Letters from Tomorrow

by Rick Dangerous

Summary

Max's ruthless future self sidesteps the limitations of her focus power by leaving written letters in the past. Desperate to save both Chloe and Arcadia Bay's populous, she mercilessly manipulates the past in order to save the future. This story follows a past Max, Chloe and Victoria as they struggle to enact the instructions in these letters from tomorrow. A slightly satirical AU.
The girl with the cashmere sweater

Chapter Notes

I'll probably use different character POVs on some of the scenes which closely match up with game canon, just to give an alternate perspective on them. Starting with everyone's favourite self proclaimed Queen of Blackwell Academy for chapter 1.

"God, his soft voice is, like, so dreamy."

Victoria Chase tried to repress a smirk and concentrate on Mr Jefferson's lecture as Taylor whispered into her ear.

"He's so refined and wise. It makes it sound so much more naughty when he bitches out some famous artist in the class. Calls their work bullshit."

Victoria was now chewing her lower lip. Taylor Christensen, Victoria's number one slave (best friend) had long known Victoria was hot for teacher. But a few days ago she'd discovered that Victoria would literally melt if you whispered the right things about him during one of his lectures. Needless to say Taylor had been exploiting this at least once a photography class.

"And, oh my god, just imagine if he had a primal side. He'd go full caveman on you one day. You know, knock you out and take you back to his lair, to use you for his own satisfaction."

Victoria subconsciously began shifting her legs under the desk, as if she couldn't quite find a comfortable position for them, but was determined to keep searching for it.

"And maybe he does. I totally caught him checking out my legs yesterday. He looked hungry."

WHAT THE FUCK. Victoria's expression of angelic pleasure dissolved into that of a jealous gorgon, causing Taylor to almost jump out of her chair in terror. Moment fucking ruined.

Victoria tried to calm herself. Taylor had probably just made up that last bit to wind her up. And so what if Mr Jefferson briefly looked at Taylor's legs. They were practically the eighth wonder of the world, and just like the other seven were on permanent display. Taylor's jean shorts, which were as short as they were tight, saw to that. Everyone looked at them. Even a significant portion of the girls struggled to keep their eyes off them, or so Victoria had been told.

In the end, Victoria decided to let them both Taylor and Mr Mark Jefferson off easily. She'd probably just make Taylor publicly display her status as a slave on her dorm room's whiteboard or something. Oh wait, she already did. Well, whatever, Taylor was already trying to make amends anyway. She'd made herself busy penning a rather concise note to resident "naive religious girl" Kate Marsh. Always an acceptable target, but even more so since she had displayed (and been recorded displaying) certain behaviours at odds with her sanctimonious "true love waits" act at the last vortex club party.

As for "Mark", all he needed to do was continue the lecture in that soothing baritone. Oh, and declare her the winner of the "Everyday Heroes" contest. Not that it should be that difficult. She was
quite confident that her entry was the best.

Fishing her everyday heroes entry out of her purse, Victoria laid it down on the table with reverence. It was a photo of her father, a mix of adoration, exhaustion and relief on his face. It was taken after he spent a week pouring over Chase holdings' finances, desperately trying to dissuade Inland Revenue from bankrupting them. The photography judges didn't need that much background detail though. Victoria's Father worked very hard to support, even save the family, and still found the time and humour to indulge his daughter's photography habit in spite of being exhausted. The mix of adoration and exhaustion his eyes were giving said it all. Details would just muddy the emotion with envy.

Victoria took a second glance at her photo, just to confirm in was every bit as perfect and immaculately detailed as she had imagined, and looked around the class triumphantly. Most of her peers were talentless hacks with no imagination. They'd take the most obvious interpretation of "hero" imaginable. Probably take a photo of a fireman or something. Fools. That would almost certainly be the correct choice for a newspaper job. Something that would appeal to the peanut gallery, people who don't like to think or interpret. The art elite in San Francisco would be expecting something less obvious. Something that they could pour over and analyse intently.

There was only one person in the class that gave Victoria pause for concern. Max Caulfield, midget hipster from the back row of class. The only serious competition Victoria had. What would she enter? Though she handed in a range of photos for class assignments, Max was best known for her obsession with selfies. Would she actually enter a selfie? It would be outrageously arrogant, essentially declaring herself as the "hero". But what if the judges, tired of false modesty, thought such an arrogant approach was 'fresh'. What if they went for it? Or if she somehow eliminated the arrogance angle completely, portrayed herself as a stand-in for the everyman? She was certainly plain enough for people to project themselves onto.

Well, to be fair, Max wasn't completely plain. Her lips were rather impressive, both full and of an alluring if understated colour. The only issue Victoria had with her own body was her small pursed lips, which she mitigated to some extent with skilled lipstick application. Max's had no need for embellishment. And her wrists were far more feminine than Victoria's chunky ones. But that came from her whole "fragile little fawn" aesthetic. Anyway Victoria's expensive gold bangles and watch were more than up to the task of concealing such minor imperfections.

Victoria put her head in her hands and sighed. Why the hell was she worried about the pedo-bait in the back of the class. Max Caulfield had nothing on her. Victoria aced almost every class, with a GPA of 3.9. She was deeply troubled by that last 0.1, but sure she could claw it back with extra credit from somewhere. Max averaged B-, hanging on by the skin of her teeth to a photography scholarship she'd somehow managed to score. Victoria hated the fact that Max was the "photography scholarship student". It wasn't like Victoria couldn't have won a scholarship too. It's just her parents were more fiscally competent that others, so she didn't need one. How did Max get that scholarship in the first place? Oh right, Mr Jefferson had personally selected her because he liked her work. And he was the first round judge of the competition too. Fuck.

Of course, there was at least one more reason Max bothered Victoria, and it went well beyond a single photography competition. Victoria knew that deep down the two of them were quite a lot alike. Victoria was a closet geek who secretly enjoyed many of the things she chided Max for partaking in. But while Victoria concealed her power-level beneath designer clothing, Max openly wore her geek and hipster interests like badges of honour. Victoria could never get away with that. It would be the end of her, socially speaking, displaced by some upstart. Her number two slave (homework mule) and budding Starscream, Courtney Wagner, for example. She shuddered at that thought, then at her use of a transformers reference to articulate it. Her mask was slipping again.
Victoria was at the top of the school's totem pole, but with the position came obligations. She was under constant pressure to maintain her popular public image, her designer fashion sensibilities, the refined inflections in her speech, and her consistently high grades. Max, on the other hand, could apparently get away with acting however she wanted. That kind of pissed Victoria off.

