Didn't you see the way that pervert looked at me?" She yelled.

"Then you either ignore him or tell him to stop! You don't hit people like that, Kelly. It's wrong."

Her extremities curled into fists. "What do you know about right or wrong dad, huh?"

"What's with you? You've been acting weird for a couple of days now. Don't you think you're taking things out of proportion?"

Her breath hitched, an indignant snort escaping her. "You're gonna regret saying that one day."

She declared, eyes watering for a reason her family couldn't possibly fathom.

The irked girl hastily recoiled from her unbelievably blind genitors, arms crossed and pretty features distorted by wretchedness as her boots clomped across the pavement.

Chase me down through the fields
You got your hooves and i got my bare heels
Chop off my head to show the world
That i am no ordinary girl
"I wonder what she looks like." Said a Native male, face unblemished because of his young age.

His female friend shook her head, walking next to him as they neared his house. "She won't tell you, silly."

"Why not?" He whined.

"Because she knows you're gonna bug that poor girl if you learn her identity."

He sighed between gritted teeth. "Why does your grandma always treat me like a pest?"

"Because you act like one?" Suggested the beautiful woman in a light tone.

"Me? I'm a fucking angel!" The individual jested.

"Please, you keep giving her shit just because she moved out of the reserve. Your own dad did the same, but do you spend your time discrediting everything he says? I don't think so."

"That's different, he's a ranger." He pointed out, faking contempt to get on his companion's nerves.

"So what, he gets amnesty? You're so full of shit, Hania." She commented with humor as they approached the young man's porch, the sun's orange hues glittering behind them.

Something gave them pause however. Something horrible. A stack of animal corpses, piled over one another, right there above the stairs leading to his home.

The stench it was releasing was beyond nauseating, a myriad of flies already feasting onto the dead mass.

"What the—Oh my god, these psychos..." Swore the girl, a palm over her mouth to refrain from vomiting.

Her counterpart crouched down, frowning at the unpleasant essence and sight, to retrieve a note that had been left behind alongside the improvised sepulcher. "Watch out. Next time it'll be your little pet", it said in bold letters. They were plainly talking about his wolf.

"Those sons of bitches just crossed the line." The boy's pronounced jaw tensed as his fist crumpled the piece of paper.

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3LY3ftiLqmE ]

It was the first time she hadn't seen Chloe for an entire day since she escaped the nightmarish
timeline where her best friend was dead. Not seeing her shining eyes, impish grin and blue mane
gave her the feeling she was back in her previous hell. Sending a message to her associate to tell her
how much she missed her presence had concluded in utterly fruitless results. No reply whatsoever.
Well, at least she tried...

Albeit she had bigger fish to fry at the moment. Like that god forsaken rock she had spent the last ten
minutes impelling to hover above ground. Her days were too overbooked for her to find an
appropriate span to practice her new abilities. So here she was, resorting to those imprudent methods.
Right there, rooted on a bench facing Blackwell's main building. Out in the open.

*Not very smart, Max.*

The pressure constricting her skull was unbearable, perhaps a tad less excruciating than the sort of
pain her rewind made her endure nevertheless. It felt as if her eyes were prompt to pop out of their
sockets any second now. Not the most delightful feeling she'd had to undergo.

Extending her arm and opening her palm to take reception of the pebble, she intensified her focus
until it ultimately landed into her hand. No time to rejoice though, since a numbing pounding
suddenly assaulted her head, forcing her to let go of her influence on the solid thing, which plopped
onto the grass immediately. Blood leaked from her nostrils, forming a crimson trail that reached her
cupid bow.

"OW!" She whined, then grunted, "Stupid—", prior to throwing the poor stone far away in vexation.

*I suck hard at this!*

Shirty due to her mediocre skills, she wiped her face until no trace of exertions were left visible, her
subduing migraine receding by the minute. Footsteps sprang up near her stooped figure, ripping her
alertness from her inner rumination. Samuel was standing beside the girl, carefully considering the
student, a concerned air upon his countenance.

"Hey there, young Max. Looks like somebody is having a bad day." The custodian never failed to
catch on quick.

"Oh, hello Samuel." She muttered, discouraged. "You're not far from the truth..."

The man joined her on the wooden bench. "Seems like you have a lot of questions."

A group of squirrels nimbly gamboled up to them, drawing the two humans attention to their cute
little self. They decided to loaf around as the teenager poured her heart out to her male counterpart.
Maxine was used to this kind of things by now, so she didn't dwell on it for long.

"Too much actually. So much shit is going on in my life lately." She sighed.

His elbows were resting on his thighs, back hunched similarly to her. "I truly wish i could help you. I see
what you're doing. Eyes are set upon you, Max. From every corner of this town. They're waiting."

"Waiting for what?" She turned her gaze to him, expectant.

"If anybody knows, it would be you. My dreams tell me that." He apprised.

"Your dreams? I get really weird dreams these days... What do you see in yours?" She questionned
with interest.
"A lot of things. None of it really makes sense, but... As concerns you, i see oodles of animals surrounding you." He soughed in an habitual mellow tone.

"Yeah, that pretty much sums it up..." A short hush elapsed. "I met someone... very unique last week. She had tons of things to say about Arcadia. And me..."

She wished she could cross paths with that woman again. Would destiny commingle their routes? Or would she have to come knocking at her door? She didn't even know if she lived among the local Hopi tribe or by herself amid the city.

"That's good. You and Arcadia Bay are connected by time and tide. So, next time i have a question, i'm coming to you." He jested with a gentle smile.

"Sorry Samuel, but i don't think i have answers to anything sadly."

"The squirrels seem to think otherwise." He remarked, glimpsing down at the creatures.

Max's features scrunched up, her thoughts fuzzy. "You said i'm being observed, right? If i give them what they want... do you think they'll leave me alone?"

"You talk like someone who's being harassed, young Max." He chuckled airily. "Is that your impression?" He wondered, head tilting to the side.

"I don't know... I guess i feel like there's too much pressure on my shoulders. Recents events make it seem like i'm special... But i feel like we're all connected somehow... To each other, to Arcadia... To this damn huge thing that everybody can sense but no one can see..."

"You may be right, Max. My dad was a fisherman, and when i was a kid, he'd take me out to hear the whales sing. Now they... they just cry... For motives unknown to us. In all my years in the Bay, i've witnessed extraordinary things that are supposedly impossible. Coincidences do exist, but not in this town. Here, everything happens for a reason."

"Like this?" She mentioned with a forward nod, eyes set upon the ether.

Flocks of disparate birds were drifting through the sky, heading exclusively to the left, while the critters at their feet suspiciously bolted in the same direction. Like they were responding to a call. Summons of a greater nature than they could understand. The invocation of some mystical source. A slew of tremors skidded down her spine, goosebumps colonizing her slender shape. A frosty mist escaped her lips, the air growing colder as a result of the sun sinking out of view.

"Arcadia must be angry about something. Another message from the earth to get our shit together." He concluded, voice a stage whisper.

The enlightened fellow rose from his seat, casting one last glance over his shoulder, dark broad-minded eyes finding her glowing blue ones.

"Take care, Max. And keep listening to the animals. They're the only ones who can guide you." He counseled, fading-out among the deserted campus, the twilight cloaking his slow-paced evasion.

Max zipped up her burgundy hoodie. Where were all those animals running to? Her irritating phone chose this eerie moment to vibrate twice in a row.
"I know you went to see Jacoby." Nathan declares, tone dangerously imposing.

She'd figured he had rashly hurtled inside her room to pursue their strange sleeping routine at first, but his locution implies otherwise.

Maxine sighs, dropping the everyday apparel she was neatly folding before his arrival on her sheets. "Before you start yelling again—"

"I'm not going to yell." He cuts off straightaway.

In the blink of an eye, he's onto her. Blocking every viable chance of escape she was envisaging, one extremity on each side of her smaller figure—compacted against her writing table.

"Hey, wh—Nathan, wait! Stop it. You're in my space." She struggles to keep him at bay—her thin forearms upon his thorax merely preventing further nearness—without success.

"You like me, Caulfield." It's not a theory, only an allegation. That's the way he makes it sound at least.

A scoff. "A bit presumptuous, aren't we?"

"A bit in denial, aren't you?" He counters wittily. "Come on!" He insists after approximately fifteen seconds bereft of backlash. "You think i don't notice the way you ogle me?"

"Oh my—I do not!" She gainsays with a revolted expression, mouth agape.

"Oh yes, you do Max. In fact, there's times i feel like you're gonna jump my bones any minute." His nose journeys from her neck to her jawline, hot puffs colliding with the pink tissue covering her muscles.

She fears she's gonna fall backward and die by fracturing her nape against her desk. Just because his seductive wiles send her head reeling. "What's your point, Nathan?"

"Stop beating around the bush. If you want something, take it. That's what i do." He half advises, half brags, unbridled orbs holding her captive.
"Oh, really? And what do you want then?" Her lips are so parched she has to lick them, his eyes closely following the motion with a wolfish gleam.

"This."

The hungry pressure of his mouth against hers is all she needs for the integrality of her covert frustrations to surface in an ardent explosion. The boy doesn't dally—she would gladly pinpoint that he seems just as impatient as he claimed her to be if her lips weren't being savagely conquered by his—immediately choosing to entice her with his tongue instead, inhibitions out the window, thoroughly stimulating every senses she possessed. But Max doesn't want to stay passive and bend to his whim this time, she wants to participate, engage his ardor with some of her own, unlike their previous frolics in the locker room, which seemed to have occurred a lifetime ago after all those days of unresolved tension between the two adolescents. She had gained but a smattering of knowledge about kissing someone else since their last experience, and she intended to make good use of it. Even when his teeth were determined to nip her lips into submission.

His higher height is definitely an advantage he doesn't hesitate to employ, nor his greater strength as his hands hold her in place while brushing each available patch of flesh he can find in a conniving manner. She wants to touch too. To roam her hands over him like he's doing to her. Yet she's of two minds about surrendering to her desires and adventuring beyond his undefinable boundaries.

"Touch me." He incites, voice several octaves lower than usual. "You know you want to. I saw how you looked at me Sunday morning." His lusty stare is too much for her. "I'm giving you permission right now." He doesn't waste time recapturing her mouth in a trice once his proposal is issued.

And she needed it. Knowing his past, knowing him... She couldn't bring herself to do anything rash without his explicit consent. She wouldn't. His arrogance is slowly irking her, coercing her out of her mousy shell, compelling her to show him what he's in for. So Maxine caves in, dainty hands—unoccupied until now—spreading across his soft-textured shirt in the same way a butterfly would open its wings. She hears, feels, sees his breath hitch at her fondling. He's just as affected as she is by their proximity, the dance their lips perform together in a flawless rhythm that had been hard to find in the beginning. Everything spins inside her head the second her fingertips graze the hard planes of his concealed chest. A faint moan escapes her control at the sensation. Flames lick at her veins, heating the underside of her epidermis with molten fire that coils, and coils, and coils from the hollow of her belly down to the secluded place between her thighs.

Nathan also likes it, if the hard, shaky motion his tongue operates within her mouth is any indication. His trembling accentuates, filling the girl with pride at being able to sway the dogged teenager so easily. His vindictive nature doesn't delay seeking revenge though, calloused extremities venturing upward until his digits meet the incredibly smooth skin of her breasts' lower section. The jerk must know she doesn't wear a bra whenever she's in her pajamas. How he came upon this information however is a mystery to her. Thinking about it is more embarrassing than anything they're doing right now, so she pushes the question aside, saving it in a corner of her brain for later.

Max mewls unwittingly, instantly regretting the noise when he stops kissing her to leer down at his victim with a cocky grin.

"Horny, Caulfield?" She'd punch him if his tone wasn't so pleasantly sultry.

She can't see her face but she knows she's blushing madly. "Shut up." She groused.

He chuckles in a way that nearly makes her knees buckle before resuming their intense make out session. In a matter of minutes, he has her sprawled across her bed, his taller body on top, right knee sneakily lodged amid her quivery legs to rub against her intimacy. With his help, the brunette gets rid
of his annoying denim jacket, throwing it on the floor carelessly, then pressing her palms upon his back to squeeze him closer. The sound of their heavy panting is finally detected by her ears, her cheeks reddening further at the awareness. The feeling of his hardness resting against her thigh scares her a bit, turning her into a shy mess, because it forces the photographer to realize this innocent dalliance could quickly escalate into something none of them were ready for.

They desperately needed to halt their impassioned actions before getting carried away. Screwing up all the mutual progress they had accomplished in their unstable relationship wasn't part of her plans. Nope.

"W-wait..." she demurs, one hand on his chest to push the relentless boy away.

Nathan obeys without a fight. "Reached your limits, huh?" he inquires knowingly.

Maxine nods sedately, peering up at the Prescott in perplexity, surprised by his fast understanding of the situation. Perhaps they had shared the same thoughts during the latest moments of their steamy exchange.

Albeit the young woman panics when she watches him climb out of bed to shuffle toward her door.

"You're not staying?" The freckled girl wonders, trying and failing to dissimulate her chagrin.

He smiles smugly at her obvious disappointment. "I need a cold shower. I'll be right back, Caulfield." He reassures, quietly closing the door behind him.

With a relieved sigh, the teen rolls over to face her forgotten teddy bear, which had witnessed the entire scene from its choice spot. The thing appears to stare at her obstinately, no doubt judging her for her new set of activities. Activities that were far less chaste than what she used to do with the cuddly toy during her naive childhood. Fuck it, she couldn't bear his one-eyed gaze any longer. Flipping him over so he wouldn't be able to scrutinize more of her non virtuous person, her musings drifted to what her parents would think if her fluffy companion had a functioning tongue and ratted her out to her genitors.

_Sorry, Captain. You're not supposed to see this sort of things. I hope you're not traumatized..._
Her own soft footsteps and the racket caused by passing cars were the only things Max could hear since she had started her journey to her best friend's house. Something was off with the atmosphere. Too silent. Almost... dead. Like a part of Arcadia—a very lively one—was suddenly missing. And this bloody mist didn't help making the environment any more welcoming either.

*Is this town metamorphosing into Silent Hill or what?*

Hair still wet from her shower, she reminisced the events of last night, the rose spreading across her cheeks warming her a bit and assisting her in her battle against the chill morning air. What was he thinking? Bursting into her room, ordaining her to "take what she wanted" before proceeding to pruriently make out with her. He wanted *this*, he'd proclaimed. Yet she couldn't figure out what "this" was supposed to symbolise apart from devouring each other's mouths. Was it all he expected from her? Maybe his wording hid a deeper meaning?

Interpreting Nathan's wishes was so damn complicated. He hadn't append anything else after leaving her to go shower.

When he'd came back—minus the embarrassing hormonal phenomenon between his legs—she was already starting to fall asleep. Although still conscious enough to feel his weight drop beside her on the bed and his warm body nestle against hers. Nightmares relating to Chloe had plagued her rest, but it could have been worse. No weird visions or dreams about Arcadia or their recent findings this time. And nothing memorable enough for her to be able to conjure it up once she had awoken.

The boy had already vanished, so she didn't get the pleasure to fuss on the topic or bother him with endless questions.

Sooner or later, the two would have to discuss where these lewd occurrences would eventually lead them. Whether he liked it or not.

Shoving her considerations aside, Maxine realized the Price household was entering her field of view, emerging by degrees through an onerous fog she hoped would dissipate throughout the day. Progressing nigh the humble dwelling, a singular detail drew her attention. The commonly half-painted walls had been assiduously finished, a midnight blue dye presently glazing the structure. She ultimately reached the garage's door, her right shoe squashing something soft and tubular in its course, compelling her to gaze down at her feet. Fresh cigarette butts had been discarded on the ground, all assembled in the same spot. Strange... The only person who smoked in this residence was Chloe, and she was habitually content to exploit the red ashtray loitering around her room.

"Up there." Peeped a voice from above, consequently startling her.

Angling her head upward, she found the punk slouched over herself on her rooftop, forearms resting onto her bent knees.

"Come through the window." Said the blue-haired girl, listless eyes delineated by the dusky circles beneath them.
Max crept inside the barren home, making her way upstairs to the sought bedroom without delay. Its atypical state gave her pause.

*Did a tornado pass through here?*

The floors had been thoroughly tidied up, usual soda cans, beer bottles, and sediments of junk having ostensibly abscond from the room since the last time she was here. An extraordinary feat, knowing Chloe's propensity for hoarding trash. William's snow dome stood proudly on her oddly orderly desk, the deer within looking in the punk's direction. An untouched cubic box was forsaken on the bed, and under closer inspection, she could make out the brand of a popular video-game console.

*Santa Claus stopped by early this year...*

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dGs-DYIPnYU]

Nimbly spanning the windowsill to join her friend outside, an ephemeral felicity bubbled within the girl as lit neon lights momentarily danced across her skin. She sank beside her partner in time, folding her legs in a comfortable position. Chloe was still staring ahead, head droopy, her beanie casting dark shadows over the upper part of her face.

"You got a new console?" Was all she came up with to fracture this grim silence.

"My mom got it for me... For helping Frank..." the other clarified.

"Oh, that's really nice."

It was. Joyce must have been so worried. She had called her daughter when the duo had barely left the hospital, deprecating the two kids for being unconscious about danger and too intrepid for their own good before also contradictorily acclaiming them for it. Typical mother demeanor.

"Yeah... She was pretty proud. Until i fucked it up again." Price said flatly, tone equivalent to an automaton.

"What happened? Did you two fight?"

"..."

The brunette wouldn't get a response, it would seem. "It's fine if you don't wanna talk about it. I... saw the house got a fresh makeover." She evoked, eliciting a strange feedback from her associate, who's steeled expression dissolved into hopelessness.

"...I..." her voice cracked and Max could precisely distinguish the exact moment her friend's heart chose to shatter. "They..." her next words didn't make it out.

A faint whimper fled from her mouth, pushing her to immerse her face into her palms to dissimulate the embarrassing noises.

"Chloe..." Whispered the hipster, a hand meeting the blue-haired girl's shoulder in a heartening manner.

*Jesus, what happened with Joyce?*
"I hate it." Shared the oldest, muffled by her extremities.

Watching wet droplets trickle through her long fingers, Caulfield surmised what could have caused such an effusive reaction. "This isn't about the paint, huh?"

Chloe sniffled, wiping her cheeks roughly. "I'm sorry. I know i suck. It's just... i feel like everybody will abandon me eventually. So i just push people away, hurt them before they can hurt me... I felt so lonely when you left, Max. Ever since he died my life has been dipped in shit."

The taller adolescent's tears were normally accompanied by anger, rage the frequent motive for their tumble, but not this time. This display of oppressed grief was enough to disorient Maxine, who still wasn't any good at dealing with unwonted situations.

"Chloe, i... i dreamed of William recently." She confessed, leading the topic onto something that would hopefully alleviate her best friend.

"And?" Inquired the latter, not immediately grasping the link between their respective disclosures. "Wait, you mean, like i dreamed of Rachel?"

"I think so. It seemed so real... He literally pulled me out of a nightmare. We talked but, it was really short..."

"What did he tell you?"

"That he was glad i was there to protect you since he couldn't do it himself anymore."

"Did he talk about me? Is he... proud? I bet he's not... right?"

"Of course he is! What kind of twaddle are you spewing now?"

Ejecting a worn out blast of air, she appeared on the verge of crying again. "I hurt everybody. I... After he died, there were times when i just stood in the middle of the corridor, staring at the door... Like he was suddenly gonna step through the entrance and come back to us. It was fucking stupid but, i couldn't help it... And then my mom would notice, and she'd lock herself in her room for several minutes, finding some bullshit pretexts... But i'd hear her cry through the door... I'm so selfish! Look what she had to give up and live through... and she did. And what does she get in return? Me, throwing some shit at her all the time, or... reminding her of painful things over and over..."

Max's digits stirred farther to stroke her nape consolingly. "Shh... This isn't your fault. It's nobody's. I'm so sorry you had to endure this on your own. He is proud of you, Chloe. You're his daughter. Never doubt it."

"I just miss him so much... I wish he'd talk to me too..." The other said, rubbing her covered arms to warm herself up, her leather jacket not adequate enough to block the cold.

"Oh Chloe, i'm sure he will. Just wait a little longer, alright? I'll be there for you in the meantime, always."

The two girls slanted backward after a spell, laying as cozily as possible upon the hard roofing. The firmament was so bleak and dreary the photographer deemed plausible that somebody might have stolen their sky, rendering it a cloudless sheet of white.

"There's no way we could have guessed this is what would happen to us when we grew up." Ruminated the punk.
"No... But we're not done growing. Maybe we can turn things around, for what's coming next..."

"Not if i keep acting like a bulldog." She turned her head toward Maxine, an earnest glint in her azure gaze. "And not if we keep keeping secrets from each other. You have to trust me, Max. I know my shitty temper makes it difficult, but that's the only way this is gonna work out alright for us."

Did that mean she had to tell Chloe what had transpired between her and Nathan last night? It seemed like the right thing to do, but she knew full well that the righteous option was majority of the time the most arduous to accomplish and ended up being a magnet for troubles. Which was totally unfair, because if you did something good, you should get rewarded, not punished, right? Well, fuck that, karma would say before turning your life upside down with a disinterested frown upon its invisible face.

Plus, speaking about her little "explorations" with Nathan would lead to questions. Chloe would wanna know if they were more than friends, if they planned to do those things on a daily basis from now on, and if she had feelings for the boy. Interrogations to which Max had absolutely no answers. So what was the point? Still, keeping something from her best friend after what the blue-haired girl had just claimed felt tremendously wrong. Maxine would tell her the truth, but only when the matters at hand will have been discussed with the concerned party. When she'd be finally aware of where the two were standing.

For now, she'd be honest, yet refrain from diving into too cryptic details she hasn't been able to decipher herself.

Her childhood accomplice carried on. "Promise you'll tell me everything when we're at the diner. Everything."

"I promise." She pledged. "No matter how close i become to someone else, you'll always come first, Chloe." She added, and the rebellious teen knew exactly what she meant.

Or more precisely, whom she was speaking about.

"I know, Max. I just need to imprint that in that thick head of mine."

"Easier said than done, right?" Jested the brunette, receiving a feeble blow to the ribs.

She drew closer to her partner, gluing the side of her tinier frame against her lengthier one so her body would endure the low outdoors temperature more effortlessly. Shoulder to shoulder, the pair silently gazed up at the ether, relishing in the stillness around them. Arcadia severely lacked its natural pitches and consonances today.

Something's wrong. I can't put my finger on it...

Minutes later, Chloe vocally interrupted their inward meditation. "I heard David tell my mom you won a photography contest at your school. He also mentioned a prize..." She broached with a prying undertone.

"A trip to San Francisco with my art teacher, to show off my work in a gallery."

The blue-haired girl's thorax leaped up, elbows supporting her weight from behind. "Max, that's hella awesome! I'm so fucking proud of you. You should have told me right away!" She upbraided excitedly.

"Well, you were kinda pissed at me..." Reminded her interlocutor, regarding her as if her memory span was laughable.
"Yeah... When am i not?" She asked, lips shaped with humor.

"You're pretty when you smile." Complimented the Blackwell student, admiring the bonny view.

A playful eyebrow arched in levity. "Are you trying to woo me, Max?"

She snorted. "Why does your ego always inveigle you to believe i want to make a move on you?"

The punk-rock teen observed the insubstantial fog coming out of her friend's mouth during her inquiry. "Pshh—Like i couldn't make you fall in love with me if i wanted..." She boasted, diving back down and folding her arms underneath her skull with confidence.

"You totally could, but that'd be cruel since you're way out of my league."

"Cut the bullcrap, Spider-Max. Nobody's out of your league." She certified, leaving no room for debate.

"So i still have a chance?"

"It's whenever you want, however you want, hippie."

"I didn't peg you for the easy type..." Max chaffed.

"Everyone's easy when they're frustrated." The sexual connotation within the sentence didn't escape her.

Too much information...

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nSLgInDWMpo]

Three individuals were confabulating amid Arcadia's suburbs, the oldest of them modestly awakened and seemingly nettled by the others' presence at this early hour. A persisting mist lurking around her neighborhood was starting to dispel itself leisurely. The wolf sitting across them was lulling its head, howling plaintively to a moon that was not there, lament resonating across the streets.

Sometimes, Chu'mana reckoned the beast was as dumb as its proprietor.

Birds of a feather flock together.

"Be thankful i even managed to get him here." Said the younger woman, trying to catch the attention of her sleepy grandmother who was engaged in studying the dog scratching his ears. "I had to spend the entire night with him to make sure Mr. Rambo over there didn't drive to their homes to murder those cretins." She finked, pointing to the man beside her with her thumb.

"Kill them? You think this is the solution? Once more, your recklessness leaves me speechless."
Deplored the elder.

"How can you be so calm about this? You women are gonna drive me insane!" Ranted the eruptive guy.

"This was a mere provocation. They're pushing you to make mistakes by fostering your hatred for them. And it's working. You're easier to taunt than a ram, boy."

"I may be a ram old crone, but at least i'm trying to do something about it."

"What should we do, child?" She wondered, arms out in interrogation. "Show our horns and charge? Like you? If you attack them directly, you'll get the cops on your rear, and they won't care who provoked the other first, you'll be the one in the wrong. That's exactly what they want. So control yourself for once, please."

Her granddaughter butted in. "He's right about something though, they crossed the line this time."

"I know. There will be consequences for their actions."

"When?!" Barked the young man.

"Very soon. My dreams have changed since the beginning of the week."

"Ah! Great! Your famous dreams. We're all saved." He mocked her by bowing theatrically, palms high in the air.

"Shut up, Hania." Chided his companion. "What do you mean, nan?"

"The roles have been reversed. They're onto him. I think they found what they were looking for."

"It shouldn't take long then." She figured, mooning abstractedly.

"So they're gonna kill Prescott?" Concluded her partner, sending an agog glimpse to the old lady facing him.

"My god, did your parents swap your brain with a peanut at birth?" The grandmother mentally slapped her forehead, in awe of his inanity. "Dreams work with symbolism bird-brain, they're not to be taken literally."

"Then what?! You lost me with all your prophetic gibberish!"

"It probably means they found a way to bring him down, once and for all." Informed the younger girl.

"Good, then what are they fucking waiting for?"

The matron crossed her forearms over her torso, giving him a reproving stare. "Give them time, boy. You're too impatient. Rome wasn't built in a day."

"Those freaks slaughtered animals and dumped them on my freaking porch!" Hania bawled out.

"And it won't reoccur."

"How can you be so sure of that?"

"You didn't notice? Something's underway. Listen." Chu'mana instructed.
He finally sealed his abrasive mouth for a short time, much to her satisfaction. Sadly, it didn't last long.

"Listen to what? There's no noise at all!"

"Exactly. Where are the birds, child? The bugs, the critters? It's morning, the wildlife should be awake and singing by now. So where are they?"

The young man was about to respond when a piercing whistle from his compeer rang through the air. The latter had slightly distanced herself from the rest of the group so she could retrieve his grayish animal, which was currently engrossed by something invisible to them, peculiarly standing alert.

"Kweeuu, what are you doing? Come here boy." She slapped her thighs as an enticement, the canine's attention back on her.

Hania's forehead creased as he observed his pet trot back toward them. "There's something wrong with him. He keeps looking north since last night." He remarked after some internal deliberation.

"And what's in that direction?"

"I don't know, the forest?" His eyes drifted to the elder, full of skepticism. "You think that's where everybody is?"

Her dark gaze mysteriously wandered to the direction the wolf had been so interested in. "Who knows boy, who knows..."

For the third time this morning, she peeks around the corner. She locates her target at the end of the hall, scanning the area in the hopes of distinguishing her face among the disorderly throng of students.

*Not today, Principal.*

He wouldn't catch her. She had become way too good at playing hide and seek. She wouldn't be in this predicament if Vanessa Caufield wasn't so dead set on making her pay for disregarding her motherly concerns. The girl knew she was done for the instant her matriarch had threatened to call her principal. When her mom declared she'd do something, it would inevitably come about. Now everytime Wells caught a glimpse of her amid a corridor, Max would manage to disappear so fast the poor guy probably wondered if she had gained the power to teleport at will. If only. Instead, she was stuck playing ninja all around campus for the time being.

*You did this to yourself, Max. Don't try to blame somebody else.*

Hugging the walls, she progresses deeper and deeper into the academy. Nearing her carmine locker, she spots a familiar individual sweeping the floor a few feet away. Samuel is mumbling something to himself about "feeling like a ghost to these kids", oblivious to the heap of teenagers swarming around
him. Another phrase ensues, but even by pricking up her ears, all she can discern are the words "squirrels" and "missing". Apropos of missing things—and since her face was right next to one of the bulletin boards—the poster promising a reward to anyone who'd return that famous tablet fraught with cat pics to its original owner had been updated, a large red "found" scribbled over the paper.

Someone must be in a good mood. Case closed, I suppose.

Opening the sought metallic furniture, Maxine inadvertently notes its interior was a lot less clogged since it had been liberated from all the stuff she had collected for Kate during her convalescence. A tender smile spreads across her lips as she remembers the girl had proposed for them to go grab some tea at their usual spot once the photographer was done with her afternoon classes. Perfect timing. Caulfield still needed to persuade her to avoid their creepy art teacher. Fast. The two were bound to stumble into each other in one way or another.

She couldn't let that happen.

You can't control everything, Max.

The concerned party rolls her eyes, having almost forgot about the uninvited nuisance constantly camping inside her mind. A student beside her flings his locker's door close, the thundering clang it produces stunning her straightaway. Specks of ebony fill her vision all at once. A tight sensation around her wrists and ankles tells her she's trapped in place, prior to her eyes finally focusing on David's corpse landing on a familiar white couch, dots of blood spraying across the leather during his fall.

"David Madsen... I always hated that mustache... You hated him too, Max?"

Jefferson's voice echoes in her ears as he inspects the dead body sullying his sofa. She's back into this damn bunker. Her heart jumps to her throat. His sadistic grin, the gun in his right hand, the infuriating way his smoldering eyes stare into her own, mirth apparent... She's lived it all before. She wants out.

"Earth to Maaaaax." A girly lilt guides her back to the real world.

Dana Ward was staring down at her, actively swaying her hand in front of Max so she would react to her presence. Everything was back to normal. For now...

Breathe Max. It's over. You're fine.

"Dana..." the mousy teen soughs. "Sorry, I'm with you. What were y—"

Her friend breaks off her verbal effusion by whipping her back in commendation, making her wince. "Good job, Champ! I've seen your prowess on the news. We're gonna have to invest in a cape if you keep acting like Superman. I bet a red one would suit you..." she muses, creating an oblong with her digits to simulate a camera.

Blasted reporters...

The shorter brunette scratches her itchy nape as she starts stammering. "Ah, about that..."

Blackwell's floors had never been so fascinating.

"Speaking of peculiar outfits," disrupts the cheerleader, "tell me you're coming to the party tonight."

Ah, yes... Dana's highly anticipated "Halloweenie Scream-a-thon", as she had so gleefully written on
the advertising posters plastered across the dorms.

"Uh..."

"Come on, we talked about it last week, you had plenty of time to think about it." Reminds the curvy adolescent.

"I don't even have a costume." Caulfield argues in bad faith.

Terrible mistake.

The athlete's face alters into an impish countenance. "Well, you could always borrow my cheerleader uniform." She submits, grinning like the Cheshire cat.

"Dana, don't be ridiculous. Plus, this is Halloween, it's supposed to be scary."

"If you let me use makeup on you, i'll turn you into a hot zombie cheerleader. No, that's too far-stretched for my skills. Maybe just a dead one. Yeah! Then you'll be in tune with the party. No more excuses." She peers at the modest hero, trying to adapt her speech according to the other's facial feedback. "I promise it's not one of those Vortex Club raves, there'll be a lot less people than the previous one. It will mostly be girls, we can't contain that much students in the dorm lounge anyway." She debates, knowing exactly what she should say to bait her surrender. "Pleaaaaaase?" She begs, hands joined like the Virgin Mary, puppy eyes glistering under the hallway's ceiling lights.

Max abdicates, upwardly blowing a defeated gust of air, making her bangs fluctuate slightly.

"...Okay."

"Yeeaaaaah!" Squeals Dana, arms aloft in victory.

"But i don't want too much attention drawn to me, think you can manage that?"

"Of course, Maximoo. You'll be as pretty as you'll be unsettling."

"That's not very reassuring..." mumbles the youngest of the two, who was already having compunctions about her decision.

Rapid footsteps approach them, a bulky silhouette stalling next to the cheerleader. "Dana, i finished putting up th—Oh sorry..." Daniel apologizes shyly after suddenly joining the conversation, looking up from his clipboard to realize the photographer was also in the vicinity.

She even rallied Daniel to her cause.

"Oh, Daniel! Super-Max and i were just talking about the party. I managed to convince her to drop by." Ward vaunts.

"That's great." He smiles pleasantly, readjusting his spectacles. "Um, Dana... I wanted to ask... Is the costume really necessary? I already kinda look like Honey Boo Boo, so... Just give me a blond wig and it should do the trick." He jokes timidly, fumbling over his words.

"What?" Dana's long eyelashes flutter precipitately, the girl not really following.

Frowning, Caulfield further leans toward the boy, the three of them now forming a circle in the middle of the corridor. "Where the hell did that come from, Daniel?"

"Nathan called me that yesterday. He doesn't like when people are in his way apparently." He elaborates, chuckling awkwardly.
Oh he's getting it.

"What a dick!" She flares up.

"Oh don't worry, Max. I'm used to it. I thought it was pretty funny actually." He reassures, gentle features contracting into a compulsory grin.

Funny my ass.

Numerous minutes of mundane chit-chat later, the little group parts ways, respectively ready to attend their next period. As the brunette grabs the last of her essentials from her locker, wedging her schoolbooks into her bag aggressively, an additional Max pops out of nowhere. Her twin is casually canted against the row of lockers, arms folded across her chest, patiently waiting for the authentic Caulfield to acknowledge her. She could always dream. Or so she thought. The school's bell tolls gratingly, nearly shredding Maxine's eardrums into countless slivers. The two tiny membranes continue to throb as the background blurs, her surroundings swirling around dizzily. So much in fact that she has to stabilize herself, her hand trying to rub away the pounding headache currently creeping up on her.

When her double speaks at last, her voice is awfully close to her ear. "I wonder how they looked... Crushed under these lockers, or fragments of ceiling... Moaning in pain and waiting for death to ease their suffering... Completely petrified..."

Pulsating visions of the mentioned disaster flow athwart her eyes, decor endlessly switching between its regular state and the crumbled mess it had turned into after the storm. Something she never got to witness. She can't detect her own ragged breaths over the pandemonium the tempestuous deluge is making. The teen swears she can almost feel the indomitable wind blowing across her skin. Legs and feet are sticking out from piles of rubbles and fallen furnitures. Blood. Screams. Death.

"Do you ever wonder, Max?"

The living nightmare fades out as quickly as it had begun, her doppelganger evaporated into thin air. She blanches, still panting erratically. An evil pumkin is staring at her from the wall, ostensibly mocking her. Courtesy of Dana and her zeal for adornment...

Scholars had vacated the premises without her notice. She was gonna be late at this rate.

"Caulfield!" Calls out an impetuous voice.

Ugh, fuck me!

She eddies unsteadily, squeezing the bag strap on her shoulder. "What is it?"

She finds Nathan impinging on her personnal space, keeping her cornered against her locker. "You alright? You look pale... I mean you've always looked like a ghost but, it's even worse now." The wisecrack is barely registered by her distracted brain.

"What do you want Nathan?" Caulfield asks in a weak tone, his silvery orbs tracking her every move.

His head turns left, then right, checking the perimeter for any unwanted bystander. When he finally opens his mouth once more, his face is way too close for her liking. "Whenever you want a repeat of last night... Call me." His right hand mimics a cellphone as he wriggles it next to his ear.

Before she could even stutter anything in response, her interlocutor was merrily swaggering down
the hall, smirking devilishly.

Maybe Jefferson wouldn't be the one to actually end her. No, Max was beginning to think that Nathan would be the death of her.

The engine's rambling was the sole hubbub disrupting the high-strung hush reigning over the car. Well, she was tense at least. Nathan seemed relatively composed for someone who were on their way to meet with a former antagonist. Which suited her just fine. The less odious he behaved, the smoother this juncture would go. She mentally crossed her fingers for Chloe to be in an equivalent mood. Reuniting those two would be no different than combining fire with dynamite. But it was her idea... And hers had always been grandiose.

_In fatuity._

Adjusting his rear-view mirror, the Prescott belatedly took the initiative to communicate with his passenger. "Hey... There's something i wanna know." Curiosity picked, she budged a little bit to better take a gander at her interlocutor. "You told me all this crazy shit about time-traveling, but you never mentioned how was our relationship before..." the boy halted for an instant, visibly searching for an accurate term to his question. "I don't know, you said you found a way to come back without rewinding time, whatever _that_ means, so... did we know each other? In the other reality you escaped?"

Her tongue stroked her lower lip, humidifying it. "Um... It's complicated."

"How? I just find it weird that i'd get visions about a storm when you're the one responsible for it, specially if we weren't even close or anything."

He had a point there. If he thought she had an explicit explanation to the phenomenon however, he was fairly mistaken.

He was a part of this, period.

"We did know each other, Nathan. Our... "discussions" just weren't very friendly." She clued in.

She could practically hear him chortle inside his mind. "Yeah, i expected that. Bet i hated your guts."

Head lowering as she fingered the zipper of her hoodie, she fleetingly meditated about their preceding chaotic interactions. "Well... I wouldn't go that far..."

It wasn't all that bad. Near the end...

"Why?" He took advantage of their halt at a red light to acutely scrutinize her, staggered as an inward scenario randomly sprouted. "Don't tell me we also made out in the past?!"

Max didn't waste time spurning his suspicions. "Jesus, no! Absolutely not." She tugged on the hem of her shirt, verifying it coated her belly suitably, as if his allusion was enough to disrobe her. "For your information, you did try to warn me about Jefferson... So i wouldn't call it loathing. Even if you
were regularly filling my ears with your foul mouth."

He snorted. "My mouth is very clean, you would know." The innuendo didn't fall on deaf ears.

"Don't. Especially not in front of Chloe. If you imply anything weird in the diner, i swear i'll chop your head off." She menaced grievously.

We don't need more problems than we already have.

"Relax freak, it was a joke." He derided. "And we're not there yet, so stop nagging me with your precious best friend." His features gnarled at the mention of Price.

"Okay, then i'll nag you about what happened last night instead." She shrugged, her tone lightening considerably.

A smug grin elongated his mouth further. "Oh, so you thought about my proposition? Want me to park somewhere so we can get on with it?" He nodded toward the backseat in a suggestive manner.

"Ugh, no!" She growled. "Natha—"

"Don't even start. You always do that, overthinking things all the goddamn time. This is fucking annoying. You want it, i want it, there's nothing more to it. Stop trying to find a reason to everything we do. We don't know how this is gonna end, so let's just enjoy it while it lasts!"

"My point exactly, i don't know what you're expecting from me!" She broached.

His jaw clenched distinctly, digits snagging some of his chesnut locks as they threaded through them. "I don't want to talk about this right now! I'm gonna have to spend my entire lunch break putting up with the dyke, that's more than enough already."

Caulfield let out a saturnine snicker. "So you don't want to speak about feelings but you'd have no problem taking this" she swung her finger between the two of them, "to the back of your car?" Her thumb followed the direction.

"Yeah, i like action, not questions."

"You're crass and obscene." She huffed, dander building up.

"Newsflash, i never pretended otherwise." He underlined. "You jumped into this all by yourself, Caulfield. Nobody forced your hand."

Another driver honked at them for failing to give way, Nathan countering by flipping him the bird belligerently. Being in the wrong didn't make him more decent apparently. It took approximately three more minutes for them to arrive at destination, which was amply sufficient for them to have subdued their nerves when he pulled over amid the Two Whales parking lot. Ready to scam, Maxine barely had time to stir before his imperious voice deterred her from deserting the vehicle.

"One more thing." He snatched her wrist posthaste to prevent her from opening the door, releasing it once she swivelled to confront him. "The timeline you left... How was the situation? Where was i?"

Her voice was meek as she eyed a familiar yellow truck—that belonged to one of Arcadia's fishermen—parked next to them. "In jail. Jefferson too. He was trying to put the blame on you."

The rich kid shifted around so he could fixate her, his ensuing fleer hardly hearable. "Should have expected it at this point... What about my dad?" He asked, head resting in his palm while his
elbow—planted on his window trim—supported the weight of it.

Maxine's blue pearls met his grayer ones. "He paid off the cops, i suppose. No one had a clue if he really had anything to do with all this madness. Even i. But money brings you places i guess... Investigation was closed before it could even start. No consequences for the rich bastard."

"Who says it won't also be the case on your next try?"