Another thing Max could apparently get away with was sleeping in class. Victoria stared at Max's petite form, collapsed serenely over her desk. She caught herself picturing young Bambi curled up in a tussock for some reason, but quickly banished that thought and assumed what she hoped was a look of contempt.

Weighing her options, Victoria decided not to draw the class's attention to this sleeping fawn and getting her chewed out by Mr Jefferson. It would probably just backfire on her. For whatever reason Max seemed to be Mr Jefferson's favourite. It was infuriating how he doted on her, complimenting and encouraging, and all she did was back away into the corner like some terrified little woodland creature. That only seemed to encourage him. She' call it a lame gimmick, but damn if it wasn't effective. In fact, he'd probably use Max being caught mid-siesta to try to build her up in front of the class. Offer a token reprimand, then "surprise" her with an easy question that anyone could answer and heap praise upon her. No, Victoria's best bet was just to let sleeping hipsters lie. If that innocent doe faced waif wanted to rest her eyes, then fine! She was all the more likely to end up as a deer in the headlights when this class's content came up in assessment.

A feeling of warmth spread from Victoria's shoulder, interrupting her sudden inexplicable fascination with local fauna. She turned to see Taylor gently resting her hand on her shoulder, a concerned look on her face.

"Victoria, Calf-field's got you zoning out again."

"Fuck."

Victoria had confided in Taylor about the little problem she was having with Max. For reasons she could not fathom, Victoria was finding Max and her little eccentricities incredibly disruptive during class. Taylor had seemed surprisingly aggravated at this, and immediately come up with the name Calf-field in retaliation, hoping to imply Max was a cow. Victoria had warmed to the nickname after a Google search revealed some subspecies of young deer were also referred to as calves. Taylor agreed this only made the name more appropriate, but secreted grave concerns. Firstly, that revelation seemed to take most of the sting out of the insult, almost making it a term of endearment. Secondly, Victoria's obsession with Max was so great that she apparently needed to fact check her insults, just to make sure they were "good enough" to use on Max.

At that moment, Max snapped back to life, as if awakened from a nightmare. Probably about the current price of Polaroid film, Victoria smirked. How the hell did someone so financially challenged afford film for all those throw-away selfies anyway? Claiming them as an expense against her scholarship?

Taylor gently tapped her leg against Victoria's.

"Victoria, you're still totally bewitched. Is there, like, anything I can do to get your focus off Calf-field. Do I need to get Bambi tattooed on my leg, or something?" Taylor ran her hand along her long, toned thigh for emphasis and shot Victoria a wicked smile.

Victoria found herself stifling laughter. It was the most amusing thing Taylor had managed all month. And the way she sold her reaction, feigning sadness and disappointment at Victoria laughing in response. Brilliant. It was almost like she was serious. There was certainly more to her than the leggy vapid ditz she presented.
The intervention by Taylor turned out to be just in time too: Mr Jefferson was just about to ask the class questions. Victoria's favourite part of class, she was responsible for over ninety percent of the answers given. A figure that would be even higher, if Mr Jefferson didn't 'volunteer' inattentive students instead of just selecting those with raised hands.

"Now, can you give me an example of a photographer who perfectly captured the human condition in black and white?"

"Diane Arbus". Victoria quickly replied with a smirk. "Because of her images of hopeless faces. You feel like, totally haunted by the eyes of those sad mothers and children." She had read Mr Jefferson's photography books cover-to-cover several times, and knew he held certain derisive opinions about her. But as Taylor had discovered, she rather enjoyed hearing them straight from the source. It made him seem like such a rebel.

"She saw humanity as tortured, right. And frankly, it's bullshit. Shhh- keep that to yourselves. Seriously though, I could frame any one of you in a dark corner, and capture you in a moment of desperation, and any one of you could do that to me."

Taylor shot Victoria a knowing glance, who's lower lip was finding itself thoroughly chewed for the second time this lesson. He was doing it again, bitching out the greats. Also the way he talked about cornering her in a moment of desperation. God. Still, she couldn't have Mr Jefferson thinking she had tastes in opposition to his own.

"I have to admit, I'm not a big fan of her work." She interjected. "I prefer Robert Frank."

This was a safe choice. Mr Jefferson's own books spoke very highly of him as a major influence, and sure enough, she was rewarded with an enthusiastic recounting of how Frank's "The Americans" accurately portrayed the plight of all levels of society in 1950s America. Victoria drank in his enthusiasm, feeling slightly giddy at the idea her answer could engender such a passionate response from her teacher. She knew, deep down, that she was being rather pathetic if not outright deluded. Still, surely nothing that serious could result from indulging in a one-sided crush, just a little?

For the second time this lesson, Victoria found a rather enjoyable moment rudely interrupted, this time by the flicker of a camera flash and the click of a shutter. The culprit was revealed almost immediately, the quiet whir of an old Polaroid mechanism the dead giveaway. Oh My God. Max actually took a selfie in the middle of Mr Jefferson's class? With the fucking flash turned on?

Most of the class had redirected their collective gazes toward Max, who seemed momentarily lost to the world, eyes sweeping around bewildered. It sort-of reminded Victoria of Kate's behaviour during her drug-fuelled bender at the last Vortex Club party. Max taking drugs immediately before the only class she was any good at seemed pretty unlikely, though. Then again, so was the idea of Kate Marsh taking drugs in any circumstance, let alone doing so then indiscriminately lip locking the nearest ten people.

Mr Jefferson had noticed Max's impromptu photography session too, and expertly changed tack on his lecture to cover the history of self-portraiture. Victoria was awed at how he could continue to educate while simultaneously chastise a misbehaving student. A wicked smirk formed on Victoria's face. Maybe once she won the "every heroes" photography competition, and was alone with Mr Jefferson in San Francisco, he could simultaneously chastise and educate her too.