"Because Nathan. They had nothing on him, he probably just had to wiggle some bills into the department's face and there you go... Problem solved." She emphasized her speech with wide motions. "The entire town hates your father, even the puppets he's got wrapped around his little finger. Sean would have been locked up if the cops had anything concrete on his ass before he could make a move and silence them with cash. This time though, it will be different."

"How do you know?"

"Cause we're doing their job. We're concluding the investigation for them. Their sole purpose in all this is to arrest the bad guys. The rest is up to us."

Brownish eyebrows narrowed. "Why would we need the punk for this?"

"You're gonna find out." Her right extremity made for the handle adjacent to her again.

"Wait." He didn't grab her this time, his words were enough to stop her. His gaze drifted to the car's floor, awkwardly diffident. "If she asked you to ditch me... would you do it?"

He reckons Chloe's gonna turn me against him.

"Of course not." Max vouched, unshakable on the matter.

"I thought you'd do anything for her."

"And so Chloe should be able to dictate who i hang with or talk to? A best friend isn't someone who gets to control your life choices or has a say in everything you do, Nathan. That's not how it works."

"She seems like someone who makes a fuss when she doesn't get what she wants though."

The teenage girl's head tilted, her chesnut bob brushing her left cheek. "Doesn't it remind you of someone?" She teased.

"Fuck. You."

Leaning her back against the door, she waited several seconds before speaking anew. "If you wanna know if somebody's worth your time, you just have to ask yourself the right questions."

"Pff—Bullshit. People always have something in mind when they approach me. That's what humans do, they use each other. What makes you so sure you can trust the punk?"

She sighed dramatically. "Chloe, she just... feels like home, i guess. There's no better way to put it. I can be in the worse situation ever, just having her there already makes it better. I know i can count on her no matter what. I always wanna protect her, and it's the same for her. I don't wanna someone who knows my favorite color, song or movie. I want someone who's able to tell if i'm lying to them, or if i'm feeling uncomfortable, or depressed, because they know me so deeply that my behavior has no secret for them. It can be scary sometimes, but it shows how much they actually care about you. They notice all those little things that makes you who you are. None of your relationships will ever
be perfect, Nathan. That's impossible. You'll have plenty of nasty quarrels and disagreements with people who truly love you, but they'll always come back. They'll stick with you, for better or worse. And simply standing next to them will make you feel... invincible. They'll accept you completely, but will naturally make you want to better yourself at the same time. These are people worth keeping close." She finished matter-of-factly, shoulders jolting then sagging swiftly, like what she had just shared was a given.

Nathan appeared to be pondering on her confession, fingertips unconsciously playing with the scraped texture of his steering wheel.

The brunette breathed placidly, figuring she'd soon fall asleep if they didn't get a move on. "We shouldn't make Chloe wait any longer if you don't want her to turn into a wild animal."

"Thought it was the case already..." he mumbled, wrongly estimating she wouldn't hear him.

Glaring daggers at him was all she required to make him shut up. Vacating his red SUV, they traversed the parking lot at a measured pace. Caulfield spotted the nice fisherman that perpetually hanged around the diner and sent him a casual smile that he immediately returned. Well, until he noticed the ill-famed adolescent trailing behind her. She heard someone spitting on the ground the moment Prescott walked past the older guy. Fortunately, she reacted before the short-fused boy could, thwarting his aim of tussling with the disgruntled man by spiritedly shoving him toward the restaurant's entrance. He angrily jerked his shoulders from her grasp once they were indoors.

It was slightly past noon, so of course, the place was packed with peckish patrons. Chloe was occupying the farthest booth of the row, no doubt to preclude the other customers from overhearing something they shouldn't. Max prayed the cacophony girdling them would overlay their tricky confabulation. The punk espied them when they sauntered to her reserved table. She didn't look particularly euphoric to see Nathan.

"Can't blame her."

He was about to install himself on the opposite seat but Maxine blocked his path, shaking her head negatively.

"Chloe, move over." The photographer instructed gently with a waving gesture.

Figuring what she was getting at, her partner in crime watched her dubiously. "Seriously, Max?"

The latter glanced respectively at her friends, inflexible before their bemused miens.

"What do you prefer? Sitting side by side or be forced to eyeball each other for the next half-hour?" She cleverly pointed out.

Both foes visually considered one another for a split second, her sentence reeling through their minds. Wisely, Chloe finally slid to the end of her bench, giving the schoolboy a wide berth so he could sit down alongside her.

"That's what i thought." Smirked the smartass, prior to settling down in front of them.

Her comrades squinted while attempting to peer at her person, the light behind her blinding them at first, creating an angelic halo around her head without her knowledge. Their pupils wound up focusing when Joyce arrived out of nowhere, water jug in hand and a spring in her step, apron sullied by multiple grease stains.

"Water for the little rescuers?" The blond proffered, cracking a warm smile at Max before her eyes
wandered to a certain Prescott heir, simper disappearing subsequently. "Oh..."

Since none of the adolescents seemingly felt obliged to clarify the situation for her, she continued.

"I didn't know you guys were friends." She pried, filling the three glasses Chloe had requested before their arrival.

Nathan glimpsed outside the window and Chloe settled for clearing her throat.

_Gosh, could they be more obvious?_

Time to save the day.

"Surprise!" Exclaimed the brunette, opening her arms widely and coercing her mouth to grin.

"Hmm..." Hummed the woman, unimpressed by her passable performance. "What about you?" She turned to her daughter. "Are you done brooding?"

"Mom, please, not now." Gripped the concerned party, hiding her face in her hands shamefully.

The matriarch rolled her eyes. "You three decided on something yet?"

"Not really. Would you give us more time?" Pleased the soft-looking student.

"Alright, just let the old ancestor know when you've made your choice."

"Thanks, Joyce."

"We'll talk after your shift, okay?" Added the punk, watching her mom retreat to her busy counter without answering her, heels clinking onto the tiled floor.

Some tension scattered after her departure, Nate's attention back on his female counterparts. Or more precisely, on the girl facing him. The glittering sunlight coruscating behind her skull was so intense it washed off her freckles, albeit it was just an optical trick.

Caulfield judged it was the "appropriate" moment to drop the bomb.

"Alright, i'll go straight to the point." She asserted, bracing herself for Chloe's outburst. "The one who's responsible for all of this, it's Mark Jefferson."

"Great. Doesn't tell me who that fucker is!" The cranky teen carped.

"Damn, she really doesn't know shit." Commented the spoiled brat, right palm closing around his glass.

In a trice, Max glared at him warningly. "He's a very famous photographer." She carried on, gazing into her best friend's orbs. "And my art teacher..."

Her sidekick blinked avidly, notion surging like a shot through her brain. "Wait—You mean..."

"I'm flying to San Francisco with him this Friday." She ultimately deadpanned.

The young man abruptly spat out the water he was ready to swallow, sprinkling the discharge all over his side of the table.

"WHAT?!" The pair of enemies hollered in perfect synchronisation.
She shushed them, index upon her lips as she sent worried glances to the people curiously browsing the area for the commotion's source, Joyce included. A lunatic pacing outside the establishment began to bawl about his lottery ticket, miraculously taking the heed off their backs. Maxine witnessed him giving hell to a poor passerby on the pretext that he thought the innocent woman wanted to steal his possession.

"Max, tell me you're joking." Hissed Chloe, bringing her back to the matter at hand.

"You've officially lost your mind, Caulfield!" Summed up the individual beside her after wiping his chin with his sleeve.

"It's the only way, guys."

"No it's not! Max, let's just call the cops and be rid of this shit." Proposed Price wholeheartedly.

"You know we can't do this." She objected.

"Of course we can! Just tell them about the bunker and they'll have all the proofs they need."

"Yeah, mostly against Nathan, not him. That's why we need all those precious clues we've gathered so far, not just what's inside the barn." Cerulean eyes drilled into the boy's stormy ones. "Like that one little footage showing him getting in the car with you the night Kate got kidnapped."

He erected his eyeballs toward the ceiling in exasperation. "Oh yeah, because that's gonna make a reaaaal difference." He overtly mocked. "I bet he'll find some way to debunk that shit anyway."

"It's a probability, not a certitude." She rectified. "Guys, this goes beyond Jefferson now. So many people are involved, much more that we first thought. Plus, we're talking about Sean Prescott here! If finking on Jefferson can reduce his jail time, you bet your ass he's gonna do it."

"That's the only logical thing you said over the last five minutes." The wealthy guy chimed in, scrubbing his mess with a nearby paper napkin.

"Doing things your way would be too messy, Chloe. We can't let things go all over the place."

"You can't be sure of that though..." Maintained her rebellious chum.

"Come on, don't you think the idea already crossed my mind? It won't work. The place is rigged with cameras, Jefferson can check the bunker on his phone at anytime. What do you think will happen if he sees the police down there?"

Chloe's lower lip wobbled dangerously. "...But, but that's—"

"The worst thing we could possibly do, believe me. The last time we went in there, he immediately knew. He trapped us and killed us, Chloe. And history's gonna repeat itself if we keep doing the same mistakes. Imagine his reaction when he glimpses at his phone and catches us snooping. Or the cops. He'll either do anything in his power to track us down, especially you" she pointed to the glaring boy, "or he'll have enough time to flee and erase every trace of himself. The authorities probably won't be able to find him ever again. Then he won't pay for his crimes and nobody gets justice."

A leaden puff escaped Joyce's daughter, frustrations scurrying out of the taller girl's mouth. One of her lengthy legs popped up when she hooked her foot on her seat, setting her chin on her knee wistfully so she could pensively stare at the menu placed on their table. Max knew she could make her see reason. She just needed one more push in the right direction.
"He's smart, Chloe. He knows what he's doing, or he wouldn't have taken all those precautions. He even took the time to find himself a scapegoat." She signaled her male companion with a prompt nod, quietly motioning it was time for him to step in. "Tell her."

He paused for awhile. "...She's right on that point. He's been doing it for years, in so many different cities. Nobody ever busted him. That says it all."

If looks could kill, Nathan would be dead. "Don't tell me you're okay with her plan? Oh, of course you are! As long as you get out of this intact, huh? You don't care about anything else than your sorry ass!" Chloe arraigned heatedly.

"Hey, i think she's crazy as much as you. I never said i was okay with this!" He withstood.

They owned the incredible aptitude of making the photographer feel like a nagging mom taking care of her insurgent kids.

She vehemently slapped her hands together to regain control over the discussion. "Guys, stop it." She ordered when their eyes were once more fixated on her.

"You're gonna get killed, dumbass." Nate demurred.

"Maybe, maybe not."

"How the hell do you reason with that thing?" He interrogated the punk, briefly glimpsing at her miffed gaze as he designated the brunette with a gesture. "I can't!"

The blue-haired adolescent looked at him askance, annoyance showing up on her stern features.

"How do you even plan to make this work out exactly?" She quizzed after cooling off a bit, and Max fathomed she was addressing her.

"You two will whisk the binders while i keep him busy." Both opened their mouths to say something, so she impeded their speech by raising a dogmatic finger beforehand. "Listen, you have to send me a text before you enter, so i can distract him and make sure he's not on his phone looking at the cameras when you sneak in. Once you're inside you have to immediately cut the feed."

"He's gonna notice sooner or later." Indicated Prescott.

" Exactly, and the first thing he'll do will most likely be calling you."

"Which is—"

"Perfect! You can play dumb and say the system is probably bugging, that you'll go take a look when you can. But that's for later. Before that, you two will have to grab Kelly, Kate, and Rachel's binders so you can give it to the cops, i'll buy you time meanwhile. If you go to the station with simple coordinates and crazy tales about an underground photo studio, i wouldn't be surprised if they didn't believe you. With the pictures, they'll have to take you seriously."

"...You're really serious about all this." Rounded up the punk.

"Damn right. I told you, Chloe. No more rewind, no more risks. This is the only way i can guarantee this piece of shit doesn't slip through our fingers. It's also the safest."

"Not for you!" She contradicted fervently, astonished by her friend's lack of interest over her own welfare.
"Perhaps, but that's the only option i'm willing to try."

"Are you insane? What if he catches onto your little scheme? There's no way i'm letting you get hurt Max!"

"Who says i will? If you follow my instructions, everything should be alright. Trust me, Chloe, just for once. Please. I can do this, i know i can. But not alone. I need you both, we have no chances whatsoever if you two stay divided. I'm not asking you to become best buds, i only require your cooperation for one entire weekend. Do this for me without skinning each other alive, and all will be good. After that, you can go back to your mutual hatred if you want, i don't care. I won't force you to further tolerate one another."

Her childhood associate stayed mute, steadily digesting her recent enlightenment. From the way the colors on her cheeks faded by the minute, Max speculated she most likely felt nauseous. Not really convenient at a place filled with food fragrances.

"I've thought about this for weeks on end. I've planned it all, to the very last detail. You said i was your hero, Chloe... if it's true then let me be one." Exhorted the dauntless young woman.

A scoffing snort succeeded to her overture. "Max, i know you're badass, but you're asking me... to let you put yourself in danger. It's practically suicide if he finds out."

"Then help me make sure he doesn't." She put forth.

A random customer clumsily knocked over his cup of coffee, drawing attention to himself. Poor Joyce craned her neck from behind the counter to assess the damage, sighing drowsily and slipping away to fetch a mop. With Chloe plunged back into her concerned silence, Caulfield resolved to pay heed to the taciturn boy instead.

"Nathan? You're being awfully quiet..." She solicited him to opine on the issue.

"Everytime i think i've figured you out, you just go and blow my mind again." He vocalized, expression stolid.

One of her eyebrows was lifted inquisitively. "Is it a good thing?"

"No!" He croaked, baring his teeth.

*Should have known...*

"What the hell do we do once we have the pictures? Go to the police directly?" Intruded the blue-haired teen.

"Not really. Nathan will go first to confess everything, with his lawyer."

"You just said they wouldn't believe us without the photos!" He fittingly evoked.

"Let me finish." She scolded. "You have to show them this was your decision. They have to understand that none of us would have been able to find proofs against Jefferson without your collaboration. And you have to make the fact that he was willing to kill you if you spilled the beans very clear. Do you understand? You were scared. He had you by the balls. You had no other choice than wait until he was away on that trip to rat him out, or you'd be dead. Scott will assist you."

"Who's Scott?" Chloe was obviously losing track of their exchange.
"Chloe, i'm gonna give you a folder filled with all the shit i've collected on Jefferson before i leave." Persisted Maxine, ignoring the query. "While Nathan is on his way to the cops, you'll show it to David, with the binders. Stepdouche was already suspicious of the entire school, so it shouldn't be hard to persuade him. Plus, he's an adult. Which means more convincing than us when it comes to sweet-talking the cops. Same thing, you need to insist on the fact that Jefferson is the real culprit. There's a big chance he'll blow out on Nathan and ruin everything, that's why i don't want him there when David learns the truth. I'm sure he'd throttle him before he can defend himself. I'm counting on you."

"I have to plead the case of that prick to David?" The concept appeared to revolt her.

"Yes. Once David's convinced, you two head to the station to join Nathan and give all the evidence to the police. They'll investigate the bunker, get Rachel out of the ground and get everything they need to arrest Sean and his clients."

"What about Jefferson though?" Questioned the lad.

"They'll just have to wait for us at the airport Monday morning. If i play my role right, the bastard won't suspect anything."

"What if you fail?!" He persevered, staring at her like she was the dumbest individual he had ever met.

"I won't. Failure's not an option. I just need to be extra careful and keep him away from anything related with the news. Fuck i'm gonna have to keep him busy a LOT." She realized, her eyes almost slipping out of their sockets when she pronounced the last word.

His next phrase was meagerly audible over his neurotic nail biting. "What do you mean?"

"If your dad gets arrested, people are gonna be all over this. I don't want the wacko to hear about it before he's in handcuffs."

Price rubbed her creasing forehead in order to unbend her facial muscles. "Yeah... We'll have to be very in sync for this to work. The three of us." She soughed abstractedly.

"Yep'. Team work at its finest." Max agreed ironically, already dreading the inevitable.

Or worst.

Brows furrowed and arms folded over her chest, Chloe twisted her upper body until she could properly study her neighbor. "You're okay with your dad going to jail?" She wondered, ever so leery.

"He deserves it."

"So do you." She remarked impetuously.

"Chloe... No." Forbade the camera enthusiast.

The warning was utterly snubbed. "You're really fucking lucky Max and Rachel are on your side, if it was me—"

"Spare me your rant, okay? I already perfectly know what you'd do in their place." He snapped with some restraint, still keen on keeping a low profile. "My dad's going to jail, my family's gonna turn into a fucking mess, and i don't even know where i'll end up after this." He listed, sounding
apathetic. "You're barking up the wrong tree if you think i'll be getting off easy."

That last statement drove his unwanted new ally to withdraw into herself, rendering her even more distant, if not sullen. Guilt swelled within Maxine as the boy's words replayed incessantly inside her head. It was true. Out of the three, the one who risked the most was him. What was a trifling weekend in Jefferson's ominous company compared to the rest of your life being completely ravaged? His lawyer had been accurate in his diagnosis. Wherever the Prescott heir would be sentenced to go, nothing would ever be the same for him. Even if he was indeed guilty of his crimes, no matter the circumstances which led him to commit them, that knowledge wouldn't stop inwardly tearing her asunder.

A gurgling protest resonantly emerged from one of their bellies, escorting her back to the present.

"I'm hungry." Grouched Chloe.

"Me too." Smiled her best friend, doing her best to unburden the suffocating atmosphere. "Want me to buy you lunch?"

"I'll pay." Both girls turned their nonplussed gaze on him. "Should make most of my money while it's still here."

"Are the Prescotts going bankrupt? Damn, so there is a God." A conniving foot ruthlessly kicked the punk's shin under the table. "Ow!" She cried out, kneading her dolorous limb while optically cursing the culprit, her so-called accomplice.

"We don't know about that yet." Nullified the latter. "Nathan is just being pessimistic."

As per usual.

"Pessimistic." He sneered, shaking his head in disbelief. "Shut the fuck up and choose something, patsy."

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[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FcFDkHg7VEU ]

Pupils were chatting and entertaining themselves outside, the school's windows eliminating most of the tumult they tastelessly produced. Blackwell's famed art teacher was too absorbed by his favorite student's portfolio—sprawled upon his desk—for it to bother him anyhow. Tenebrous eyes were skimming over diverse photographs, suspending their journey when they attained the prized winner of the Everyday Hero Contest. He understood the message the girl had strove to express with this picture. Simple minds would never see past the shallow aspect of the beginner's selfie, they'd even probably mistake it for narcissism, but he knew better.

The way she had deliberately made her camera focus on her photo wall instead of her person. Its meaning reposed wholly on that negligible detail. Photography was her everyday hero. It was her
passion for the craft that forged her into what she grew up to be. Well, partly.

And she should be proud of what she had bloomed into. A shame she was too modest for self-worth.

Jefferson's gaze explored the only image where her face was visible.

Max may possess sweet juvenile features, but a noticeable spark within her promised she would bite anyone who came too close, too quickly. A guarded and risky fire he had previously witnessed inside Rachel's eyes. Maxine was quite the distant person, which tended to remind him of his own aloof nature. Especially when it came to his students, female ones in particular. If he had a coin for every single time he had to reject the advances of promiscuous schoolgirls, he'd be as rich as a Prescott by now. Yet he never had to resort to his recurring rebuffs with the brunette. She wouldn't even dare to be honest, it would be utterly deviant to her personality.

As innocent as she looked, she wasn't the kind of girl who let you walk all over her. Unlike many other women he had encountered in his life. Unlike... his mother. Mark found himself spending more and more time imagining how the novice photographer would react to his latent pushy manners. For the first time in his life, somebody was drawing away from him anytime he'd attempt to step forward. Not in fear, but as a form of opposition. And Mark Jefferson wasn't used to opposition. He was used to getting his way. Not unlike his young, spoiled apprentice.

Nathan... He perfectly understood why his little protege was suddenly taking an interest in her. They had comparable tastes, after all.

At the beginning of the year, the reserve Maxine would employ when addressing him seemed to derive from shyness. This days however, the intellectual poise she exerted in their conversations managed to unsettle him. Maybe she'd even be capable of unnerving him, if he wasn't who he was. Since the first time he'd met Caulfield, the art teacher had always wondered what sort of thoughts were hidden in that busy head of hers. Maybe things similar to his, as their little after-school rite of yesterday had suggested. His heart had skipped a beat at her words, the same way it sometimes did during his most productive sessions. Everything that came out of her rosy lips had seem to have been plucked directly from his twisted, secretive mind. Perhaps Max truly shared his vision. He knew he was right to scent something special in her.

The man also knew digging beyond her impervious surface would be most rewarding. Way more than it had been with Nathan, who had turned out to be a huge disappointment, alas. Unfortunately, he wouldn't get the pleasure of sharing her company today. She had stopped by his class in the middle of the afternoon, demanding to be exempted of their routine for this one time. A necessary engagement, from what she'd expounded. Ever so lenient, notably in front of those beseeching eyes of hers, he had capitulate without further ado.

He was deeply regretting his decision now that an unbidden blond was furtively approaching him.

"Mr. Jefferson?" Her obnoxious voice ravaged the quietude of his classroom.


Unsatisfying.

Her hands settled onto a corner of his sturdy furniture while she slanted over it. "I'd like to talk to you, if that's okay." She said, adopting that ludicrous posture which made her posterior stick out.

Refraining from rolling his eyes at the overt seduction, he caved in. "Of course, Victoria."

Not like he had much of a choice.
"It's about the contest." She added, licking her lips as she caught sight of Max's exposed pictures.

*No kidding...*

Closing the portfolio he had put together with the concerned party, Mark eventually swung around, looking straight at the pest. "You're not happy about the results, i assume?" He theorized, virile fingers wrapping around each sides of his waist.

Her stare faltered for a short while. "Look... I know how this sounds, and i don't want you to think i'd dare to question your aptitude to evaluate our work, because that's not what this is about. I just..." she strained herself to phrase her thoughts, glimpsing at the teacher anew.

At least she wasn't acting terribly arrogant, for once. "Alright... Go on." He encouraged.

"This competition... i put a lot of hope in it." She must have seen his mouth open because she directly carried on before he could interrupt her. "So did the others, i know what you're gonna say." The girl assured consciously. "But the outcome wasn't what i expected. It left me with a lot of confidence issues."

He pushed his glasses upward, replacing them properly on his nose. "I see."

"I was wondering if you had any advice for me. Everybody has to start somewhere. At the beginning of your career, there must have been times where you doubted yourself, right?"

Time to fulfill the role of the devoted, impeccable mentor.

"Absolutely. It happens to everyone. I wouldn't be where i am today without my insecurity. Errors and rejection are part of the process. You *will* get criticized, *harshly*. And if that's enough to stop you from pursuing your dreams, then you're not cut out for this vocation." Jefferson counselled professionally.

"But, how did you overcome your fears of failure?" The question sounded genuine.

" Mostly, i swallowed my pride and heeded my betters' advices." He wished she was smart enough to do the same. "Don't take every negative comment into consideration though, only the constructive ones. Some people will want to see you succeed, while others will thrive on watching you flunk. You just gotta sort them out." He preached, smiling lightheartedly.

Chase's back straightened, her intrinsic aplomb resurfacing.

"What about you? Do you want me to succeed?"

He nearly laughed at her desperate tone. Was she blind or did she plainly refuse to accept he wasn't interested?

*What i'd like is a day without you throwing yourself at me so transparently.*

He didn't say that, of course. "I'd like to see all my students achieve their goals, Victoria. I'm only there to guide you, however. Not determine your fate. Losing hope due to a minor defeat is not a solution for an artist. You'll get many more opportunities in the future, i assure you. This is too soon to shake off your aspiration."

Fostering youngsters wasn't something he detested doing. In fact, he found it quite agreeable. Raising the rich schoolgirl's spirits on the other hand, was a task he would gladly palm off to anyone.
"Thank you for your words, Mr. Jefferson. Things don't look so glum anymore." She credited with a coy smirk.

"Glad i could help."

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vKH-rcO6PA8 ]

"Are you afraid of the consequences this could have for you, or of losing your new friend in the process?"

"...Both..." was all he could muster.

Nathan had spent an hour describing everything he had kept to himself these last few months to Jacoby, his psychiatrist striving to exteriorize the boy's feelings about the ongoing quagmire he freshly got dragged into. The older guy had clearly been uncomfortable during distinct unsavory points of his chronicle, belying his discomposure with an impassive mien the teenager was so proficient at employing he could see through it forthwith. His disquietude was most evident upon the tales regarding Jefferson.

"You're sure you don't want to give me any detail about this little scheme of yours?"

Yeah, he had taken the precaution of leaving that part out of his roundup.

"It's not mine." He rectified, the glare of the sun—beaming through the window's office—constraining him to squint. "It's hers. And mind your own business."

"Okay, then... do you think it's going to work?"

"No idea. She's bonkers. Bitch has a death wish." Nate sounded uncharacteristically phlegmatic, something that didn't escape his interlocutor's keenness.

"She sounded pretty sane to me. Well, mostly." Muttered the doctor, writing down something on his clipboard.

"Are you going to defend her every chance you get?" Prescott Junior complained, an undercurrent of jealousy in his tone.

"You call it defense, i call it a personal opinion. When was the last time you took drugs, aside from your treatment?" Inquired the professional, changing the subject.

"Two days ago..."

Sunday afternoon, after his unconscious trip into the forest. He had resolved to unwind by smoking some weed with Hayden, just to end up indulging himself with worse than marijuana once alone later on.
"Do you mix them with your pills?" Jacoby's subject bestowed him his ingrained "what do you think, dumbass?" look. "You know that's counterproductive, Nathan."

"I know, daddy." The short-fused adolescent replied snidely.

"Ah, the sarcasm is back at last. I was beginning to think someone had replaced my patient with a pale imitation."

Swooping more comfortably into the back of his armchair, Nathan tilted his face while he gave his shrink a penetrative look. "You like irking me, don't you doc?"

"If it earns me a sincere reaction out of you, then i don't see why not." Shrugged the specialist.

The rich kid went silent afterward. A sincere reaction? All he could accurately ascertain was the dismay squeezing his throat at the notion of Caulfield traveling miles away from him in the company of a mad man. Suppressing the foreign panic that had seized his body when the young woman had confided her goal had been an exacting deed. But he had managed. Her defiance enraged him. Even her fucking best friend was incapable of compromising with her.

Useless shrew.

He'd never be able to persuade Max not to pursue her ridiculous plot. It might be their best option, but who cared? How could she think it was okay to progressively make him care for her if she was just going to injudiciously put her life on the line in the end?

Freakin' tweemo-bitch!

The excursion was supposed to last the entire weekend, thus his mentor and the wacky do-gooder would fly off Friday evening.

That meant he only had two days left before she went on her perilous trip with the psycho. Being alone with him would make her vulnerable, no matter how brave or insightful she was. Her cognizance of his creepiness wouldn't stop him from hurting her. Or whatever he intended. Perhaps she was correct about his motivations. He sincerely hoped his teacher only envisioned her as another apprentice to take under his wings. A more talented, saner version of Nathan that would surpass him in every aspect of the profession. He wouldn't harm her then, just use his wisdom, guile and charms to get her wrapped around his finger. Unless Mark realized she was perfectly aware of who he really was.

Then she'd be fucked.

Nate's hands balled into fists over his armrests. Jacoby noticed.

"You remember what to do when things become too overwhelming, right?" The expert mentioned, sensing his impending outburst building up.

"Count to three, i know." Mechanically quoted Sean's son.

"Is there something else you'd like to talk about?"

"...No."

All he wanted was an assurance she'd be safe. Something impossible. He should make the most of his remaining moments with her.
"Alright, then i think it's enough emotion for today." Decided the older man, uncrossing his legs and ascending from his seat.

No shit.

Subsequent to a shitload of extra recommendations from his caring physician, the two males bade each other farewell. As soon as Nathan had rushed outside of the room, his cellphone started vibrating against his thigh. He banged his head into the nearest wall when his eyes strayed to the caller's name. Wonderful! His cunt of a mother was trying to contact him. His dad was, in all probability, behind this exotic accomplishment. His parents never concerned themselves with his affairs unless they needed something specific from him. Otherwise, it was just to haul their turbulent offspring over the coals. Ready for war, the youngster swiped his thumb across the device's screen angrily.

The fuck is it now?!

"Nate?" The woman who supposedly gave birth to him uttered.

"Why are you calling me? Got me another pointless appointment with one of your specialists?" He hissed the term scornfully.

"I only wanted to check on you."

He scoffed spitefully. "Without an ulterior motive? That'd be a first." All his bottled up sass was erupting simultaneously.

"You weren't there yesterday, thus i questioned the maids. They said you didn't come home since... Saturday. That doesn't sound like you."

And you couldn't grasp why by yourself?

"So? Maybe i'm sick of this place." He peeped at the old-fashioned wall clock ticking through the vacant lobby. "Aren't you supposed to be at work right now?"

"I am. I took advantage of my break to call you."

"Oh, how nice! Now, why don't you tell me what you really want so we can get this over with?"

A long, wavering pause took place for a spell. "...Your principal called recently. You've been skipping school again."

"Ahhh here we go!" His hand slapped the wall alongside him with false enlivenment. "The underlying reason. What is it? Did he tell daddy? Is he too mad to lecture me himself?"

"Your dad's been in quite the bad mood lately. He's dealing with some issues at work. I don't think it's a good idea to irritate him further."

"Because he has good ones? When was the last time you saw him satisfied about anything, huh? Oh let me guess, probably dates back to when i wasn't born."

"Nathan, i'm simply trying to help you here. You know what your father will do if you don't watch your step. Honestly, is it that hard to lay low for awhile? You know what will happen if you keep messing up before your graduation. He wasn't joking when he said he'd make you work at the
"Big daddy can go fuck himself for all i care. And so do you."

A discouraged sigh rumbled through his phone, the blow creating crackling statics over the line. "...You won't even let me try, Nate."

"Yeah, you had nineteen fucking years for that. Too late, mom." He hung up without another word.

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7_MXjeW8dss ]

It felt like an eternity since the last time she'd visited this place with Kate. They used to come here to taste different kinds of tea once a week. It was their own little custom. They'd talk about anything, especially their past. The religious girl has always been intrigued about her years in Seattle, asking all sorts of questions about how life was in the big city. Max often wondered if her friend was interested in moving out of Arcadia to live a metropolitan lifestyle once they'd all graduate, or if her queries were mere curiosity. This recurrent meeting around fancy cups of Earl Grey was a way for them to forget a little about school and homework. A guarantee to relax after a hard week of teenage bullshit. And right now, Kate appeared undeniably relaxed. The same couldn't be said of Maxine though. More than twenty minutes had elapsed since the girls had arrived at their accustomed café, yet the photographer couldn't stop the beads of sweat treacherously pearling at her hairline, concealed by helpful chestnut bangs. This insufferable ambient heat wasn't the only one at fault for this. Stress was actually playing a big part.

As was Marsh's acute stare, which never relinquished from her gradually reddening face while Kate placed her teacup back on their table.

"Max... I can sense you want to tell me something." The angelic adolescent delicately brought a loose lock of blond hair behind her ear.

The brunette gulped discreetly. She had been dreading this discussion all day long, even more than the one between Chloe, Nathan and her.

**Hey Kate, guess what? The degenerate who drugged and kidnapped you was actually our professor! So you would really do yourself a service by evading him. Oh, and Nathan had something to do with it too! Ugh, better get on with it...**

"I have a favor to ask you." She admitted reluctantly. "Well, not really a favor but... Just don't freak out, alright?"

**Wowzer, you're such a speaker Max!**

Kate smiled lightly, arching a sharply defined brow. "If you don't want me to freak out, you should use better words than those."
Sadly, she had no way to formulate her demand without raising her classmate's suspicion. Digits drumming next to her own warm cup, Maxine played with a corner of the illustrator's sketchbook absentmindedly. The blond had used their meeting as an opportunity to show her the children's comic she had started to draw over the week. Instead of enjoying their time together, the hipster knew she'd have to spoil their fun by bringing up Jefferson's improper demeanor. A touchy subject.

"Stay away from Jefferson." She blurted out in a hardened tone, cerulean gaze darting to her greener one. "I know you're not due to come back before next week, but in the meantime, if you two ever cross paths, look the other way."

Marsh was clearly confused, her sunny countenance morphing into an addled one. "Why would i do that?"

"Remember what he told you before the rooftop episode?" Revived Caulfield.

Comprehension loomed up across Kate's turquoise irises. "It's all in the past now, don't worry about it." The towhead dismissed with a fleeting wave. "He sent me a card, like the others. He's truly sorry."

The photographer huffed. "He's not a good person, Kate. Whatever your opinion of him may be. What kind of teacher would say those words to a depressed student?"

"Max..."

"He's a jerk." She admonished, gritting her teeth.

Her classmate sighed. "Look, he hasn't been very helpful, that's certain. But... I don't want to hold a grudge. Hate is way too exhausting, and such a waste of time... I'm ready to relent. You know, be the bigger person. It would be unfair to forgive Victoria yet show enmity to Mr. Jefferson."

"That's very noble of you. As always..." a gruff Super-Max noted bitterly, blue eyes dropping to the wooden table beneath her jittery hands.

Kate frowned, sad at the sight of the downcast mien the brunette was pulling.

Tinkering with the golden cross dangling around her neck, her perspicacity chimed in. "You found something, didn't you?" Her guilty orbs answered for the girl. "Max, i realize how much you want to protect me, but i need you to be honest." 

_Nathan is going to kill me for this._

Elbows landed on the hard furniture as the mousy student rubbed her weary eyes. "I shouldn't be the one to tell you this." She concluded cryptically.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Marsh's knitted her eyebrows, head faintly inclining to the side.

"Please Kate, i'm being dead serious. I know it sounds strange, and like i'm keeping things from you—"

"Which is exactly what you're doing..." She reproached frankly.

"Yes, but not without reason." Max's extremities slinked closer to her friend's. "I beg you, avoid Jefferson. At all cost." She insisted somberly.

Smoothing her pleated skirt, her comrade leaned a bit forward. "If you manage to make your request
sound consistent, i will."

"Give me until tomorrow. Can you do that? Please? You'll learn everything i uncovered tomorrow." Swore the camera girl.

After a significant amount of pondering, pensive stare roaming across the empty tables encompassing them, the religious young woman glanced back at her interlocutor. "Alright, Max. All this mess is really troubling me, but i'll do as you ask. I promise."

Caulfield superposed their fingers gratefully, scruples assuaged by the vow. "Thank you, Kate. Count on me to also keep my end of the bargain."

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mN-CqIytN2U ]

Chloe Price sluggishly descended her house's staircase, halting as soon as her feet reached solid ground to glance at the sofa her mother was sitting on, stooped over their family's photo album in deep preoccupation. Maybe it was time to have that little chat she had promised the older woman earlier. Prowling in the couch's direction, the remorseful punk positioned herself next to her matriarch who finally acknowledged her proximity by anchoring her blue gaze inside her similar one.

"I'm sorry, okay?" The girl started, closing the weighty book so her interlocutor couldn't pay heed to anything else. "I know i'm a pain in the ass but, i think i'm ready. To let go... You don't hate me, right?"

Joyce swayed her head imperceptibly. "You already know the answer, Chloe. You may be hard to handle, but you're still my daughter. Nothing's going to change that."

The teenager wrapped her long limbs around her caretaker, stroking the other's bare arms in the process.

"I'm gonna try, mom. For real." She pledged earnestly, gratified when the woman cradled her.

The parent closed her eyes, basking in her daughter's endearment to the full extent. "Thank you."

Face stained in the ceiling
Why does it keep saying
I don't have to see you right now
I don't have to see you right now
Sitting at her desk, a woman with straw-blond hair grasped the family picture settled on the edge of her furniture, gliding it closer. Effulgent sunrays sparkled behind her through the giant window of her downtown office. Vibrant pools of malachite paused on the naïve faces of her young children, immortalized within a wooden frame. Kristine was a free spirit. Independent, strong-willed. Watching her grow up, it was an evidence. Her daughter would blossom into an elegant character without being tarnished by Sean's influence. Nathan however... The boy didn't have that luck, thanks to his dear father.

He had made a good job of forging him into his own image while making sure the kid would stay too cowardly to oppose his diktats.

Could she honestly complain when she had allowed it? Being Mrs. Prescott wasn't all that, no matter how much she loved her husband. Her son didn't want her help? Fine. She wouldn't press the issue. With little momentum, she thrust the object inside her opened drawer, closing it afterward in a definitive movement. It stung, yet her pride wouldn't let her dwell on it further.

Eons ago, her family would have had a chance to be what it was supposed to.

But that time was long gone.

Digging like you can bury
Something that cannot die
We could wash the dirt off our hands now
Keep it from living underground

Millions of speculations were running through her head. Bits of past conversations were crawling back from the confines of her memory, haunting her while she mentally retraced every clue these blurred recollections could grant her. And the most well-known face in town was staring back at her from its printed image. Rachel Amber's expression—forever frozen in time by the papers dispersed all around Arcadia—gave her the impression it was on the point of spilling the missing girl's most obscure secrets. Kate had heard those rumors of an affair between the aspiring model and her art teacher months ago, and had purposefully tuned them out. It was silly. Students loved drama and gossip. They'd invent dozens of sordid hearsays every week to make their dull life more stimulating. But now that she pondered on it, after all the things Max had disclosed over the last few days, she was beginning to rethink her recantations.

Why would her friend be so adamant on keeping her away from Mr. Jefferson after investigating on this night the blond had so much trouble remembering? What exactly did she unveil? If Rachel really had an adventure with their admired professor, by a twist of fate shortly before her vanishing, was he at fault for her sudden disappearance?

Mostly, did the man have anything to do with her latest misfortune?

Was he the owner of that smooth voice addressing Nathan during her comatose state?
A large crowd had been gathering near the shore for some time now, drawing Max's attention once she had stepped out of the café. She hadn't had the opportunity to spot it sooner since the establishment's windows were plastered with posters and papers of all kinds, hindering the bewitching view it was supposed to offer of the neighboring beach. Her tendency for meddlesomeness had gotten the better of her, as usual. The student slithered through the watchful mob until the cause of their interest entered her line of sight. Another poor whale had beached, the gigantic yet pitiful corpse laying miserably on the sand next to the first casualty.

Notwithstanding the doleful event, Maxine became instantly aware of the silhouette that had been standing in her peripheral vision since she got here. Cerulean eyes fluttered as they espied the unmistakable face.

"Oh, it's you..." she spoke lowly, as if raising her voice above the sound of the waves would scare the raven haired woman away.

"Yes, little old me. Came to admire the view?" Even though her tone was acrid, the girl knew it wasn't directed against her.

Despondent eyes fell to the ground when her mouth opened anew, the atmosphere still uncomfortable regardless. "Not really. This is so sad... Like one wasn't enough already."

The golden-skinned dame seemed to approve the sentence, some pained kindness emerging across her features.

"Look what we have here." An unfamiliar voice rose behind the two.

The flash of recognition within the Native woman's dark eyes was all the photographer needed to understand Chu'mana knew the old white haired man that, she on the other hand, had never encountered before. Warmth spread from his lips up to his onyx orbs as he smiled down at her. His cordiality put her off a bit. People in the Bay weren't what you would call congenial in regard to strangers.

"Um..." she whispered, her natural shyness kicking back at an alarming rate.

A feminine hand seized her shoulder in encouragement. "Don't fret child, just an old friend."

Reassured the matron.

"Max, right? I'm Ahote." He revealed, extending a wrinkled hand in greeting. "I wish we'd met in better circumstances."

She took hold of the offered limb hesitantly, afraid of the potential vision she could get from the contact. "Uh... Yeah, me too..."
I wonder if their names have meanings...

The older guy went silent after this, taking place beside her to scrutinize the grisly spectacle, Caulfield ending up sandwiched between the two adults. At last, she caught the gaze of the winged creature peacefully perched onto his broad shoulder. A majestic raven. The fact that it seemed to be looking right through her skull should have put her on edge. It didn't for some reason.

"Made any progress?" Demanded the woman, rending her out of her trance. "It seems to be getting worse."

"Don't worry. I'm on it." The schoolgirl affirmed, seeking to sound convincing.

"I know, child."

Blinking hastily, she focused her quizzical stare on the individual on her left, who was still intently gazing at the dead creature. "Really? How?"

"My dreams told me."

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JZjAg6fK-BQ ]

Victoria kept checking her plastic cup everytime she took a sip of her beverage to confirm her pink lipstick hadn't left any smudges. She should have already known it wouldn't transpire, considering the amount of cash she had invested in the cosmetic. Despite the attestation she remembered reading on the product's packaging, dark eyes probed the red object in her hand for the tenth time by now. Nevertheless, she couldn't cease the annoying reflex. If it was caused either by boredom or anxiety, she had no idea.

Across the dorm's lounge, Taylor and Courtney were grinding against each other foolishly, lost in their own little world. A fairly drunken world. Even their costume were accorded, the first one dressed with angel wings and a halo above her head while the second wore tiny red horns and a pointy black tail. Chase had decided to be more original than her friends and had chosen to cosplay the curvy action figure safely hidden in her room. Only Taylor was aware that the badass character came from a japanese anime Victoria liked since childhood.