At that moment, Taylor decided to send her little note to Kate, by way of airmail. The note, now scrunched into a ball of paper, was making a perfect shallow arc for Kate's head when Max Caulfield shot out a hand, and without even looking, caught it. Both Taylor and Victoria immediately began to give Max the evil eye, only to quickly break eye contact, completely taken aback by Max's
"She looks like a postal worker." Taylor whispered.

Victoria agreed this was an apt comparison. Max looked haunted, worn down and murderous all simultaneously, hunching over her desk and desperately searching the content of her pencil case. Victoria felt like something awful was about to happen. Like this possessed Max was going to pull out a craft knife, leap from her chair and slash someone's throat. Surely Max hadn't gone full meltdown over an innocent little joke between Kate and themselves?

A blink of the eye later revealed that Max had not, in fact, tried to murder anyone. Yes, she still looked completely mental, but rather than attacking, she had put pen to paper and begun furiously scribbling something. Victoria carefully re-examined her thoughts over the past couple of seconds. Had she really used the word murderous to describe Max Caulfield? Waif hipster suddenly going Rambo? Well, Stallone was pretty short too. Then all of a sudden, Max's face returned to normal. She looked confused, disorientated. At that moment, Mr Jefferson decided to strike.

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

Max stared blankly for a second, then looked desperately around the room. Victoria noted with some relief that Rambo-Max had reverted back to Bambi mode. She chided herself for actually being intimidated by Max. Sensing a chance to reassert herself, she raised her hand, eager to volunteer an answer.

"Max, are you still with us?" Jefferson inquired.

"I don't think Max was ever with anybody." Victoria sniped, hand still raised. After a brief pause, Taylor chimed in with sycophantic laughter, while hoping Victoria could explain the joke after class.

Meanwhile, Victoria couldn't believe her luck. This was like a "good" version of her original prediction. Jefferson had asked a question, but Max was a deer in the headlights, no clue how to answer. Victoria knew the answer and would prove herself in front of everyone that mattered. And everyone besides Mr Jefferson and Max Caulfield as well.

It almost went Victoria's way. Jefferson had waited long enough for an answer and was about to throw the question to the class. Due to the general level of class apathy, that meant asking Victoria. But at the last second Max realised she was tightly gripping a pen for some reason, and looked down at her exercise pad.

"The D-Daguerreian process, invented by French painter Louis Daguerre around 1830. This process made portraiture hugely popular, mainly because it gave the subjects clearly defined features. Following which, the first Daguerreotype self-portrait in the United States was by Robert Cornelius."

Max's delivery wasn't the most poetic. In fact it sounded like Max had read a model answer out rather than come up with it herself. None the less, the substance of the answer was perfect.

"Outstanding." Jefferson replied. "A little slow to begin, but exactly the answer I would have given. I don't suppose you want to take over the class Max?"

Victoria's teeth ground like millstones. Her original prophecy had come true after all. The school bell rang and class was dismissed. She barely noticed Mr Jefferson's reminder about the everyday heroes contest, particularly to Stella, Alyssa, Taylor and Max, whom had not at least publicly displayed much intention of competing. Instead, Victoria stayed motionless at the desk, her eyes latched onto
the still bewildered Max in a death-stare. "Fucking Max Caulfield," she muttered, over and over.

Taylor sighed. Victoria was like a broken record when it came to Max, always getting stuck repeating her name over and over. Slightly ironic considering Max was the one with the vinyl collection. Speaking of Max, she'd apparently noticed Victoria's attempt at laser vision, gesturing for Taylor to do something. God it was lame having your best friend labelled weird by the official class weirdo. Victoria had to get it together.

Picking up a ruler, Taylor gently brought it down gently on Victoria's head, like a monk chastising her disciple for failing to empty their mind during meditation. Victoria sprung up as if a spell had been broken and proceeded to perform her normal after-class activity. Fail miserably at chatting up Mr Jefferson. Well, she actually had a few good excuses this time: handing in her everyday heroes competition entry, and trying to get that extra credit to boost her GPA the final 0.1 point. It was just kind of sad Victoria never obsessed over anyone who'd actually return her affection.
A letter from tomorrow

Chapter Notes

Back with another Chapter, this time Max POV. There's a little overlap with the end of the first chapter. Anyway, onward!

Max Caulfield didn't know what the hell was going on. She sat at her desk racking her brain as Mr Jefferson's class emptied, desperate to restore a measure of normality to her understanding of the universe. It had started with her waking up at her desk, having slept through half of Photography class. Never a good look for a struggling student, especially when said class is the only thing keeping her GPA high enough to avoid losing her scholarship. The substance of her dream, or rather nightmare, had been none to pleasant either. A 'Wizard of Oz' scale tornado wiping out her town of Arcadia Bay. Max liked to think the traumatic effects of the dream had also temporarily compromised her better judgement. That would provide her a nice excuse for subsequently being caught taking a selfie in the middle of Mr Jefferson's lecture.

"Ok", she breathed. "Now the really confusing part."

Max's memory was hazy for a period of around thirty seconds immediately after taking that selfie, as though she had entered an almost trance-like state. Perhaps trance-like was a poor choice of words though, as it conjured images of perfectly calm, relaxed people waiting to be given hypnotic suggestion. Max had felt entirely the opposite of calm and relaxed. She had been more furious than she thought possible, like she wanted someone dead and would have gladly slit their throat herself, or used her bare hands to rip their throat open, were a knife not conveniently handy. She couldn't remember why, or at whom these feelings were directed, but merely knowing she was capable of that level of hatred made her sick. Max had vague recollections of other things as well, scribbling something on a bit of paper, and catching something flying toward Kate, but it was mostly drowned out by a murderous desire to go for the jugular. Was she going insane?

The next thing Max knew, everything had gone back to normal, she was no longer feeling insanely angry, and at least to the best of her knowledge everyone still had their windpipes and carotid arteries intact. Her moment of relief at not committing a felony was sadly ruined by the sudden intrusion of Mr Jefferson, delivering his sanction for class disruption: ambushing her in front of the class with a photography question. Fortunately, it turned out that Max had written the correct answer on her exercise pad during that trance period. Before Jefferson had even asked the question. Queue X-Files music.

Staring blankly at the exercise pad which had so helpfully provided the model answer, Max suddenly noticed another small note, scribbled on the exercise pad's bottom right corner. "PTO after class." She turned the page carefully and found a short letter, apparently written to and from herself. 

Dear Me.

First, don't let anyone see this. Seriously, look up now and check the damn class.

The note didn't miss a trick. Victoria was still at her desk and staring straight at Max, bitch-gaze set to high beam. "Geeze", Max thought, "what have I done now?" Was Mr Jefferson ambushing her with
some hard theory question not punishment enough? Yes she had gotten it right in the end, but that was only thanks to the weird future note. Why did someone like Victoria, so smart, attractive and talented, have to act so horribly toward everyone?"

It was clear Max wasn't the only one to have a problem with Victoria's behaviour. Taylor Christensen, Victoria's semiautonomous drone (emphasis on the semi) was looking extremely putout, though probably more at Victoria acting in a less than dignified manner than any concern for Max. Bullying and insulting other students were totally acceptable to a Vortex Club acolyte, but fixing someone with a death-stare for two minutes moved you into weirdo territory, and cast the whole Vortex Club in a bad light. Max shot a confused "what the hell" gesture to Taylor, who silently glanced back "whatever", sighed and somehow convinced Victoria to resume her usual after-class activity: failing to chat up Mr Jefferson.

The pain of watching Victoria's clumsy teacher-seduction attempts for the fifth time that month was too much for Taylor, who made a discrete exit from the classroom. Meanwhile, Victoria sauntered over to Mr Jefferson's desk in her best "Jessica Rabbit walk" emulation. Max groaned at how thick Victoria was laying it on: on arrival Victoria apparently suffered a partial leg malfunction, since she felt the need to lay her top half on Jefferson's desk while conversing with him, hips thrust out and periodically swaying.

"Is it wrong I kind of feel like walking up there and smacking that?" Max wondered, slightly hypnotised by the back-and-fourth action of Victoria's tailbone. Just to see her enraged reaction, of course."

Managing to pry her eyes from Victoria's hindquarters, Max checked the rest of the classroom. Aside from Victoria and Mr Jefferson, the only other person remaining was Kate Marsh, the kindest, most sincere person Max had ever met. Kate was a seemingly rare creation, the only devout Christian Max knew who was completely dedicated to the whole "love your fellow man" bit. To be fair, Max didn't actually know that many strongly religious people, but the ones she'd seen (usually on television) seemed far more focused on other areas of theology, like governments "overtaxing the rich", not allowing people who loved each other to get married, and maintaining their own pious self-image. Kate, on the other hand, never judged anyone for having different beliefs to herself, was always kind to others, and spent most of her free time volunteering for community work.

In Max's mind, Kate's kindness and sincerity made her one of the most beautiful people she had ever met, though her physical attractiveness wasn't entirely lost on Max either, in spite of Kate's largely conservative wardrobe and hairstyle. Kate had a beautiful face, and was a dab hand at applying makeup to accentuate her features. The limit to Max's makeup skills was a modest application of eye shadow. Their weekly tea dates had been a highlight for Max and she found Kate could turn a bad day around with a single smile. But recently, something had been taking a heavy toll on Kate. It had started with small things: neglecting her violin practice and postponing tea dates. Today she seemed utterly miserable, staring blankly at her notepad. Max just wanted to rush over and do, well, anything to make her happy. Exposing the letter once more, she resolved to talk to Kate after finishing reading it.

As you might have gathered, this note contains information from the future. I doubt you'd believe me if I told you how this was achieved, so I'm going to show you instead. When you're ready, go to the girl's bathroom.

Before that though, check up on Kate. She's going through hell right now and really needs support.

"Oh thanks future note, as if I couldn't figure that much out myself. Maybe you could suggest something I wasn't going to do already."
AND HAND IN YOUR 'EVERYDAY HEROES' ENTRY. This will improve things in ways you can't even imagine. And completely unofficially, you have a very good chance of winning.

"I had to ask," Max groaned. Her 'Everyday Heroes' entry had been sitting on her desk all period: a shot of herself from behind looking toward the sum total of her life-experiences as represented by her photo wall. Not that she was trying to cast herself as the hero. Not exactly, anyway. It was more that everyone, even the boring and plain person in the photo, had heroic moments in their lives. She'd gone to the extra trouble of manipulating the depth of field to blur herself in the foreground, just to sell that she was a stand-in for the viewer. A difficult task on an old Polaroid model with no built-in focal options, but she had managed to-. But Max found her train of thought derailed with a wave of doubt and self-criticism. There was no point patting herself on the back for a minor technical accomplishment, especially when the substance of her shot left so much up to the viewer to interpret.

"Hard to imagine this crap could win anything. I probably should have just photographed a fireman getting a cat out of a tree." Max took a breath, and looked back at her future note. "Maybe I'm being too hard on myself. And the note's already made me look good in front of Mr Jefferson once. I guess I should trust it again."

Yourself in time,

Max.

The "Back to the Future" reference eliminated the last doubt in Max's mind that she was the letter's author. Tracing her eyes across the desk, Max suddenly noticed the presence of another foreign object sitting there, a crumpled ball of paper. Some vague recollection surfaced in the back of her mind, of plucking the ball out of the air in overly bad-ass fashion, like she was the terminator, or someone moderately competent at sports. She uncrumpled it, and recognised Taylor's handwriting.

Hey Kate, love your porn video.

Fucking moronic drone. What the hell is this about? Max couldn't decide whether to be enraged or bewildered. She couldn't think of anyone less likely to be involved in pornography than pure, innocent, Kate. It seemed completely unimaginable. Well, perhaps if she took her hair out of that enormous bun in front of the object of her affections, let it cascade perfectly into position with the flick of her head, all while gradually unbuttoning her white dress shirt and whispering "teach me to sin" with those bright red lips...

Ok, so maybe it wasn't completely beyond Max's imagination, though she was utterly disgusted with herself in admitting as much. Still, it was a ridiculous fantasy. Maybe they found some porn star who closely resembled Kate, and were trying to pass her off as the genuine article? Whatever the case, they were assholes.

"Right", Max thought, "I can either try to cheer up Kate, who's been bullied horribly over something I only have the vaguest inkling of, and will need to be treated with the utmost sensitivity and care. Or hand in my competition entry." In the end, she resolved to do the easy option first, so headed over to Kate.