The blond fiddled with the plastic gun strapped to her thigh, cursing herself for thinking this party would be tolerable, even if it lacked guys. Well, good-looking guys at least. Dana had insisted that this Halloween shindig was essentially for girls, yet had let some of them attend the soiree with their boyfriends. Or future beau. Because she was confident no one in this school would willingly date that loser Warren, and he was here. That fucker should have been suspended for what he did to Nate, but the pigheaded Prescott had refused to rat on the geek. Odd for someone who had the reputation to be the worst asshole at Blackwell. Was he loosing his touch?

She moaned vehemently, jaded to death. Nothing remotely captivating happening, no one to flirt
with... A dire evening in perspective. Though she inwardly thanked whoever had omitted to invite that pesky airhead Logan.

"Hey gorgeous." Greeted a masculine voice behind her.

Nathan watched his favorite drama queen turn on her heels to face him. He most likely wouldn't have been able to identify her due to the tinted wig. For a terrifying moment, he had presumed the bashful wacko had invited the dangerous calamity she kept referring to as "Chloe". Praise the Lord, it was only Victoria shamelessly exhibiting her secret nerdy tastes to the world. The Prescott winced, grey gaze lingering on the top of his friend's head. You could say he had developed quite the aversion toward blue hair. Thanks to a specific punk he'd soon have the immense displeasure to put up with. *Oh joy...*

"Good, you came. My blackmail worked." Her critical eyes drifted to his apparel. "Annnnnd you didn't use the clothes i gave you..."

*I'm not dressing up as Draco Malfoy. Ever! What does she take me for? A freaking nerd?!*

"Fuck your costume, it looks ridiculous."

"Well, aren't you nice today... *Grumpy*. Why did i waste my time putting an outfit together for you? A brown hat would have done the trick." She said sarcastically, getting rid of her empty drink.

He ignored the nickname. He had nothing in common with the dwarf. Nothing.

Changing the subject with wheedling always worked with her, so he did just that. "Lookin' sick. I'd ditch the wig if i were you though..."

"But you're not. I think it looks nice. Maybe i should let my hair grow back." She submitted, twirling a blue curl around her index finger.

Zoning out as he scarcely listened to Victoria prattle about her looks, the speech Caulfield had shared with him during their ride to the diner resurfaced out of the blue, disturbing his inner brainwork. Her impassioned oration about the her bond with the dyke. Throughout the years, Vic had never failed to support him regardless of his increasing lunacies. She plausibly cared more about him than his own parents. Yes, she ignored all about the abhorrent stories he had rightfully abstained to confide, but that didn't mean he didn't trust her. De facto, he wanted to protect her by distancing the girl from the loathsome shit pervading his everyday life. She was the one who constantly reminded him not to neglect his treatment, not because she wanted him doped up—like good old big daddy—but because she worried about his health. The one who fended off anyone who dared to spit on his name. Who was there for him whenever the necessity to emotionally explode after an umpteenth fight with his father arose. What would he have done without her at his side during his time in this dumb school? Couldn't he afford to demonstrate his gratitude sometimes? She undoubtedly deserved it.

His silence seemingly perturbed her since she stopped yakking altogether. "Um, why are you looking at me like that? I hope you're not falling in love with me because that'd be kinda freaky."

He scowled, his inexperience regarding verbal appreciation flustering him. He didn't feel apt to put the sentiment into words, so he did the only rational thing he could think of: squeezing her against his chest awkwardly.

"Nate? You okay?" the blond inquired, stationing a manicured hand on his back forthwith.

"I just... I'm glad we're friends."
He sensed her simper in the crook of his neck. "Of course you are. What's with you getting all soppy out of nowhere?"

"I'm not soppy." He grunted, the noise resounding in her ear viciously.

"Yeeaaah..." she drawled. "But you're acting really weird right now."

Nathan's tone drove her to think he was pouting. "What, i can't hug my best friend?"

"Yes, you can. You just choose the weirdest timing to show your affection... You didn't take anything yet, right?"

She drew back, studying his expression, scouring for any sign of haziness inside his silver orbs.

"I'm not high, Vic."

"...Something bad happened, huh?" She accurately presumed. "Is it your dad again?"

"No."

"But it has to do with your family." Chase pursed her mouth. "Come on, i know that face!" Covered eyebrows were lifted in discernment. "Wait, there's something else too."

"Stop using your fucking sixth sense on me!" He accused.

"It's not sixth sense, it's feminine intuition. Or else you'd have it."

His head rolled backward in vexation. "Can i have a hug without you incessantly running your mouth?"

Her shoulders briefly jolted at the suggestion. "Meh, this party sucks anyway." The spoiled girl proclaimed, enveloping him in a tight clutch.

Sean's son snorted mockingly. "Like you'd have the balls to say no."

For the remark, his abdomen was jabbed by a wicked elbow.

A few feet away from them, Maxine was daydreaming, pupils dallying upon the lighting system that was plunging the room into an intimate ambience by continually switching between indigo and carmine shades. The pink reddish hue in particular gave the place a hellish mood, along with the spooky decorations Dana had spent so much time hooking up in every corner. Pupils were mindlessly prancing around, akin to undersized demons squirming among the retributive flames of the underworld. Pretty fitting for a Halloween night.

Brooke was drinking with Daniel near the punch table, obviously taken by their conversation. The neophyte artist harshly tugged on the slit of her highwaist skirt, appalled at the odds of her underwear showing without her awareness. Not that it was that short or that the slit was too wide, but cheerleader uniforms weren't part of her ordinary wardrobe. Yeah, her athlete friend had persuaded her to don her sporty outfit. And here she was, all red and white, adorning the Bigfoots colors. Ward didn't have the mercy to forget about the makeup part either, turning her skin even paler than it originally was and planting fake gashes on her arms and legs. One trifling cut was drawn on her forehead, another one on her left cheek. The finishing touch had been modest smears of artificial blood sprayed across her phony wounds.

Max licked her lips, tasting the crimson lipstick tinting them. Despite the loud music, she heard
footsteps in her back.

Warren stood there, perceptibly ashamed. "Max..."

"Oh, hey." She answered mildly, striving to display her willingness to converse.

"How are you doing?"

If there's one thing she hated, it was talking over a ruckus.

She started to walk, nodding in the direction she was heading—the dormitory's lobby—so he would tag along. "Pretty good."

*Given the amazing rate at which my life's going to shit.*

The dork timidly rubbed his neck. "Are you still pissed at me for what happened with Nathan? I apologized to him. I know i don't have any valid excuse for—"

She cut him off by puffing out fervently. "Warren, we all fuck up. In fact, i'm quite the champion when it comes to it. As long as you realize what you've done, feel remorse and try to make up for it... You're good in my book."

"I'm glad." He murmured with relief, the two friends hugging sweetly as a token of peace.

During the friendly cuddle, her gaze caught Nathan's fuming orbs. If jealousy was visible to the human eye, it would be seeping from his pores right now. His stern visage was an evident substantiation he wasn't thrilled to be here. She surmised any rave that wasn't launched by the Vortex Club didn't hold any value to him. Victoria must have predictably brought him over against his will. Although the disguised blond was currently hanging out with her minions whereas the wealthier adolescent was left to his own devices.

Glaring at Warren was tangibly his new favored occupation.

*Damn, what's his problem?*

The nerd stepped back, examining the hipster from head to toe, hands still on her shoulders. "You look hot for a... dead cheerleader?" He guessed hesitantly.

"Dana's idea." She shrugged, smiling softly. "You're not so bad yourself, Count Dracula." She concluded after completing her own visual inspection, digits smoothing the bits of cape she had access to. "Nice fangs by the way."

"Thanks, Dr. Caulfield."

Her chin jutted toward the purple haired teen sending him imploring glances from the dancefloor. "I think Alyssa's waiting for you. Looks like she wants to dance."

Was that a blush cropping up on his cheeks? "Y-Yeah, i should probably go before she decides i'm not worth her time anymore. Women..." he joked, rolling his eyes playfully as she slapped his arm for the jibe.

In less than five seconds, Graham had reconvened with his date.

Standing in the threshold, arms crossed, Max was content to simply behold her comrades thriving in the middle of their celebrations. Dana and Trevor especially seemed pretty exulted by the occasion, dancing glued to one another, the duo incapable to resist the overpowering impulse to smile
longingly at each other. The cheerleader's burlesque dress would beautifully flap around each time she swivelled.

"These two make me wanna throw up everytime i see them."

She didn't have to turn her head to know who had spoken, so she kept her gaze ahead.

"It's called romance, Nathan." Caulfield explained with the same tone Warren would employ when speaking about science.

"Still gross." She could hear his grimace in his voice.

"Anything related to love is gross to you anyway."

"What does that mean? I can be romantic as hell."

She spun around, finding him already assessing her, leaning nonchalantly onto the entryway. No costume, as expected. However, his light-brown hair—flawlessly slicked back—had been given more attention than usual. A simple milky dress shirt, unbuttoned at the top, snugly cloaked his thorax and a red tie hanged loosely around his neck. The contusions tainting his face had considerably fade out, except for the crudest ones which were turning plum. The tinge accentuated his physiognomy brilliantly.

Maxine belatedly resolved to play along. "Yeah? At what occasions?"

A saucy smirk stretched his commissures. "Last night was a good example."

"Oh, really?"

"I held back and didn't even deflower you, Cockfield."

Blue pearls peered at the ceiling transiently. "Wow, such a gentleman."

"I know, right?"

Her flimsy head shook from side to side in aggravation. "You're a lost cause. And stop checking me out."

Discretion isn't your forte...

The lad held his hands up, acting like a saint. "It's not me, it's my eyes." He negated teasingly.

"Pervert."

His extremities receded into his pants' pockets. "By the way, your boyfriend left me a note to apologize for fucking up my beautiful face."

"Boyfriend". Here he goes again...

"You mean improving your heinous mug." She beamed, provoking his inflated ego.

A long finger threatened her. "Don't get cocky, bitch."

"Or what?"

Yeah, or what? He was mulling it over. She could tell from the way his eyes thoughtfully trailed to
every single feature of her face. Suddenly, the Prescott nudged her with his thigh, coercing his classmate to the side until they were both out of other students sight. Pressed against the wall, the girl observed him quietly, apprehensive of his next move, his mouth now barely an inch away from hers. Sensing cold fingers traveling up her neck, she tried to endure the urge to get her skin away from the icy digits, which stopped their intentionally laggard course once they reached her left ear. A sensual, barely noticeable kneading began at the sensitive spot while Maxine was too busy scrutinizing the way the colorful lights that cruised over the walls drove his eyes to stand out alluringly amid the corridor's darkness. Along with the delineation of his almighty cheekbones. She could feel her consciousness sink further and further away as she appreciatively took in his appearance.

Nathan wasn't doing any better to be honest.

Cerulean pearls were ogling him with a desire that had never been directed at him before. Max was seeing him. Wanted him. Not his fucked up problems, his family's prestige or his father's fortune. Just him. And that realisation was enough to make his head spin.

He's been with girls before. Not a lot, but enough to have his very own experience of sexuality. None of them loved him, and neither did he. Still, he was nineteen, was far from the ugliest schoolboy you could meet, and he had money. The only real problem he's ever experienced when trying to get a chick to tangle with him in the sheets was his... unHINGED reputation. Some were outright scared of him, others simply had no wish to tarnish their image by going out with the screwy Vortex Club owner. Despite the ones that did have the courage to see past his mental challenges, he always felt like they had undisclosed motives. That they were using him. Maybe they thought about the many benefits that going out with a Prescott could procure them. Honestly, doing this sort of things with someone who sees you as an accessory rather than a human being, someone who doesn't possess any sort of real fondness for you, isn't all that great. Even if he was getting what he wanted in the end, Nathan couldn't shake the feeling that something was inevitably missing... A sensation that could turn the adventure into something meaningful. A part of the pleasure he heard his peers frequently gush about was radically absent from the two or three shags he's had in his life.

As he exited his annoying reveries, his thumb slid down her mouth, temporarily catching her plump lower lip in its wake before releasing it swiftly. Their brains patently decided the two adolescents should be done with their mutual contemplation by now, their lips meeting of their own accord without any question crossing their mind. Which was remarkably rare in their case. Her fingers tangled in the short hair at the base of his nape, sending unnerving shudders along his spine. The young man vengefully retaliated by gliding his hands up her exposed stomach to caress any bit of flesh he could find here. At his dismay, the action only served to excite him further. Not that she wasn't affected too. Quite the contrary in fact. The grip on his hair strengthened as her left palm slipped down to his scarcely covered left pectoral, exploring a protruding collarbone on its way. Mouths pressing more urgently against one another, breaths shortening dangerously through their nostrils, the pair seemed to easily forget anything that wasn't related to the sensual ballet their limbs were diligently performing.

He just wished her stupid crop top wasn't so tightly wrapped around her ribcage so he could sneak a hand inside.

A growl erupted from his throat, adam's apple bobbing as he swallowed tensely. Retracting unwillingly from the smaller form, Nathan exhaled loudly in an attempt to calm his beating heart, forehead resting against her own. His steely glare never drifted from Maxine's blue irises, which had greatly darkened since her pupils had considerably grown larger. Breaking their intense stare after some time, the Prescott's cheek caressed the photographer's soft one when he leaned down to enfold her more securely in his arms.
"You're real lucky you're a virgin, Caulfield." He falsely warned against her ear.

She giggled silently, reaction he would have missed if not for the suave trembling of her breath upon his skin and the slight quiver of her torso. Max focused on reveling in the instant, burrying her nose further into her companion's neck. Finally, the first truly peaceful moment of the day for the brunette! No tears, no conflicts, and most of all, no more attempts to convince her friends that her stupidly crazy ideas were almost unerring. Their embrace was a welcomed addition to her painfully long and tiring last twenty-four hours. The two students stayed in this posture for several minutes before an unsought glance to Kate's door led the young woman to free herself from the boy's grasp.

Her return to reality was brutal.

After receiving a questioning peep from Nathan, she guided him toward the tiny, cramped room that contained those washing machines Dana was always so keen on avoiding at all cost. A rapid flick upon the light switch was sufficient to dimly illuminate the narrow space. The hipster gently shoved him deeper into this new secluded den. He was a guy, so of course, the first deduction that came to mind was far from chaste.

"Wow Caulfield, you're turning into a freak. Pushing me into a dark corner to do the freaky deaky with my helpless body, i didn't expect that from you." A mischievous grin formed on his lips, his attention fixed on the shorter woman who was still standing near the entrance, scanning the vicinity so she could reinforce that no one had noticed them.

Like the control freak she was.

"Shut up, you bozo." He detected her smile even if it was out of view. "We should talk to Kate." She deadpanned, pushing the door carefully until it closed by itself.

His infamous frown returned posthaste. "Why?"

In a matter of seconds, Max was back in front of him.

"Don't you have things to tell her? I thought you felt bad about what you did."

"Yes, but at what moment did you think admitting i was involved in what happened to her was a good idea?"

"It'll be alright as long as i'm here."

"No, she's gonna freak out and then your stupid plan will get wrecked." He denied.

"No shit Captain Obvious, that's why i have to be here. I can calm her down, make her see reason. I'm her friend. And Kate is a very kind, magnanimous person, i'm sure she could find it in her heart to try to forgive you if you clearly explain everything to her. You just have to be one hundred percent honest and show you truly wish to repent."

Prescott Junior invaded her personal space in one stride. "Where does all this optimism comes from, Caulfield? Not everybody is as forgiving as you, for your information. She may be a bible-basher but that doesn't mean she won't want my head when she finds out."

Maxine rolled her eyes, scoffing inaudibly. "Oh come on, where are your balls?"

That struck a chord. "My balls? Where's your common sense? You used to be the most self-doubting cliché on the fucking planet, and now everytime you speak it just sounds like we're in a stupid fairytale. "Everything's gonna be alright, we can do it, you just have to trust me, we have to do
something" blablabla! Guess what? Not everyone can get along. Kate may not hate me now but when she learns the truth, she certainly will. And if you think the opposite, you're a delusional hippie. God, i bet rainbows come out of your ass whenever you fart!"

Wan eyelids slid shut to rebuff the imaginary concept. "That... is not something i wanna picture."

They continued gauging one another noiselessly, brooding involuntarily and resembling two stubborn fifth-graders until he ultimately ceded.

Nate massaged his scalp roughly, messing up his hair. "Just give me time to think about it, alright?"

Hands on her hips, the student fathomed it was best to let it go. "Fine, but don't take forever. I need an answer tomorrow."

"I got it, dimwit. Now fuck off, you're ruining my mood and i need to cool down."

"Very mature. As you wish, Prescott." The youngest relented, arms soaring in the air then immediately falling by her sides again in defeat.

Max crossed the room in a speedy gait, intent on departing from his maddening presence.

"And Caulfield!" She stopped, looking at him over her shoulder. "You better sleep in my room tonight or i'm dragging your ass by force."

"Fine!" She yelled from the threshold, a little peeved.

"Fine!" He shouted right back.

As she slammed the door shut, Nathan had to bite the inside of his cheek to thwart the amused smile that frightened to form due to her appealing, yet nasty character. He liked them feisty apparently.

Chapter End Notes

Dana's early Halloween party is mentioned in the game -> http://imgur.com/biowVwQ
Her subsequent awakening unfolds in varied steps. First, something akin to a hot breath colliding with her flesh. Next, a very warm and wet thing slithering up her neck, rudely extracting the girl from her dreams.

The sensation brings her a few years back, when Chloe's white cat would infiltrate its owner's bedroom and proceed to wake Max up with insistent kitten licks. Every night she'd spend in the Price household would conclude the same way. Bongo had learned her biggest weaknesses through cunning observation, including her struggle at refusing anything to any cute creature she encountered, and had used that knowledge to efficiently beg for food at the early hours of the morning. Young Maxine always ended up warily following her feline guide downstairs, blue eyes barely able to open under the pressure of somnolence, while her best friend remained blissfully asleep and unaware of her pet's manipulative methods. Minutes later, Joyce would eventually drag her feet to the kitchen to find the child pouring a can of slimy food in the cat's bowl, smiling and shaking her head at the scene before advising her to not let Bongo "bully" her.

So yes, the first thing that comes to mind is that history is repeating itself...

"Bongo..." she whines drowsily, "go away..."

Except Max isn't ten anymore, is supposedly sleeping in Nathan's bed, and Bongo is long dead.

Wide eyes opening dramatically, she finds the source of her discomfort maliciously staring down at her. She can still feel the teeth that were previously nipping at her throat, as though Nathan's mouth hadn't swerved from her flesh. But it had. Her hand races to her neck, fingers splaying across the irritated spot they were seeking. When a row of pristine teeth reappear behind his conniving grin, she gets the ample confirmation that he's been up to no good.

"What did you do?" Even if she unfruitfully bothers to question his actions, Maxine is already aware she isn't going to like the answer.

Answer that never slips from his stretched lips, obliging her to hastily leave the comfort of his bed to check on her throbbing skin. There's no mirror in his room, so she finds herself treading up to his desk to take a picture of herself with his camera, knowing the flash would provide enough light for her to determine what kind of trick he had pulled on her this time.

As expected, the apparatus doesn't let her down. An enormous blood-colored blotch is decorating her ashen skin, followed by an army of smaller pinkish blots trailing down her throat.

_That bastard gave me freaking hickeys._

She'll have to conceal them. How, that's another story.

"Are you crazy? I told you not to leave any marks!" Caulfield fumes, turning back to face him.

"Oops." The young man says unapologetically, conceited smile never withering. "Who's Bongo?"

"This is serious. What if someone sees it? I don't wear turtlenecks, you idiot! How do i hide it?"

"Then don't." He shrugs. "Who the fuck cares? Your friends will just think you're finally having
some fun in your miserable life."

"It's not just about the students. Did you think about Jefferson?"

"What about him? I don't think he has any business with who puts their mouth on you when no one is looking."

"Well, he already caught you snapping pictures of me behind my back, so there's a big chance he'll suspect you're responsible. His little protege trying to steal my innocence away from me..." Max insinuates craftily, hands squeezing her hips. "I wonder how he's gonna react to that."

Nathan snorts. "He ain't that smart. He'll probably assume your nerd pet finally grew some balls and attempted to ravish you."

"I don't want Warren to get in trouble either. That freak can be pretty unpredictable, in case you forgot. I don't want to tease his psychotic ways out of him."

"Just pretend it's some left-over makeup from last night then."

"No one's gonna buy that."

"Whatever. Come back to bed."

"I'm pissed at you! You did it on purpose."

"So? I like embarrassing you. It's funny. Just look at your reaction." He grasps her elbow and slings her back onto him.

Or rather attempts to, to be exact.

"Oh, no no no no no." Her index finger frenziedly oscillates from right to left as she extirpates her limb from his grabby hands. "You're not getting off that easy, Prescott."

"Really? What are you gonna do?" The other challenges, unimpressed.

"I'm... I'm gonna..." she stutters, rose speedily gaining her cheeks. "I can abash you too, you know!" The claim doesn't sound very assured.

His stupid smile is infuriating. "Okay, go on... I'm waiting." He leans backward, arms wide open in invitation and steel orbs freely raking her form.

He's so full of himself.

Aggravated, she mentally vows to give him a piece of her mind. Maxine brutally pushes him until he's flush against his sheets, planting herself on his lap. Poor Nathan is already shocked by her bold demeanor, eyelids blinking maniacally while he stares up at his companion. Pleased with his prominent reaction, the brunette proceeds to attack his neck before her common sense comes back at full strength and prevents her from exacting revenge upon the arrogant boy. Not thinking is definitely her best weapon against his lewd antics. And her damn natural bashfulness.

Chubby lips close around a patch of flesh, an assiduous suction beginning posthaste. She tries, she really does. But it's not like she's an expert in this particular field. Seconds elapse one after the other and the dearly sought effects are obstinately not manifesting, driving her to consider that this might have been a disastrous idea.

"You don't even know what you're doing, do you?" He muses hoarsely. "You're gonna have to suck
Hands slip under his pajama top, traveling across his chest and probing naked skin without restraint for the first time since they started their weird flirting. Nathan tenses, shudders wandering all over his anatomy despite his simulated aloofness. A muffled gasp wafts upon Max's right ear, denouncing his muted rapture, while her mouth focuses all its attention on the crook of his neck.

*Don't think about it, don't think about it, don't think about it.*

All of her toil ultimately pays off once plum blemishes surface along his epidermis. Abandoning the inflamed spot she had diligently abused, Caulfield glides her tongue upward, shyly teasing his chiseled jaw. She decides that feeling Nathan's abdominal muscles throb below her exploring palms is worth the abashment. Meanwhile, her partner docilely lets her do as she pleases, engrossed by the soft fingers in direct contact with his ribs and the sly appendage stroking his highly sensitive mandible.

The young man tries to conceal his excitement with a deceitfully relaxed moan. "You sure this is supposed to be punishment? 'Cause if it's what i get when i fuck up, i'm gonna do it a lot more from now on." He jeers, hands crossing beneath his head to adopt a cool posture.

"Shut it, Nathan."

No way in hell was she going to let him win this one.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q6nZNUFuNHo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q6nZNUFuNHo)

The sound of a squeaking faucet reverberates throughout the classroom as Maxine turns off the culprit—conveniently stationed on one side of her desk. With droplets of water still leaking from her digits, the girl quickly splits a paper towel from its roll and dries off her freshly washed extremities. Once decently dry, she tosses it in the nearby trashcan and tugs on her red scarf, soft skin chaffing underneath the cloth wrapped around her neck. Having anything swathing that zone unfailingly felt like someone attempting to throttle her. An irksome impression she could have lived without, which is why she usually avoided covering her throat altogether.

Not like she has much of a choice now, thanks to a certain puckish prick. Max couldn't let her newly acquired hickies be apparent or it would raise suspicions. Her partner didn't seem to mind his own set of bruises though, walking around campus carelessly and refusing to hide the purplish evidence of their activities.

Tough luck, he didn't stop at that.

Every accidental encounter across a corridor culminated with his hand brushing against her own, act
fortunately unperceived by the teenagers around them. Sitting in the back of the room was definitely a perk considering that she'd had to share her table with Nathan for the entire period. Her science teacher had divided her audience in pairs to conduct diverse experimentations, and by an ironic quirk of fate, the duo had ended up being sorted together. This last hour had been full of delicate nudges, deliberate yet prudent teasing, and imperceptible touches kept from prying eyes, the Prescott shamelessly taking advantage of the concealment offered by their desk. To be honest, she appreciated the gestures. At first, she didn't think the cantankerous adolescent would be so keen on indulging in physical contact, but given that he's been deprived of affection most of his life, it was only logical.

Caulfield yawns, pushing her quixotic thoughts away before glancing up to see her professor beckoning her forward in an eager manner. Ms. Grant had released her class ahead of schedule since they were finished with their experiments of the day. Students had been solely happy to comply, everyone scuttling out of the room without waiting for the bell to ding, at the exception of Max.

Small feet immediately amble toward the older woman, enthused about what she had to say. Riveting things, no doubt.

"Max, have you seen the news?" The latter inquires, dark curls caroming prettily around her face while she extends a familiar newspaper to the other brunette.

*Please, tell me it's not about the Frank incident.*

Arcadia Bay Beacon's latest headline is titled "Pan Estate turned into a local zoo?", accompanied with a picture of the construction site being held hostage by a large swarm of disparate beasts. Curiosity picked, Maxine opens the paper hurriedly until her gaze falls onto the object of her interest. The article stipulates that all sorts of critters have taken up residence on the Prescotts' newest property during the last two days, forcing the workers to put everything on hiatus.

*So this is what's been bugging me since yesterday. I haven't seen or heard a single bird from that point on, now that i think about it. Let alone any wild animal...*

Her memory evokes her most recent conversation with Samuel, followed by their squirrel buddies' inexplicable flight and the flock of birds pursuing the same direction. Whatever happened on that day must have greatly upset the town's unfathomable forces, as the custodian had stressed out.

"How is that even possible? They would have to be aware of what they're doing."

Ms. Grant nods leisurely, her thrilled smile contrasting with the laid-back attitude she's voluntarily sporting. "Exactly. It's like Mother Nature has a mind of its own. Arcadia is truly fascinating."

"You think this is going to keep Sean from constructing the estates?"

She sniggers faintly at the idea. "Stop him for good? No way. The man is too stubborn for that. Put it on stand-by? For sure. He's probably gonna try to deal with it as fast as possible, but now that the affair has been made public and that people and tv reporters are on the site, he can't do anything illegal. Or harm the animals."

"That's one good thing, at least." Acknowledges the photographer. "I still don't see what a bunch of critters could accomplish by idling on the area..."

"Who knows? This might just be a big innocuous distraction. Lure people's attention onto one specific point while something else is brewing below the surface, waiting to emerge. Or perhaps this is some sort of final warning..."
Something waiting to emerge, huh?

The girl chortles, mindful of the turn their discourse is taking. "We sound like conspiracy theorists."

Her contagious amusement reaches her teacher. "You might be right, Max. But honestly? I don't care if people start to call me crazy. I can't wait to see what will occur in the coming days. My curiosity needs to be satiated."

"Don't worry. I'm sure you'll have your fill, Ms. Grant." Implies the student mysteriously.

Gazette wedged under her armpit and bag strapped over her shoulder, Max skitters outside the room. Not knowing what to wear this morning, or rather not in the mood to concern herself with such trivial issues, she had sluggishly donned Rachel's clothes after regaining her bedroom. Chloe had persuaded her to keep them since the first time they were borrowed, so they now had a place in her closet until she decided otherwise. Oddly enough, having something of Rachel on her person makes her feel braver. As if the defunct girl could relay some of her support through the attire.

That's ridiculous.

No one asked you.

The cellphone lodged inside her pants buzzes.

Sorry Max, change of plans. No Two Whales' lunch for us today.  
10/17 10:55am

Okay... Something came up?  
10/17 10:55am

Yep'. My mom needed a favor. She convinced me to take her shift. Somehow... I'm already regretting this.  
10/17 10:56am

Oh, so you're working right now. Wait... Are you wearing an apron?  
10/17 10:56am

...  
10/17 10:57am

OMG YOU ARE!!!  
10/17 10:57am
I hate you.
10/17 10:57am

You must be so freaking cute in your uniform! I can picture your angry mug perfectly. A-d-o-r-a-b-l-e!
10/17 10:58am

Remind me why we're friends again...
10/17 10:58am

I can't believe i'm missing this! You gotta send me a picture!
10/17 10:58am

Fuck no! I swear to god if you bring your ass to the diner during your break i will tear you inside out Max. NOT joking.
10/17 10:59am

That's harsh. I can't even support my best friend in a time of crisis?
10/17 10:59am

You only want to gloat over my shame.
10/17 10:59am

Yeah... Yeah that's pretty much it.
10/17 10:59am

Don't come. Final warning Maxi-Pad. Gotta go.
10/17 11:00am

What a killjoy.

She'd have to message Alyssa—whom she knew was planning to eat at the spot later today—and ask her to inconspicuously photograph the blue-haired waitress for her. Chloe would never know, so Maxine wouldn't have to feel guilty about going against her wishes.
As she rounds the corner, she finds Juliet fighting with Wells outside of his office. Arms folded over her navy jacket, face pulled in a deep frown, the blond looks unwilling to negotiate. When Caulfield spots a well-known publication in her Principal's hands, which is urgently being wobbled around, she instantly connects the dots. The school reporter was done with her editing and the article about Sean Prescott's new partnership was henceforth circulating widely across the establishment.

That screams bad news for Mr. Wells... I almost feel pity for him.

Nathan is vehemently fiddling with something inside his locker a few feet away. She skulks in his direction, determined to discover more about this strange Pan Estate phenomenon. The lad senses her presence before she can utter a word, as though he possessed an inward detector for mousy busybodies. He doesn't appear peeved by her propinquity, bearing a vegetative expression.

I thought he'd be more lively after this morning...

Glimpsing at what his extremities are doing within the school furniture reveals he's been contending with sundry science books.

"Know anything about that?" She practically shoves the article in his face.

He eyes it for three seconds before budging it at a further convenient distance, persistent in his phlegmatism. "Why would i?"

"Well, your dad is the one building those things, so..."

"Daddy dearest doesn't bother sharing his vast knowledge with me anymore." He shuts his locker door, done with his scuffle. "Gotta keep the freak out of delicate matters. You'd have better chances asking your super friend Lois Lane." His body twists toward her.

"Juliet? You read the article about your father, didn't you?"

"Yeah. You aren't the only nosy bitch in this school, apparently." His scornful rictus plainly exhibits his opinion of the blond.

I helped her actually. Better keep that to yourself, Max.

"She's just doing her job. A pretty good job if you ask me."

"I didn't. And my dad will be doing his when he comes after her ass for libel."

"Everything she's written down is true. How could he sue her for slander?"

"He hates snoops. Whether what she snitched is real or not, he doesn't give a shit. He'd turn her life into a living hell simply to make a point."

"But she's just one harmless student. And this is a tiny school paper, it's not like it's being distributed all over the city. I think your dad has bigger problems to deal with at the moment." Max connotes, dangling their city's newspaper ironically.

"Let's hope you're right, for her sake."

"Way to dramatize everything, Prescott." She rolls her eyes, looming closer in order to make their chat confidential. "Now that i got my hands on you, could you please refrain from distracting me with your sneaky fingers when we're in the middle of a class?"

"Why? Too arousing for you to handle?" His eyebrows perform this unsettling choreography she
hates above all.

"Not at all." She lies impudently, subconscious snickering in the back of her head. "Someone might catch on if we're not careful."

"You're afraid the losers you hang around might learn that you're infatuated with the school's scumbag?"

A choking noise flees from her windpipe. "Infatuated is quite a strong word. And my friends aren't the reason we need to be cautious, you know that. Words travel fast around here, and we don't want Jefferson to fathom we're more than schoolmates. Or that we're plotting against him."

Caulfield is certain Nathan knows what she means. There is no harm in people witnessing them conversing together, but fondling is another matter.

"Yes, let's not be seen with the Prescott jerk. Could be bad for the goody two-shoes' spotless reputation."

An exasperated sigh passes through her parted lips. "Have you thought about what we spoke of last night?"

"What? The Kate thing?"

"Yes, the Kate thing."

He croaks out something no human ears could possibly distinguish.

"Can't hear you."

"Yeah, yeah, let's do it." He exhales deeply.

"Careful, your eagerness is overflowing." Says the sarcastic girl. "I'll arrange something with her and keep you updated."

He hums lethargically, looking anywhere but at her, patently bored.

Ahead of his next inhalation, the space between them narrows drastically. "I'm not ashamed of being close to you, Nathan." She kisses his cheek with a pert smile before absconding from the corridor.

Nathan stares after her with goopy eyes, still struck by the gesture. His right hand cups his cheek hesitantly. He finally remarks the fellow pupil loitering nearby, who's too busy gawking at the normally grouchy schoolboy to sneak away undetected. Mr. Dickface—a random guy who had assisted to Ms. Grant's class with them, and if his memory is working properly, is also a member of the Bigfoots team—had beheld the preceding quaint scene without their knowledge.

"What are you lookin' at, moron?" Rumbles the Prescott, belligerent anew.

The reprehensible teenager scurries away in a trice.

Nate knows the meathead isn't going to snitch about what he's just seen to anyone. Max may often overlook it, but most students feared him. That's why anyone outside of the Vortex Club tended to avoid him entirely. People around here knew that meddling with his personal business always led to bad consequences. Therefore, they didn't.
Inky orbs are boring holes into the side of her face, spurring an encompassing queasiness from within the juvenile woman. That bloody wall clock ticks, ticks, ticks, in an analogous rhythm to her heart's palpitations. Concentrating on her current duty necessitates all the might amassed in her puny figure. Albeit her superficial composure doesn't deter him from lingering too close as he inspects each of her movements.

"Back off, dude."

"You two did a marvelous job on that assignment. Seems like teaming up was a good idea."

Maxine looks up from the fancy equipment she's been carefully packing up inside Jefferson's giant black cases. "Thank you. I'm beginning to think the same."

Indeed, the splendid A Victoria and her had gotten for their essay is a huge testament of their queerly easy-going collaboration.

"...Victoria did participate?" The rhetorical query ostensibly requires ratification from her.

"Of course. Why would you doubt it?"

"Let's just say when it comes to homework, Ms. Chase's always had a fondness for Wikipedia pages. And this clearly took some real effort." Her instructor emphasizes with a waggish undertone.

She chuckles, closing the ebony box once and for all. "I can attest she partook every step of the way."

A drawn-out hush engulfs the classroom. This is her long-awaited opportunity to leave, but seeing his trainee heading for her bag rashly wags Mark out of his taciturnity.

"I wasn't expecting to see your face on the news again so soon." He intimates while Caulfield inwardly curses the whole cosmos for her misfortune. "Is saving helpless people some kind of hobby for you? You certainly didn't mention it when i asked about your weekend the other day."

Nictating artlessly, she twirls until they're face to face. "...Oh, i—"

"It's fine, i'm just teasing you. I know you tend to avoid putting yourself in the spotlight."

Intelligently notes the older guy.

"Yeah..." she draws tonelessly, lowering her doe-eyed gaze to the ground. "I hate drawing attention to me, or when people exaggerate my deeds. Which always happens this days..."

"Well," he smiles tenderly. "i'll spare you this time. Please be careful though," his features toughen significantly, "i wouldn't want my favorite student to constantly put herself in serious danger. That man was armed, after all."
"I'll try to be more cautious next time. With the rush of adrenaline and all, I didn't really get to think things through." Maxine elaborates.

"Perfectly understandable. Still, I can't help being curious..." His head inclines, the professional studying her with a quirky stare.

"About what?"

"You, Max." He draws closer. "Your newfound audacity." And closer. "You're different. There's something... weird going on with you." He insists, locution identical to the past.

That rings a bell.

For a second, the cold clutches of fate inclemently wreathe her coated neck. "What do you mean?"

"I can't really explain it. Some sort of shift in your aura. It suits you though, don't worry." Callous digits gingerly land on her shoulder.

Before she can even blink, Max is teleported inside a foreign car. She's driving, actually. Well, not her, Jefferson is. Because it always takes her a couple of seconds to remember she now has the ability to visit her entourage's innermost memories. And it's as disquieting as ever. A rapid glance at the rear-view mirror shows her a familiar body laying limply along the length of the rear seats. Jet black tendrils are sporadically brushing the vehicle's floor. The slim, milky arms she's grown acquainted with through the involuntary trips within her teacher's mind are morbidly blue. Stenches of death besiege her nostrils.

Deanna... Jesus...

The ambient darkness, occasional ignited street-lights and cloudless obscure sky make her realize it's nighttime. They're passing different piers, all numbered. Yet the ride doesn't end in this area.

A beam of white veils her vision.

Mark is alone, shovel in hand. This spot is secluded. No bystanders. No disruption. The smell of earth is pungent. Tufts of brown grass peek out of the sand, twigs crackling beneath his snazzy shoes whenever he steps onward. The man digs for what seems like hours, although Maxine only gets a glimpse of it. He sometimes pauses to wipe some sweat off his forehead and these preciously accommodating moments let Caulfield catch sight of an extremely long bridge stretching over the sea.

Wait... The Golden Gate Bridge. Fuck, this is San Francisco...

Another jump forward in time and Deanna's body bag gets thrown into the freshly dug hole, in the same manner someone would discard a garbage bag. The lifeless young woman blankly stares at her murderer through the half-transparent material.

"It won't happen again." Soughs the famous artist.

The digging restarts soon after. Once Jefferson's goal is accomplished, day is gradually rising over the horizon.

I have to find this place.

Everything suddenly changes and Max is relentlessly propelled across several locations in stages. There's one single invariable factor to them all. Girls. Interacting with him in divergent fashions. Debating on many ordinary subjects, consuming the drinks he offers them, smiling and laughing at
his pleasantries. They will all be victims in the end, the student reckons. The unsuspecting women
don't, on the other hand, regardless of the year in which he meets them. That's why she can
subsequently observe their unconscious selves posing for his lens.

The flashes conclude with Rachel, at a time the freckled brunette can finally recall. To her utter
disgust, she's encroaching onto private territories. Their cherished sessions. Unlike his other preys,
the aspiring model is able to consent. Stuck behind her professor's eyes, Max watches Rachel using
her wiles through half-lidded looks and seductive smiles. Nothing trashy. Instead, nuance and
subtlety would define her impeccably. But things escalate at an alarming rate as the retrospection
proceeds. Caulfield recognizes the dark room. Mark is on the ground next to a doped up Rachel,
pushing something inside her mouth. From time to time, the teen is completely sentient, standing,
sitting, testing stance after stance until the older man deems them satisfactory.

Follows a nocturnal encounter near Blackwell's campus. Jefferson's hands up the blond's shirt. Her
lips pressing upon his stubble. Maxine feels everything, as though she's vicariously tasting those
instants herself. It makes her sick. Revulsion floods her system. She needs to get a grip. She has to
come back.

As if some superior entity had listened to her whims, the world erases itself and reverts to the present.
"Max?" The real Jefferson demands, hands supporting her weight by her waist in hopes of steadying
her tottering frame.

"Sorry..." the ailing adolescent mumbles, nearly gagging in the process.

Don't throw up. You haven't in days, don't screw this up now.

"You scared me. I thought you were having a seizure. Your eyes..."

"I'm not." Recalling, she creates a much needed distance between them. "Everything's alright, trust
me. I have very bad headaches during my periods, and sometimes, the pain is too much to handle. It
makes my eyes roll back."

She should be mortified. But she's not, simply because this is a lie. Plus, she stopped feeling shame
around Jefferson a long time ago. He should, though. Sadly, the man is so bad he doesn't possess the
sagacity to be ashamed of his despicable actions. The fact that she's currently bleeding from the
crevise between her legs is sinking into his brain, the knowing glint inside his eyes telling her he's
probably picturing it unwittingly.

"I see." He murmurs, understanding. "Being a woman sounds terrible."

"It is. You should feel lucky, Mr. Jefferson." The jest comes naturally, another gimmick supposed to
divert his meddling concern elsewhere.

"In moments like these, i do."

The neophyte photographer clears her throat.

"So, maybe we should stray onto another topic... I mean, we all like the freedom of complaining
about our miserable condition but, this is getting a little embarrassing for me." She smiles with
humor, avoiding his gaze in an attempt to appear timid. She knows how to fake it. She used to be so
shy around him after all.

Her teacher laughs genuinely. "I can imagine. Are you excited for the trip?"
"Yes. Very nervous too."

"That's normal. But i'll be there to support you, so there's no need for edginess. I want you to handle yourself on your own as much as possible, but whenever you feel at a loss, i'll help you to the best of my ability. As soon as we set foot in San Francisco, consider yourself my protege."