Dark rings silhouetted the bottom of Kate's eyes, an unpleasant combination of too little sleep and too many tears. She was trying to put on a brave face, but couldn't completely conceal the desperate look in her watery eyes, which seemed to be screaming "save me". Her notepad still had last period's class notes on it – ray diagrams for optics. Max fought off a brief panic as to which side of the lens she should put the focal point on, as Kate's having meticulously drawn a hangman's noose alongside seemed far more concerning.
"Hi Kate." Max began lamely.

"Max." Kate looked up, and for an instant, Max thought she saw a glimmer of hope flash across her otherwise dead expression. "Thank you for what you did in class. You were incredible."

Initially, Max didn't know what Kate was talking about. All she remembered was stupidly disrupting the class with her camera then almost failing to answer one of Mr Jefferson's questions. Then it dawned on her. The whole "intercept the paper ball launched by the harpies just before it hit Kate in the face, without even looking" thing. Not that she really remembered it. Being practically worshiped as a hero made Max uncomfortable, and she instinctively executed her signature nervous gesture, bringing her hand to the opposing elbow. She was momentarily startled by an unexpected warm, wet sensation on her hand, and Kate's eyes suddenly bulged in shock.

"My lord, Max! Your arm!"

Max felt herself going pale. The bottom half of her hoodie's sleeve was saturated in what looked very much like blood. She gingerly peeled back the sleeve, afraid some unnoticed injury was about to begin spouting like a fountain the moment it was uncovered. Kate's face grimaced, anticipating the same thing. Nothing. Her arm was completely fine. An awkward pause ensued, as both Kate and Max began thinking of alternate explanations that explained the red-soaked sleeve.

"I think my pen must have leaked."

As far as explanations went, it was far from convincing. Max's pens were all small ballpoints, with nowhere near enough ink to explain her sleeve being completely soaked. Max recalled, in horror, her desire to kill during that strange trance period. Had she followed through? Surely not, the entire class would have seen her do it, and she'd be in police custody by now. And none of the class seemed to have any grievous injuries.

"Or maybe Samuel the Caretaker was painting, and forgot to put up a warning sign?" Kate suggested.

That seemed a little more plausible. Max was known for being slightly clumsy, so accidentally leaning on wet paint wasn't beyond the realm of possibility for her. Rummaging around in her bag, Kate managed to produce a small, half empty box of tissues. Max felt horrid taking them from her, since Kate's current emotional state meant she clearly had need of them herself. Over Kate's incredibly polite objections, Max elected to just shed her hoodie and pack it within her trusty sling bag, rather than consuming Kate's entire tissue supply dabbing it dry. Instead, Max restricted herself to the bare minimum of tissues needed to dry her bare arm off. Max was inwardly furious at herself, instead of comforting Kate, it was Kate who was helping her. Still, Kate did seem slightly more emotionally sturdy now, with Max's situation proving something of a distraction to her own problems. "Perhaps I should just try to keep her distracted", she wondered, and did her best to drum up a conversation.

"I'm going to hand in that 'Everyday Heroes' entry today," Max began weakly. "Though the way Victoria acts it's like she's already got the competition sewn up."

"Max, she's got nothing on you." Kate's reply was remarkably matter-of-fact, as if stating the obvious. "Are you just talking to me to stall handing in your entry?"

"No!" Kate looked rather sceptical after that outburst. "Well, to be honest that is a pretty welcome side effect. But mainly I just wanted to talk to you."

"Max. I'm sorry but I don't think I'm feeling up to casual conversation today. In fact I think we'll
have to take a rain check on getting tea this afternoon too. But if you want to make me feel better, please hand in your 'Everyday Heroes' entry. I'd never wish bad on anyone, of course, but I'm sure I'd feel a little relieved if the chances that Victoria win this competition were worsened in favour of someone more worthy, less tainted by moral turpitude..." Max was taken aback. That last comment was incredibly harsh by Kate's usual standards, and when translated back from "Angelic Saint" it roughly equated to "Go pimp-slap the fucking hoe."

Slightly buoyed by Kate's encouragement, or perhaps her own "translation" thereof (Max found the idea of donning a purple felt hat and backhanding Victoria across the face strangely appealing), Max bid Kate farewell and set off for the teacher's desk. But as she made the short journey to the front of the class, her courage quickly began to evaporate. Victoria was as intimidating as ever, having at least three to four inches on Max in height, and from certain angles Mr Jefferson had a strangely imposing figure for a high school photography teacher. It took another glance back at Kate for Max to find some reserve of courage and interrupt the two of them to present her photo.

"Um, excuse me."

"Yes! Excuse you!" Victoria was apparently none too pleased about the interruption, though to be honest Max was probably saving her from further embarrassment. Her attempts at romantically pursuing Jefferson were becoming something of a farce. Fortunately Jefferson seemed glad of the interruption too. He was probably running out of ways to politely pry Victoria off his leg.

"No Victoria, excuse us. I'd never let one of photography's future stars miss handing in her entry."

"Here it is" Max began, shyly handing the photo to Mr Jefferson. "Though I'll admit I'm not that confident. I feel like such a loser displaying my work publically."

"I know I'd feel like a loser trying to put selfies on public display as art. " Victoria sniped

"Now Victoria, even John Lennon said that he felt like loser half the time, so I guess that'd put Max in good company." Victoria didn't know the quotation Jefferson was referencing, but resolved to immediately add Beatles quotations to her reading list. Whatever the case, it annoyed her to no end that Max was, once again, scoring points with Mr Jefferson.

"Victoria, I think you were saying you had an entry to hand in as well?"

Victoria presented her own photo, a confident air about her. Jefferson took the shot in hand, studied it for a moment, and then placed on the desk. Right next to Max's photo. He made a show of comparing them side by side in silence for some time, and Max noticed Victoria's smug self assured posture seemed to be slipping. What the hell was going on? Why was he so intent on directly comparing their entries immediately? Shouldn't he be giving all the entries equal scrutiny, instead of focusing entirely on their ones? Answers were not forthcoming however, as when Mr Jefferson finally spoke, it was on a different topic.