There's times when Max wonders if being around him so much after everything she went through might have shaped her into someone like him, had she still been broken. She is, in some way, but not in the same fashion as before. Not like the Max she left behind in her other reality. This one... If her ruptured self had spent time with her teacher, would he have succeeded in turning her into the crazed, art-obsessed apprentice he wanted her to be? He was always so adamant on sharing his gift, on allotting his wisdom to someone else.

Someone who wouldn't shy away from harming others to obtain the purest emotion. The perfect shot.

"You can count on me, Max. I assure you, this is a moment of your life you'll never be able to forget."

Perhaps. Perhaps if he'd have taken advantage of her pitiful state, the psycho would have managed. Yet the girl facing him today wasn't the one who tried to enshroud herself under the Bay's frantic waves. She could no longer relate to this Max, nor to the one that existed before all this horror went down. The one who had freshly moved from Seattle to pursue her dreams at Blackwell. Who hadn't talked to Chloe in five years, had no inkling what her best friend looked like presently.

The old Max Caulfield—the original one—was dead. Buried deep into a part of her brain she couldn't access anymore. She was never coming back. And as days passed, as time flew more and more, she was glad of it. Because this Max could achieve so much more, even with her damaged mind and her appalling hallucinations, or the loathsome alter-ego dancing around her head and delighting in her suffering. She owned the sinew the previous one was too self-conscious to have. She was going to make a difference where the former Maxine had failed.

The past would never fade away, but her wounds could be mended. And she fathomed the only way for her to get better was to let go of her guilt. She wasn't ready however. Not until she had fixed everything.

"I'm sure i won't."

Then maybe, she could get rid of her trauma.

His father had sent him a text mandating him to come back home once he was done with school. Nathan seldom takes kindly to being ordered around, but with his begetter, he can't afford to be picky. Especially considering that he has scarcely set foot inside their luxurious estate, and he can already hear the man having a fit upstairs while talking on the phone. Even if he's not currently in the room with him, the fact that he cannot make out the voice of his dad's interlocutor is a good enough hint about what's happening. Another unavailing business call, he guesses.
A deafening din abruptly erupts from Sean's office, the teenager slowing down his steps as he identifies the smashing noise without effort. Heels chink hastily above his head, resounding across the ceiling and presumably belonging to one of their cleaning wenches. Which signifies that his patriarch is no longer alone up there.

*Yep*. *Mr. Big Shot's pissed. Now guess who he's gonna take it out on...*

Perhaps he is secretly aware of his son's unwelcome combing through his personal stuff and it's the reason why he had summoned him home. Although that would be suprising, since Nate's been exceedingly careful not to leave any signs of it before returning to Blackwell. No, there's something else. Something that most likely has to do with what his mother had told him yesterday. If only Wells could hold his tongue for once.

Climbing these stairs is an habit for him, but there's one thing he'll never get used to. The hair-raising atmosphere of this old house. Not that the ceiling and walls are ready to crumble or that the place is unsanitary. On the contrary, everything is minutely kept impeccable, from all their furnitures to each dusted corner of their property. Yet the creaking sounds that echo every now and again from unknown sources give him the creeps. Nathan never believed the Prescotts' residence to be haunted, however, you only had to visit it once to realize how wrong and bizarre it felt to abide among its different rooms and hallways. And don't even get him started on his dad's tastes on furnishings. The whole dwelling could have easily served as model for an horror movie's mansion—minus the nonexistent spiderwebs.

"Come in." Peeps the manly voice from behind the door he's been knocking on inadvertently, too rapt in his own musings.

The rich kid obeys right off the bat. Ponderous-looking curtains are already pulled in spite of the early hour, the room merely illuminated by artificial means instead. Like that green desk lamp on Sean's secretary, similar to the ones you could find in Blackwell's library. Stalking up to his father, he ultimately notices the hunched over maid picking up edged shards off the floor, knees red from the ceaseless friction caused by the rug beneath them. The loud rumpus he had heard earlier was in reality nothing else than a broken glass. Mr. Prescott's mood mustn't have been so bad, or the entire office would be laying in shambles by now.

"Trouble in Dictatorland?" He foolishly provokes, hands in his pockets.

"Nothing unfixable."

"Clearly. Especially when you got other people to pick up your mess."

"And she's generously compensated for it every month." The older man replies with wit, observing his youngest crouch down to help the poor servant. "Leave it." His progeny complies reluctantly, letting the woman finish off her task by herself. "You never bothered worrying about the staff's condition before. Are you finally growing up, son?"

Nathan nods toward the newspaper on his father's desk, the same one Caulfield had showed him earlier this morning. "Is that why you're rampaging your office?" He risks a snarky grin. "Business ain't running smoothly lately?"

Humor completely vanishes from Sean's face. "Some people seem unable to do their jobs correctly these days. My patience is running thin. Sit down."

Again, he submits to the other's will, settling comfortably into the only available chair remaining. "Are you talking about your goons, or your shiny new associates?"
"Of course not. Those ones are nothing short of competent. Not like you wouldn't know, we spoke of this a while ago."

"You also left out the part where you explain what they're planning for your little shit-pit. Assuming you can keep your end of the bargain, with all the complications fucking up your business." He adds, feeling entertained by his dad's straits.

"I already told you. This shithole town is going to get an enema along with a fresh brand. You'll have to deal with our recent affiliation yourself eventually, once you take over."

_Ah, i should have known._

He tilts his head, comprehension crashing onto him. "Is that why i'm here?"

The patriarch adjusts himself in his seat, linking thick fingers together over the table, and plunges his iron gaze inside the child's afterward. "I've come to the conclusion that you'll never listen. Giving you a choice is obviously the worst thing i've ever done. Therefore, i'm bestirring your adaptation to the ownership of this corporation. You can stay at Blackwell and continue your scholarship, but you'll have to compensate for it with preparations for your future on the side. Every other minute you have outside of school will be spent with me, at work. I don't care how much you like photography, if it's just a hobby or if you plan to make a career out of it. You can take as many silly pictures as you want, as long as it's not impeding on your working hours and hampering your progress. To tell you the truth, i don't give a shit about what you want. And i'm not interested in hearing your opinion about my decision, so keep it to yourself."

_Like hell i will!_

"You really want _me_ representing the company? It didn't cross your mind that this might be a bad idea?" Nathan points out heatedly, boiling at the absurd concept of him supplanting his dad in his leading position.

"Sooner than later, this firm will be in your hands. Training you is essential. We wouldn't want all my hard work to crumble under the weight of your ineptitude..."

He howls with laughter, slaps a hand on the wooden furniture separating them, then tops it off by slanting closer to Sean while licking his lips. "And what exactly makes you think i'll go along with your wishes? Why should i care?"

The slamming door alerts them of the maid's egress.

"You're my son. You do what i tell you."

He wants to scream in his ugly, petty face. Do something—anything—that would drive the older man to switch his listless countenance for something more appropriate.

_Stop looking at me like that._

"You don't treat me like a son, you've been treating me like a business contract since i was born." The adolescent rectifies. "Just because you brought me into this world doesn't mean i'll have to owe you for the rest of my life. That you can do what YOU want with it."

How often has he wondered if his existence had been the fruit of negotiations between his parents? Was he ever wanted, or just a backup plan? Maybe an accident that they had resolved to keep around. What did his father feel the first time he held him in his arms? Has he ever been proud, if only for a fleeting instant? When did things precisely start to decline between them?
How could he choose an inane legacy over his own child's affection?

*Did you ever love me?*

"I'm just here to help, Nathan. Whether you realize it or not."

"Help?" Mocks the young man, a toothy smile apparent. "I can't even open up to you without fearing that you'll use it as a way to find my weaknesses and try to manipulate me."

"I already know your weaknesses, Nate. I made you."

The Prescott boy snorts. "Yeah well, mom did most of the labor. You just had to lay back and wait."

"Perhaps." His father caves in on that one point, canting backward until his shoulder blades hit his office chair. "But someone has to educate you properly, and that responsibility falls onto me."

"Oh yes, look at me! Think you did a great job? How do you find the results of all these years of education?"

"Incredibly underwhelming." He confirms, a disdainful brow hardly elevating itself.

"I bet!" Snarls the offended party.

"I bet!" Snarls the offended party.

Sean relocates his eyes sideways, sighing mildly. "I wasn't very different from you at your age, you know. And i was also deeply conflicted with what my father expected of me. You didn't get to know him, but Harry was a very cold man. If you think *i'm* strict, well..." he trails off pensively. "Just like you, i found his methods unfair, if not unnecessary. But if time taught me something valuable, it's that parents always know better. He simply wanted the best for me, and the future of this family. If being rough was what it took, then so be it. And i'm grateful for everything he gave me. Be it our empire, or contusions... Maybe you'll understand one day. As i did."

"I doubt it. All i hear is a sad little despot trying to justify his tyrannical ways. Not working." Nathan says. "This is obviously another one of your mind games. Trying to throw me off by playing the calm and composed card? When all you desire is probably to slap the shit out of me until i finally turn into the obedient little puppet you want me to be."

That part makes the singular gleam in his interlocutor's orbs harden. "Don't worry, daddy. You still got it. It works on your slaves, it works on mom, hell, it even used to work on me! But not anymore. I'm done with you." He stands up leisurely, a matching parallel to a prince withdrawing from his throne. "There's gonna come a time when all the nasty shit you've done is going to bite you right back in the ass. And that day, you'll be fucking sorry."

A final caveat for what seems like a final meeting.

"Listen to him..." Mr. Prescott muses mockingly. "Since when did you become such an exemplary guardian of the underdogs' cause, son? I wonder..."

The kid doesn't reply, pacing to the door. His very last salvation from his genitor's insidious claws.

"Starting next week, you will head to the office everyday directly after school." Sean's stern voice raises behind him as he clasps the handle. "Don't expect me to cut you some slack this time. I would thoroughly enjoy my last days of freedom if i were you."

*I could tell you the same.*
Nate looks over his shoulder, drilling amused pupils through the drab stare he abhors. "I already got great plans for the weekend. I have a feeling it's gonna be very interesting."

Of course, the other doesn't get the insinuation. Nathan doesn't linger around to corroborate his father's ignorance though, exiting the room forthwith. To his astonishment, he stumbles on his mom, who had been standing behind the office door to listen in on their desultory dialogue. She blinks unevenly, face screaming guilty to his internal accusations, and crosses her arms over her beige blazer.

He's not sure what's coming.

While his dad perpetually was all wrath and fury when it came to his lineage's brazenness against authority, his mother had never raised her voice at him. It's like she didn't think he was worth the trouble. The boy could never opine if he found it either vexatious or convenient.

"I warned you not to test him." She simply reminds.

Prescott Junior scoffs. "Ah, yes. Thanks for the heads-up. Fucking mom of the year material... aren't you?"

She frowns at the taunt. "Can't you refrain from turning everything into derision? I don't know what to do with you, Nathan... I really don't."

Poor you.

He advances painstakingly slow, noticing the way she steps back in nigh undissimulated alarm. "I'm not the one you should be worried about. Perhaps you should start questioning your husband a little more about his pastimes."

Well-trimmed eyebrows surge along her forehead. "Why would i do that?"

"You never wondered what's behind that door?" His index finger points toward it. "Why he keeps it locked all the time? Why no one can go in there apart from him? What could he possibly be doing in there? What's he hiding, huh? Are you really that trusting?"

"It's none of my business. Your father has a right to his own space, and so do i."

Nathan produces a sound between a chortle and a grunt. "Keep telling yourself that. You sound like a broken record. Every damn word that comes out of your mouth sounds like something you've learned by heart. There's nothing genuine in what you say."

The desire to shake her out of her misconceptions about her husband threatens to overthrow his self-control. Trying to shove some sense into her is futile. Who is he kidding? She wouldn't question anything. She'd lock herself in her bureau and put on some obsolete classical music, busy her mind with more work or maybe light one of those disgusting cigars he knew she smoked behind everyone's back. Another pointless approach at abating her mental strain and keep blinding herself about her bullshit marriage and dysfunctional family.

"When i was little, i thought you were strong." The woman seems confounded by his refreshingly sedate tone. "Stronger than dad, even. Perhaps because you didn't need to beat me to get me to do what you wanted." He continues, gaze riveted on her person. "Grandma once told me you were the perfect picture of what an independent woman should be. Now look at you..." A mere sway of his head flaunts how low he thinks she had stooped. "You're just his lapdog."

He doesn't waste time waiting for a response and makes his way back downstairs. His phone's
vibrations suddenly perturb the house's widespread quietude.

Where are you?
10/17 17:35pm

My house.
10/17 17:35pm

It's time... Kate is waiting for me.
10/17 17:35pm

Coming.
10/17 17:36pm

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X3otEsS5jiE ]

Kate's turquoise stare still hasn't left the polaroid placed between her palms despite Nathan's confession nearing its completion. Max watches her stay impervious through it all, silently trying to mold together the hunks of information she's getting with what she could barely remember of that night to restructure it in its wholeness. The dreadful after-party she had unknowingly survived isn't the only matter mentioned. Rachel's death after her affair with their secretly deranged teacher, the kidnappings, the photos, Nathan's marginal part in it, his father's, the men responsible for this insanity, and Max's own plan to put a stop to it, are all incorporated into the mix.

Pools of blue-green are seemingly lost on the ghostly form of Rachel Amber virtually cradling a distraught and oblivious Maxine. The latter has ventured to bring the photo as a mean to validate the young man's irrational claims. With such potent evidence, doubts about the fate of Blackwell's sweetheart could no longer dwell within Kate's mind.

Loads of ruefully soughed apologies, visible tremors assaulting his sweaty extremities, and angst-ridden glances at the angel figurine standing on Marsh's desk... that's what the Prescott heir is reduced to during his monologue.

Even now, in the quiet interval ensuing the boy's explanation, she's not sure the blond had caught the gist of it all.
"This is a lot to take in." The concerned party expounds, draping an arm over the back of her chair while conserving the photograph in her other hand.

Nate sends an apprehensive look over his shoulder, eyeing his female cohort, positioned slightly behind him. The two plainly have no inkling on how to respond. Caulfield isn't sure they even should. Of course this is a lot to take in, isn't that evident? Hence the best course of action is indubitably to let her absorb everything patiently.

"How could he do this to me..." Kate whispers in bewilderment, eyes on the ground. "I never saw any clues that..."

"He took advantage of his position as a teacher." Max interrupts promptly before her friend could start blaming herself. "Don't beat yourself up over it Kate, he fooled everyone."

"...I'm scared for you, Max."

She's alluding to their risky stratagem.

"No need. I'll be fine. Trust me." The brunette avers with aplomb.

Marsh's gaze purposely targets Nathan. "Did you do this too?" A flick of the dainty hand holding Max's picture precedes the inquiry.

"Yes and no." Caulfield lies without batting an eye. "One of her and Jefferson's trysts went wrong, Nathan made a mistake and Rachel overdosed. So Jefferson sedated him and posed him with her corpse to implicate him, even if he was the one who had told him to drug her in the first place."

At least, that's the version everyone else would hear from them, including Kate. Telling the exact truth would only further complicate matters. The less incriminating charges against Nathan, the more chances to persuade the jurors to grant him a second chance. Assuming that they didn't run into an inexorable crowd. She knew Rachel didn't mind, Chloe had also been briefed on this particular detail, and Kate wasn't directly concerned about this part of the story anyway, unlike the dead teenager. But that didn't stop Maxine from hating herself more than ever for lying to a precious friend. Or soon, the rest of the world.

There's a part of underlying veracity in this altered statement, because without Jefferson there to coach his pupil into doing terrible things, none of this would have occurred anyhow. Not to mention they had no guarantee that their teacher wouldn't have slipped up one day and kill the poor girl himself without needing Nathan's interference. Nonetheless, it doesn't adequately sweeten the pill. Not at all.

"I'd like a word with him." The religious adolescent requests, eyes trained on her assailant's former abettor. "Alone."

After silently soliciting his endorsement by way of a concerned peek, Max abdicates. "I'll be outside."

The door shuts behind her, so subtly that the motion is barely audible. Afraid of the onerous hush stretching between them, Nathan initiates their private exchange himself.

"I'm so sorry."

Swallowing his own saliva turns into an exacting chore.

"You said that already." The blond recalls. "Why tell me? Is it for forgiveness?"
Her glossy eyes may be unyielding, but her tone is as soft and sweet as he remembers, even with the acerbic edge it has gained in the last minutes.

"No." He denies candidly. "I'm tired of hurting people... I want to change. To right my wrongs. I've never done anything good in my life before. Thought i'd start with you." He explains, wiping his perspiring palms against his pants. "Plus, you deserve to know."

Kate turns her wistful attention away, depositing the polaroid on her table before crossing her arms and feet, gaze on her blue carpeted floor. "I'm glad you told me. Max was right... I don't know if i could ever forgive you if i'd heard the truth from the cops first. Or her."

"You don't have to. That's not why i'm doing this."

She wants to believe it. That Jefferson's words, his ploys to pull the wires of his impressionable broken mind, were truly so effective that he didn't feel like he had a choice when he had spiked her drink just to obtain his mentor's esteem. She's willing to take it all into consideration, either his mental condition or the hardships he had suffered due to his twisted family. She's amenable to put everything into proper context to really understand how things had played out in his head in these moments, how he could have convinced himself that he wasn't doing anything seriously wrong. That letting Jefferson take his sick pictures wouldn't cause her severe harm. Because putting herself into someone else's shoes is what Kate has been practising all her life in order to be the compassionate, merciful person she's striving to become.

And perhaps also because she's absolutely confident that Max would have never let the Prescott say his piece if she didn't unequivocally deem his repentance as sincere. His alacrity and cooperation in putting his father behind bars should be proof enough too.

Yet right now, all she can do is be honest.

"I feel sullied. It's hard to look at you."

Thus she doesn't.

"I can imagine."

"Can you?" She restates through a bitter chuckle. "This is the first time in my life i truly wish to hurt someone." Ringed hands stiffen their hold on her pallid limbs.

His twipperate gulp isn't hard to catch among her bedroom's stillness. "Are you going to—"

"I won't tell anyone." She breaks off his imminent stammering. "Max has gone through great lengths to work a plan out. I don't want to give her any trouble. My anger toward you shouldn't have repercussions for her. You'll have to deal with what you've done by next week... That's enough for me."

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bYlvMhK1FGA ]
"Do we know each other?"

A blue-haired waitress squinted at the seated client in front of her, scanning his handsome features for a sign of recognizance. She got none.

"Uh... I don't recall seeing you before." She retorted bluntly.

"Oh, i remember now!" The bespectacled dude clicked his fingers. "That Vortex Club party last week. You're Max's friend, aren't you?"

"Oh, yeah!" Smiled the punk. "Her best friend actually. And you are..."

"Max's art teacher."

A brief interlude ensued the revelation. "...So you're Mark Jefferson?"

"Yes. It's nice to meet you..." a brisk view of the nametag pinned to her chest proffered what he was looking for, "Joyce? Did i get that right?"

Little did he know, Chloe had been obligated to borrow her mother's uniform this morning. "You did."

"I suppose you've heard of me from her since you mentioned my name?"

"Yep', i've heard plenty." She hinted, repeatedly tapping her pencil against her notepad.

"Hope it was nice things then."

Her azure eyes ascended reflectively, allowing her to feign rumination. "They were very interesting, to say the least." The teenager's honeyed voice divulged.

The attractive man chuckled charmingly. "That's pretty cryptic."

She shrugged innocently. "Sorry, i don't kiss and tell. Did you make a choice yet?"

"No worries." He assured her benignly. "I'll have a simple coffee. Black, no sugar."

"Alright, it shouldn't take long."

"Thanks, Joyce."

Minutes later, when his order was finally ready to be served, the young woman took great pleasure in discreetly spitting into the cup of fresh coffee before delivering it to her patron.


The writing on the wall
You don't want to see at all
But you have to
Yeah you have to
A brownish dog was darting straight toward the exiguous shelter located amid Arcadia Bay's junkyard, a heavily tattooed man straggling not far behind.

"Slow down, pup." The human rasped, palm pressed against his bandaged abdomen.

The pet snubbed its impaired owner's plea, penetrating the structure to begin a thorough inspection by sniffing the ground with its snout. Knowing that Rachel and Chloe used to hang around here all the time, Frank had opted to investigate their squalid crib. A distinct bark pealed across the brick walls when Bowers entered the trashed shack at last. Pompidou galloped up to him, holding something between its teeth. The drug dealer gently nabbed the folded paper from its mouth and opened it, intrigued. He would recognize his girlfriend's handwriting anywhere.

"I want to die?" He read out loud, eyes narrowing into slits. "The fuck happened to you, Rach'...