"Now, I understand you both want, or perhaps need some extra credit work", Jefferson made a show of looking directly at Victoria as he said 'want' and Max as he said 'need'. Max felt this a little gratuitous. Her least favourite thing about meeting her own photography hero was how aloof and superior he sometimes acted. It occasionally appeared that he felt himself above everyone else, an authority unto himself.

"Since you both handed in your 'Everyday Heroes' entries before the deadline, I've decided to come to the table. The only catch is you're working together."

Victoria immediately protested. Max said nothing but looked rather despondent.
"I absolutely can't work with her! Her… Artistic sensibilities are incompatible with my own." Max felt herself try to recoil involuntarily at Victoria's rebuke. The second part of it was almost exactly like how she imagined an official letter of rejection from an art gallery sounded. Jefferson was having none of it though.

"Now Victoria, if you want to be a professional, you'll have to learn how to work with people you have, uh, creative differences with. Not glaring at them for two minutes straight after class." He then turned and looked Max straight in the eye. "You too Max."

Max flinched in disbelief. What- what had she done?

"You normally act in such a reserved manner, so I was incredibly shocked with the expression you were wearing during the class's questions segment. I don't know what differences you and Victoria are having, but for a second there you looked like a ball of uncontrolled rage. Almost like you were going to vault your desk and go for the nearest person's jugular." Jefferson laughed. "Though, since I was the nearest person, I do appreciate your restraint."

Oh, right, the whole "inexplicable homicidal trance that was apparently somehow linked to time travel". Mr Jefferson apparently felt he was on a roll now, launching into what Max was sure he intended to be an insightful mentoring speech based on his own experience.

"Listen girls, if you continue on this path of photography, you'll inevitably find out that people aren't always how they appear at first glance. That their true natures are sometimes very different from how the present themselves and act around others. That terrifying display by Max is a near-perfect illustration of this."

"I'd like the two of you to explore this idea. You're going to bring me a series of photos of each other. The style, layout, etcetera does not concern me. You can even include other people in the frame if you wish, and can rope them into helping you. What I want is for each of you to show me something non-obvious about the other. In so doing, perhaps you'll also show me something about yourselves."

"It might also be educational for the both of you to feel what it's like on the other end of the camera lens. Consider this a first step in that direction. Being a photographer gives you a lot of power over the models you are working with, and you need to develop an understanding of that. They'll only have the confidence to give you the shots you need if you can forge a relationship of trust and respect with them."

"Unless, of course, you plan on sedating your models", he added with a wink, "but of course I can't recommend that."

At that moment, something strange happened. Jefferson appeared to stagger a little. Fortunately, he had his chair handy, so quickly decided to sit down. Victoria's leg affliction appeared instantly cured, as she immediately got off the desk and moved to offer aid, looking genuinely concerned. Jefferson raised a hand to waylay her.

"I'm fine. Just felt slightly anaemic for a second. I guess – I guess it must be a few too many late nights grading class work. At my age it's starting to catch up to me."

Max decided it was time to leave. She'd done most of what the note suggested: handed in her 'Everyday Heroes' entry, and tried to cheer up Kate. Max wished she'd had another chance at the "cheering up Kate" part though. Made it less about herself and somehow given her more hope. She'd better follow through with the remainder of the note's instructions and head on to the girl's bathroom. To be honest though, Max would have probably headed there anyway. She'd felt an awful lot of
stress that period, from angst about handing in her entry, to getting chewed out in class for taking that selfie, to suddenly discovering something looking a lot like blood covering her arm. She really needed a timeout, maybe splash some water on her face. Perhaps she could even wash the red stuff of her hoodie sleeve off in the basin. Probably not though, with the level of saturation, her hoodie was probably badly stained.

Meanwhile, Victoria found herself glaring for the second time this class, watching Max exit the classroom. Victoria was sure she was making progress with Mr Jefferson this time, about to even setup a "proper date" under the pretext of "reviewing her portfolio or something", when Max fucking Caulfield had charged in and stuck her antlers in the moment's backside. Then Max had handed in her 'Everyday Heroes' entry: A selfie, just as predicted. But unless she was misreading what happened after that, it seemed Max and Victoria's entries were the favourites. Part of her was relieved at this revelation, it validated her work to get into the school's top two. But the other part realised there was a fifty percent chance of losing to a fucking selfie. A selfie of Max Caulfield! After all the rejections Victoria had suffered submitting to art galleries, that would be the final insult. Oh, wait, no it wouldn't. The final insult would be having to work with Max on that cooperative task Mr Jefferson just assigned them! Victoria subconsciously began balling her fists, then stormed out the door hot on Max's heels. She couldn't do anything about Mr Jefferson temporarily taking leave of his artistic sensibilities, and treating Max's selfie as a masterwork. She couldn't do anything about having to work with Max on a group project. But she could definitely chase Bambi down right now and teach her the law of the jungle.

Chapter End Notes

Oh god, another "Victoria and Max take photos of each other" scenario. As if that hasn't been done already. Hopefully I can put a little spin on it at least. I think Victoria following Max into Toilets for the "Chloe gets shot (for the first of many times) scene" has also been done before. Hopefully I can branch this story in a previously unexplored direction soon enough. Thanks to everyone who manages to read this anyway.
Max's back momentarily went rigid in shock, as a hand seized her by the shoulder. She had gone into the bathroom, mostly to splash some water on her face and calm down, and partly because of the instructions of a strange note from the future. Which was, come to think about it, the cause of much of her need to calm down. The last thing she needed was someone sneaking up on her and grabbing her à la an old horror movie. She spun around, quickly deducing the arm's owner when a pair of ridiculously expensive looking gold bracelets came into view. How appropriate, the person invoking horror movie cliche was a literal witch. And also, unfortunately, the one person she absolutely couldn't afford to have a meltdown in front of.

"Well well, Max Caulfield. The selfie-whore of Blackwell. We need to talk."

Victoria Chase was carrying herself with even more imperious arrogance than usual, chest puffed up and thrust out, while using her height to its best advantage by towering over the waif-like Max. The result was more than slightly intimidating, and ever-so-slightly jealousy inducing. Victoria did have an incredible figure. Max had seen this behaviour a number of times in the past, and it always signalled the same thing. Victoria had decided someone had stepped out of line, and needed to take them down a peg. For some reason Max was exceptionally good at setting it off. What the hell had she done this time?

"You were awfully pleased with yourself in class today. Eventually managing to answer one whole question? You'll be top of the class in no time." Victoria paused for effect, glaring into Max's eyes. "The- D-D- Daguerreian process s-sir. You could barely even say it. Then you even hand in a selfie for your 'Everyday Heroes' entry. How predictable. I'll give you points for audacity, Max Caulfield. You actually had the arrogance to nominate yourself as the hero."

Oh, that was it. The 'Everyday Heroes' competition. The nervous part of Max began to feel a little better. Victoria feeling threatened by her entry was nothing if not a vote of confidence. However, there was another part of Max that felt more than slightly aggravated. The part buried deep inside her that took some level of pride in her work. The part that secretly knew she was good enough to humble the class's "top photographer" with a bog-standard Polaroid regardless of how much Victoria spent on equipment. The part that might even enjoy seeing Victoria, ever so gently, brought to her knees.

Victoria had taken the most basic, misguided, and idiotic interpretation of Max's photo imaginable. Max knew that a photographer of Victoria's talent was capable of far greater insight into her entry than what she was demonstrating, so this was probably a deliberate attempt to upset and belittle her. The smart move would have been to ignore such an obvious provocation. But Victoria with her back against the wall had awoken that other part of Max, and she kind of wanted to keep Victoria pinned there for a bit longer. Metaphorically speaking, of course.

"God, you're obnoxious." Max snapped back, taking both of them by surprise with her aggression. "You honestly get this upset if you can't answer every question in class? You're like… Like some evil version of Hermione Granger!"

In hindsight, that last bit of rapier wit was unlikely to skewer warm butter, but the sheer novelty of someone talking back to Victoria had left her momentarily dumbstruck and unable to retaliate. Max decided, none the less, that her best bet to avoid verbal evisceration was forego any more direct
attacks. Instead she began giving a condescending lecture on the merits of her competition entry. Imposing Victoria was ignorant and unable to interpret art was, in Max's considerable experience, the best way to wind her up anyway.

"And as for my entry, I used myself as a stand-in for the everyman, Victoria. That's why I took it back to the camera and with a narrow depth of field. The viewer can imagine themselves as-"

"How did you even get narrow depth of field at those distances on a normal Polaroid camera! There's no means to vary the focus!" Victoria suddenly demanded. Max allowed a smirk to cross her face. Sorry, but that's a Caulfield trade secret, so enjoy racking your brain over it. Way to show your power-level, BTdubs.

"Did you actually want something? Or are you just looking for excuses to watch me use the bathroom?" Max inquired, causing the faintest imaginable blush to flash across Victoria's face.

Max was enjoying the sensation of actually having one up on Victoria. Victoria's loss of composure, the roughening inflections in her speech, brought out a charmingly blunt honesty that her usual elitist front lacked. It was a pity that this honesty only seemed to come out when Victoria was enraged. If she ever dropped both the pretence and anger simultaneously, Max thought they'd get along swimmingly.

"I wanted to discuss the work Mr Jefferson just assigned us," Victoria snapped. She took a breath, trying to restore her composure. She managed it for all of two sentences. "Obviously, you are at a considerable advantage, being awarded a superior model to work with. Though with my skill, I guess I'll be able to make do with you somehow. I also expect you to take this activity seriously. I know you enjoy defying all logic by retaining a scholarship on a B- average, but for me this extra credit could boost my GPA to a perfect 4.0. I won't let you screw that up for me Caulfield. Understand? Do not screw-

*CLICK*

Max interrupted Victoria's tirade by taking a photo of it.

"I don't fucking believe this."

"Sorry", Max uttered, "but it's so rare to see you display some actual passion, as opposed to your usual manufactured persona. Given the task was to show some hidden aspect of the model, I couldn't help myself."

Max gently waved the photo her camera had just spat out. In truth, Max knew this did nothing to help modern instant film develop, and if shaken too vigorously might actually damage it. But Max also knew that Victoria knew this, and the look of contempt this engendered on Victoria's face made it worth the occasional damaged photo. As the photo began to develop, Max noticed an odd flicker of blue in the far left corner of it.

"There is no way I'm letting you hand in a photo of me in the girl's privy."

Max was sorely tempted to defend the shot's composition. A more honest view of Victoria framed against a room dedicated to the disposal of crap was singularly appropriate. Instead she glanced back at the photo and was drawn to that blue smudge.

"Yeah, yeah. Victoria, can you shut up for a minute, I think just noticed something interesting."

Max noted the sound of Victoria's grinding teeth with some satisfaction. Victoria was completely unused to being fobbed off so casually. Was this the key to handling her, Max wondered. Perpetually
keeps her off-guard? Further thought on the matter was derailed by another glance at the blue streak in the photo. It was almost like it was beckoning to her, demanding to be captured on film in greater detail. Determined to hunt it down, Max started walking toward the far end of the bathroom. Victoria followed her, eyes shooting daggers into Max's back the whole way.

Max quickly located the source of the blue streak. The most beautifully coloured butterfly Max had ever seen was just landing on a bucket of water, which had apparently been left by the cleaner. Max quickly lined up a camera shot, and was about to push the shutter when Victoria interrupted her.

"Damn it Max, both the bucket and the water in it are highly reflective. For once get a clue and turn your fucking flash off."

"Oh, right," Max thought. Another habit she'd gotten into just to wind up Victoria was using the camera flash in inappropriate situations, like outdoors during the day or in very well lit rooms. Places it would be ineffectual but pose no more detriment beyond draining the batteries. She should probably stop that – it had gotten her noticed taking selfies in class, after all. And if she'd used it here, she'd probably introduce a lot of unwanted glare into the frame. Wait a minute. Did Victoria actually just help her out?

"Honestly, I can't believe someone with an all-expenses paid photography scholarship could be so sloppy. Not to mention how you apparently sleep though class, and just scrape by on theory tests. I don't know how you managed-.

"Thank you, Victoria." Max conceded, more to shut her up than anything else. She thumbed the flash switch to off and took the shot. Almost immediately, a strange yet now familiar sensation ran over her, and she found herself spaced out and not quite in control of her body again. For some reason, there was no overwhelming sensation of rage this time, and her activities were limited to withdrawing a pen and scribbling something on the back of her left hand. The sensation quickly passed, and Victoria carried on the conversation, oblivious to anything having happened.