Questions in the back of minds
Answers you don't want to find
But you have to
Oh you have to

In Seattle, the Caulfields were arguing about their beloved, reclusive daughter.

"She'll call when she's ready. Stop harassing her."

"I don't see what's so hard in taking ten minutes out of your day to speak with your parents."
Reasoned Vanessa.

"You're just being paranoid. She told you everything was okay, why not believe her?"

"Because Ryan, something's wrong. I can feel it." She disclosed, extremities levelled at her heart. "Call it motherly instincts or whatever you want, but i'm not delusional."

"She's busy with school. You know how it is, we went through the same shit when we were her age. And one of her friends tried to kill herself last week. She needs some space." Rationalized the gruff father.

"There's 243 miles between us, she has plenty of space already! Maybe what happened to that Kate girl traumatized her." Her husband's eyes rolled up to the ceiling. "She said she was hanging out with Chloe again, maybe i should call Joyce." She suggested. "I hope they still have the same number..."

Before his wife could reach for their landline phone, Mr. Caulfield obstructed her path, rough hands gripping her shoulders. "You're going too far. You need to stop. Max is a big girl. She's a tough cookie. She'll call, just let her do it on her own terms."
"Nathan..." Kate called, impelling him to glance away from the bedroom door he was facing. "Maybe one day i'll find the strength to look past it, but not right now."

Staring into her eyes for the last time today, he nodded, empathetic. Without further ado, the boy retreated from his classmate's safe haven. Max had been forbearingly waiting for him, looking at the Prescott with a combination of perplexity and grief as soon as he reappeared.

"You know how to drive?" He questioned, toying with something inside his pockets.

After one affirmative nod from his interlocutor, he threw his car keys in her hands.

"Then let's go."

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3UdbsqCd6RU]

The moon is full that night, its effulgent luminescence reinforced by the spatter of stars humbly shimmering around it. Tucked in a fluffy, warm blanket, Max surveys Nathan's remote silhouette bustling along Arcadia's shoreline from atop his truck's hood. The boy is profoundly engaged in an environmental photoshoot which had started fifteen minutes prior.

She's conscious he needs some time to himself without actually being alone, so she leaves him to his occupation while the fabric she's swaddled in shields her from the glacial draft meandering the beach. The panorama is too impressive to complain anyway. Maybe she should have snatched her camera too before driving them there.

However, the place crucially lacks its habitual wildlife. Birds were evidently fundamental to a natural atmosphere, and their absence gave the landscape a morose aspect.

This better be temporary.

Five minutes later, her Prescott friend saunters back to her and negligently plops down beside the girl, his car creaking under the pressure of their combined weights. Maxine knows he wouldn't have returned if he wasn't ready to discuss, and yet, she can't bring herself to do anything else than obtusely peer at his profile. He won't talk about Kate, and there's nothing to add to this specific topic, but she'd still like to deal with the plethora of inquiries trotting around her hectic brain.
"Just fucking say it already." He dictates without looking away from his photographic gadget, thumb pressing on its buttons at regular intervals.

Either he had also acquired super powers over time, or she's just very easy to read.

"Why did you drug Chloe the night you met her?" Vocalizing it liberates a tad of the heft compressing her core. "You thought Rachel wouldn't mind when you did it to her because of her shenanigans with Jefferson, but you couldn't possibly think what you were doing to Chloe was alright..."

At least i hope.

"It was revenge, i think." He elucidates, nose dived in his individual slideshow of recently taken pictures.

"Revenge? For what?"

"Oh please," he derides, "i caught up on her intentions the second i looked into her eyes. She was after my money. Not like she was the first. I know exactly what she was planning, saw right through her snaky head. She was gonna get me piss drunk and take advantage of my state to steal some cash from me. Bet she thought i was too stupid to suspect anything."

"So it was justified?" The remonstrance pervading her elocution is painfully palpable.

"I didn't say that." Nathan suspends her prospective reprimand, mien stony. "Yes, i fucked up. And i already told you it wouldn't reoccur." The way he drops his pricy camera in her lap afterward is her sole cue that he doesn't mind her perusing its content.

A symbol of trust, hopefully.

Max browses through the shots while he savors the distant tide's extensive lull. Countless of them depict the oceanic scenery ahead of them, whereas more ancient ones revolve around these woeful whales' massive carcasses. Her introduction to his macabre esthetic preferences had originated from an antecedent timeline, so she's not disconcerted.

"Why do you take pictures of dead things? Is it some sort of... fascination?"

He gives her the stink-eye. "You really take me for a nutcase."

"I'm just curious. I want to know more about you. And when you ask me questions, i always answer it."

"Depends if it suits your mood..." He appends sarcastically, hesitation urging him to mark a pause before carrying on. "You've ever seen a corpse? The real thing i mean, not those bullshit ones we see in movies."

I told him about all the people that died during the storm, didn't i?

"Yeah..." Yet the Bay's denizens are not the ones immediately coming to mind. Instead, a far-flung image of her deceased grandmother resurges, the kind woman she had adored reduced to a hollow sack of flesh devoid of spirit.

"What was your first thought?" His harmless interrogation constrains her back into her eight years old self.
"I couldn't recognize the person anymore." Maxine confides, cerulean pearls squinching at the starry sky. "It was clearly their face, their body, but... they were gone. Nothing to do with their appearance. It was more like a feeling... I don't know how to describe it, it's too peculiar."

"An empty shell." Summarizes the Prescott, gazing up at the same spot.

"Yes. Like everything that made them who they are, their personality, their soul... Vanished. Nothing left. For a second, i thought i was staring at a mannequin... not someone i loved."

"I want to know where they go." Reveals her companion. "I know it seems fucking creepy but, i can't help myself. When i see one, i have to capture it with my camera."

Her head instantly curves in his direction. "For what reason?"

"It started when i was a kid. I used to think that if i was quick enough, maybe i'd be able to catch them leaving their bodies behind."

"So you're just trying to photograph people's souls? Are you sure you're not trying to make your obsessions sound more poetic than they really are?"

Glowering at the adjacent adolescent in reprisal, Nathan's astringent repartee doesn't delay. "I'm not some twisted psychopath, okay? Or a fucking emo bitch who writes poem with the blood from their wrist for that matter."

Max nonchalantly hands him his camera. "Maybe not, but i doubt you'll ever manage to solve an ongoing afterlife mystery by photographing corpses. Is it really necessary?"

*Besides, you'll rarely come across human remains, so you're stuck with animals.*

"I was a *kid*, Max. It didn't seem that weird in my head at that time."

"You're still doing it to this day though." Maintains the brunette, ebbing until her spine meets rigid metal. "There's really no other reason behind it than curiosity?"

"The motives have changed now." His next sentence is pronounced in a lower pitch. "I envy them."

"You're jealous of the dead?"

"Sometimes."

"Why?"

"Because they get to escape. And i don't." He sends her a dirty look over his shoulder. "And before you go down that road, no i'm *not* suicidal." He refutes, rolling his eyes before following her example by sprawling his svelte figure along the car's hood.

"No need to get so defensive about that. There's nothing to be ashamed of. It happens to a lot of people."

He resorts to snorting afresh, impatient to veer off the sinister theme of their deliberation. "Like you would know."

The girl falls awkwardly silent, forcing him to swivel her way. She's holding something back.

"...Caulfield?"
No backlash. If the wind wasn't presently blowing her hair out of her face, he'd have speculated she was a mere painting. A still image laid there to deceive him. Someone could have told him Max Caulfield was made out of porcelain, he would have believed it. So fragile in appearance, easily breakable, yet hard to the touch. She's everything Jefferson seeks in a subject. Worse than that, she's most likely the complex, immaculate muse he's been chasing after all these years.

Nate's blood freezes.

Caulfield wasn't the type who let others shoulder her burdens, hence, that moronic woman continually kept things to herself. But everyone has their limits, right? And Max would ineluctably reach hers someday. She won't shatter in one go, no. She'll crack slowly throughout the years, then fall apart delicate piece by delicate piece. With all the grace one can manage.

He immortalizes the moment in a swift flash. She doesn't even notice.

"Actually, i do." Is her startling, dilatory comeback. "I wouldn't have called it that when it happened though... suicide. It really was what it was now that i look back on it, but... in my head, i only wanted to disappear."

"You? You tried to kill yourself?" Nathan reiterates, boggled by the notion.

"Not consciously. At least, not really. Chloe was dead. Everything had gone to shit. But everybody was moving on. The world kept on turning, and i was stuck. I thought i would get over it at first, like the rest of them. I faked it pretty well in the beginning. People thought i was strong and... not happy of course, but, something like that. And then i cracked. There was pain, and anger, and tears... and i thought acceptance would be the next thing to come. But no. All that was left was emptiness. Everything felt void of sense or purpose. I didn't have a place to fit in anymore. Not at school, not in my hometown, not in my own house. I lost my connection to the world around me. To the people i loved. It felt like waiting for eternity to stop, while knowing perfectly it wouldn't. With nothing good enough to keep you distracted from your thoughts. Life tends to get awfully boring when you have no reason to get up in the morning."

Now Max understood how Chloe must have experienced her departure after William's death. True, moving away had been her parents decision, not hers, but in the mourning child's heart, it must have felt like treason regardless. Maxine could finally relate to the torture, even if Chloe's ordeal had been far worse, from her point of view. The thirteen years old blond hadn't been gifted with incredible powers, couldn't go back in time to reshape the tragic events of her life. Hadn't been blessed with a second chance. She's had to make due with what little she had left to cope with bereavement— Perpetual rage and contrition. Joyce had been her sole anchor through it all, and undoubtedly what had kept her going while her selfish, powerless best friend was commencing anew miles away.

"I couldn't talk about the horrible things i was forced to live through to anyone without the risk of sounding insane." Max goes on, her comrade's dreary orbs still pinned to her visage. "So i kept my mouth shut. Well, it didn't do me any good." Her trembling suspiration transforms in a steamy haze. "One day i decided visiting places that tied me to Chloe might make me feel better. I thought the beach would be a good choice. I remember walking along the shore, listening to the gulls and... Next thing i knew i was knee deep into the ocean. I didn't even realize i was trying to drown myself until Rachel literally pulled me out of the water."

"What? Rachel?"

"Not her, obviously. A deer. I don't know if it was her ghost or just some sort of... spiritual aspect. But it was her, definitely. She seems to often manifest under this form for some reason." Caulfield says. "She's probably the reason i'm still here today. She convinced me to give it another go. I didn't
want to go through all this shit again, but i guess i owed her that. Her and Chloe. And Joyce. And maybe even you."

"Are you fucking serious? You didn't owe me shit. I'm partly responsible for everything that happened to you."

"Partly. That's the word. And you paid for it more than you deserved because i was too blinded by my desire to save Chloe to deal with things correctly. Meanwhile, worst people than you were allowed to roam free. That's not fair."

"Pshh—Listening to you, you're indebted to the whole fucking universe. You got a nasty guilt complex, y'know."

She certainly does.

The youngest teenager intentionally withholds her usual sass, choosing rather to glance at her counterpart. Perceiving his temperate yet nonstop shivering reminds her the Prescott has no protection against the numbing temperatures. They'd better get in the car, but that would mean they'd eventually end up returning to Blackwell. She doesn't want that. Being together, away from their cursed school, is amazingly refreshing.

"I'm freezing. Let's get back inside." The rich kid proposes, rapidly arising from his red SUV.

Maxine ditches her blanket upon entering the vehicle. Nathan subtly rotates his key within the ignition lock, roof light and dashboard lighting up with the radio coming to life simultaneously as he successively switches the heater on.

[ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vnLAa6_hB9A ]

Remarking his evident procrastination at pulling out of their sandy sanctuary, she expediently jumps on the opportunity. "I got another question."

"Seriously?" He may sound annoyed, but she knows that deep down, he's grateful for the interruption. "Let me guess, it's about—"

"I want things to be clear between us." She intervenes before the boy can verbalize how much of a nuisance she's turning out to be. "What are we exactly? Friends? Because i don't usually put my tongue in my friends' mouths."

Nate sighs resignantly, his resilience to explain his feelings abruptly slipping away. "I think i can trust you. You may know more about me than a lot of other people in my life, but it doesn't go both ways. With all the disturbing shit you have on my ass, you could have the cops throw me in jail on a whim. What do i have on you? I barely learned a thing or two about your past over the last few days. You can't expect me to throw some bullshit confessions at someone i've started talking to almost two weeks ago."

"Of course not. That's not what i asked for."

"Then what?"

"All i want is for you to tell me if we're doing this because you enjoy our dynamics and because you
"I'm not using you for sex, since that's what you're implying. And i may not be a lovesick puppy like your stupid Warren, but i do..." Nathan halts, lids firmly closing, like his next words represent a tremendous effort from him, "...Care." He finally admits. "Nonetheless.

"Well, i'm not in love with you either." Max counters. "Our... "friendship" is fairly new, as you've mentioned, so that'd be ridiculous. That doesn't stop me from liking you though."

"And making out with me," He completes wryly.

"And making out with you." She agrees. "Now that this is out of the way, let's just... keep going? We'll see where it takes us soon enough. I don't want to rush anything, contrary to what you seem to believe."

"Good." Deadpans the well-off teen. "And you didn't have to tell me about your feelings, i already know. You're not very discreet."

The gratuitous flak makes her sulk prettily. "Maybe i prefer admitting things myself instead of letting you put words in my mouth."

"Which you do all the time with me."

"Ugh!" Groans the brunette. "Why do you always have to anger me?"

"I like riling you up. Turns me on." He shares with a crooked grin.

"So if i wanted to give you a boner, i'd just have to frown, or yell at you?" She strikes back without thinking.

Good Lord... I can't believe i just said that.

Regaled eyes bulge from their sockets. "Damn Caulfield, seems like hanging out with me is healthy for you after all. You're less and less of a prude."

"I never was." Is her ineffective riposte to the quip.

"So you say." Gently, Nathan hikes up her sleeve to examine the dissipating scrapes she hadn't scratched in days. "They're fading."

Thirty seconds elapse wordlessly.

A harsher tug on her arm sends her flying onto him, the young man manoeuvering her over his lap according to his liking. "What are you doing?" Max exclaims, left knee accidentally bumping into the gearshift without consequences.

Nathan's forefinger pinches a fraction of her scarf, yanking on it until the material unravels from her nape. "You realize this is our last night together this week? Or forever, depending on your survival skills..."

Confusion is written all over her face. "And?"

The shawl is sloppily hurled aback, joining her blanket on the backseats. "Well, i thought i'd better find a way to motivate you about not getting killed. You know," he intones, digits tracing the hickeys he had branded her with this morning, "give you something to look forward to when you come back."
"Don't tell me he's been concocting some kind of perverted plan all day long...

"I can't decide whether you're a hopeless romantic trying to make the most of our last moments, or a shameless pervert trying to get into my pants."

"What about both?" He offers, diverted by the sight of her in such a vulnerable position, cornered between him and the steering wheel.

"They're incompatible."

An imperious brow arches. "You're clearly clueless when it comes to guys."

"What i know is that you're trying to bribe me with..."

Commissures cynically contort. "With?"

"...Indecent stuff." Blurs out Maxine.

"There's a word for that, virgin. It's called sex."

"I thought you didn't want to rush things." She huffs.

"I don't. I got other things in mind. Nothing too overwhelming." Nathan promises, unbuttoning Rachel's old checkered shirt.

There's a sensuality in everything he does to her, a trait she would have never correlated with this boy. More often than she cares to admit, she finds herself leering at weird parts of his body, innocent pieces of flesh she erstwhile couldn't imagine anyone else would feel tempted by. The column of his throat, peculiarly his adam's apple. The sharp definition of his jaw. The dimples in his lower back, which she can sometimes espy when his shirt and jacket ride up too high. The lackadaisical expression he occasionally wears while staring straight into her eyes. The way his thin collarbones almost stick out of his chest. How dark, well-drawn eyebrows manage to tremendously hone his gaze. That obdurate little lock of hair that always falls over it. How boyish features scrunch up in a severe scowl during most of their tiffs.

Nothing ribald like his backside—something she often hears other girls mention in the middle of their confabulations—or as trite as an overvalued six-pack.

"That's the magic with sex, it comes in many forms. You can even keep your clothes on." The phrase ends with his hips meaningfully grinding into hers.

"U-um..." Indulging in hedonism is hardly part of her routine. The hypothesis alone suffice to render her speechless.

"Relax. I told you..." Nathan's susurration is carnality personified. "Stop thinking." He coaxes, hooking his lips to hers.

Kissing him will inevitably turn her thought process to mush. And as predicted, the second his tongue grazes the roof of her mouth, enthralling jolts race down her back. All the fervent protests she had in stock prematurely die, forever ensnared in her larynx. The heated exchange perseveres, gradually increasing in intensity. Hearing the wet sounds their mouths produce everytime they
connect strangely arouses her. Coherence vacates the premises of her mind, his leg never ceasing the satisfying friction between her thighs. Nathan switches tactics without warning, cascading open-mouthed kisses down the brittle throat he had uncovered.

Her head rolls backward in submission, allowing him to feast on her flesh to his convenance. Heavy wheezes desert her lungs as resolute fingers probe a bare stomach, adroitly proceeding to a taut back prior to daringly breaching the barrier of her bra without unclasping it. Trapped in a possessive clinch, the mousy student reciprocates the nimble touches, ridding him of his denim jacket before gliding her fingertips beneath his obsidian shirt. His ragged panting is just as bad as hers at this point.

Shrinking back slightly from each other, her glazed stare meets his ardent eyes.

"Shit Caulfield, you're hot."

A subjugating conflagration sparks underneath her skin. If somebody pushed her into real flames right now, she wouldn't be able to tell the difference. The heir's capacity to make her dismiss her self-consciousness is unprecedented. Exhalations mingle erotically as the young man recaptures extraordinarily pliant lips. Feeling him growing hard against her knee isn't enough to fluster her this time. Their mutual fondling sustains itself quite lengthily, the pleasurable warmth in her lower belly flourishing everyday her crotch and his thigh sensuously converged. The schoolgirl represses a surprised gasp when his thumbs unforeseeably massage the peaks of her breasts through her underwear.

This doesn't go unnoticed. "You're awfully quiet." He scolds blandly in the midst of their snogging.

Everything is hot. Too hot. Her body, Nathan's, the stuffy air surrounding them both. The masculine musk oozing from him clouds her senses, inhibiting her from focusing on anything other than his enticing redolence. It fills every inch of space around her, or maybe within, she's not sure anymore. She can't think straight. Can't breathe properly. Unsolicited moans break out despite her willpower. His hands seize her hips, assisting her in the back and forth motion executed across his leg.

"Feels good?" Nathan snickers crudely. "You're wet, aren't you?" She cries out at his bluntness, covering his filthy mouth with her palm.

A guttural laugh emanates from the boy, unable to escape effectively due to her hindering hand. Her slender thighs tighten around his, signaling him her climax is but a hair's breadth away. Something inside Max menaces to burst. Something so mind-blowingly powerful she fears surrendering to it would result in cardiac arrest.

"It's fine. Let go..." Heartens her partner, his methodical humping redoubling.

The words are sufficient to send her over the edge. A screen of white progressively permeates her sight, constraining her to seal her eyelids shut. Boundless bliss ripples throughout the hyperventilating young woman. Endorphins broadly spread across her system, converting her to liquid jelly while Nathan terminates their movements, observing his shorter lover attentively.

"See? Not so bad, huh?" The spitfire has the nerve to gloat.

"W-what about you? Did you..."

"Nope." He lights a cigarette after recovering his pack and lighter from the glove box, then partially opens his window. "S'fine, i'm used to blue balls syndrome around you." A dainty fist swings at him. "Hey! You don't hit the guy who gives you orga—"

"Don't finish that sentence if you care about your manhood." Max intersperses his cheeky banter
with a threat, knee still dangerously close to his family jewels.

"Tss—Playing shy now? You were more wanton this morning." Maybe he's become inured to her intimidations. "Sleepy?"

"It's your fault." She quibbles, forehead resting limply upon his shoulder.

"Go on then." He encourages, pushing her further into him with the extremity pressed on the back of her head.

"But—"

The Prescott inhales his stick of tobacco, fumes shirking through the ajar pane. "I don't want to go back to Blackwell right now. I'll wake you up when i'm ready to drive us back."

Silence peacefully encompasses them, but Caulfield fights off the fatigue creeping up on her in an ultimate strain to salute her partner for his accomplishment of the late afternoon.

"Nathan..."

"What?"

"I know you were scared... about talking to Kate." She whispers. "You did a good thing."

*I'm proud of you.*

He hears the thought, if the incisive sheen within his leaden stare is any indication. "Just sleep, Max."

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