"I hate seeing artistic opportunity go to waste" Victoria replied. "Its not like I did it for you in particular or anything."

Victoria loomed over Max's left shoulder, watching with some interest as the shot developed. It was an odd feeling having her there. Not as unpleasant as Max had imagined either. The scent of Victoria's expensive perfume and the slight heat from her proximity made for a rather enjoyable intrusion. Victoria seemed to be genuinely interested in this photo, and that had toned down her attitude. It was still somewhat unsettling, though. To quote an old Canadian astronaut, she'd "never been this close."

"That's a lovely shot Max." Victoria said quietly, before a more subdued version of her sass returned. "And look, you've even caught a touch of your reflection in the bucket's water, so I guess it's technically yet another selfie. I'm sure Mr Jefferson appreciates such consistency in your portfolio."

There was a moment silence. A sense of cold dread slowly seeped into Max's feet and slowly made it's way up her body, as Victoria's face began to contort into an evil smile. Max knew exactly what was coming.

"So… Hermione Granger?"

Fuck. Here we go.

"I wonder what that would make the great Max Caulfield? No wait, I think I've got this. Short and skinny, body not unlike that of a young boy, and completely tragic. I don't suppose you know some
lanky dirt-poor kid to complete our little power trio?"

Suddenly, the bathroom door burst open. That much wasn't really unexpected. This was a school bathroom, and there were no doubt any number of students needing to relieve themselves. However on seeing who had entered, Max was more than slightly shocked. It was Nathan Prescott, Victoria's friend and the school's richest asshole. And, as his name suggested, Male. What the hell was he doing in the girl's toilets?

"Nathan?" Victoria tried to inquire, before Max shoved her hand over Victoria's mouth, pulling her back into hiding behind the last toilet stall. Another not entirely unpleasant feeling, Max mused. "If only I could shut her up this easily in class." Fortunately it seemed Nathan hadn't heard her. He certainly seemed too busy notice, shaking like an addict cut-off from his fix, and talking to himself in the third person about blowing up the school. Yeah, casually walking out there and challenging him in this condition was definitely unwise.

"What the hell is he doing in the girl's bathroom?" Victoria whispered into Max's hand, echoing Max's earlier thoughts and slightly tickling her in the process.

Another person entered, this time a girl. She was relatively tall, about a match for Victoria, and had hair almost as short. However it was precisely at that point that the similarities ended. Victoria was a picture of regal femininity, carrying herself with an obviously practiced poise and elegance. The new girl had dyed blue hair, lean muscle and more front than a bulldozer. She also used the 'word' 'hella' a lot. Max thought she looked magnificent. While her heart was already racing (hiding in the back of the toilets from someone of questionable sanity while literally gagging Victoria kind of had that effect), it was like it found another gear when this azure-crowned badass stormed in. Max also felt there was something awfully familiar about her, but couldn't quite put her finger on it.

"Oh fuck. Max I know that girl. She's a horrid delinquent, expelled last year for, well, for almost everything. Hung around with that missing whore Rachel too." Victoria whispered. At that moment the "Horrid Delinquent" was leaning over Nathan, attempting to extort "hella cash" using information about his drug-pushing activities.

"I'm more concerned with your bud Nathan. The schitzo drug-dealer planning to blow up the school." For some reason, Max felt an intense impulse to defend the newly arrived punk-girl, even though she was sure she'd never known a delinquent like that before.

"Nathan's just a little tightly wound, Max. Yes he hooks the Vortex up at parties, but that's hardly a reason to condemn his future with a criminal conviction."

A second later, emphatic proof was delivered that Victoria was an awful judge of character. Nathan pulled out a semiautomatic pistol, there was a brief scuffle, and the Blue-haired girl was falling as the sound of a single gunshot rang out.

Max look on in shock, utterly unable to process what she had just seen. Or more accurately, utterly rejecting it. Acting on pure instinct her right hand shot out, as if to somehow take reality by the throat and choke it into submission. And somehow she did. Everything went a little blurry. Max saw the scene play out backwards before her. It was a true out-of-body experience: Max could see previous self acting out recent history in reverse. Focusing on her outstretched arm, Max realised she had become semi-transparent, like some ghostly apparition. Glancing to her left belatedly revealed that she was still restraining Victoria with her left hand, now also looking equal parts transparent and dumbstruck. They exchanged a brief glance, and Max noticed they'd been pulled all the way back to photography class. A throbbing headache overcame Max. She brought both hands up to cradle her head, and found herself back in reality. Time was running normally again, she was fully opaque once more. It was the last few minutes of photography class, and everything seemed as it was. Everything
except one minor detail. Victoria Chase stared intensely at Max, a curious mix of shock and fear displayed on her face. Max had brought Victoria back with her, and Victoria apparently remembered everything.

Chapter End Notes

Well, well... Max seems to be somewhat taken by this mysterious blue haired girl, but also seems to take a strangely unwholesome pleasure in provoking Victoria. I wonder how this is going to play out?
Falling for hipsters

Victoria Chase shook in abject horror as photography class ended. She took deep breaths and tried to steady her hands. Victoria had just witnessed a horrific event: a shooting, perpetrated by one of her oldest friends, Nathan Prescott. Some lack of composure was understandable. But it wasn't just the shooting that had terrified Victoria. No, the other object of her terror, all five foot five of her, presently sat in the back-row of class nursing some sort of headache. Max Fucking Caulfield!

Victoria stared blankly in Max's general direction, mind too busy trying to understand what just happened to really care what it was seeing. Max had witnessed the shooting alongside Victoria. Max had then stuck out her hand, violated conventionally accepted science, and rewound time like an old cassette tape, to the point that the shooting hadn't happened. The faintest sneer displaced Victoria's look of horror for an instant. Max just had to be all retro-hipster, even when developing god-like powers.

The relief Victoria felt from that moment of levity was brief. Max, the girl some would suggest Victoria had been tormenting ever since she transferred into Blackwell Academy, apparently had superpowers. She decided she didn't like the time-line, so she changed it, erased the event in question with the flick of a hand. What if Max decided she didn't like Victoria? Victoria flushed as she imagined herself literally evaporating, obliterated with a flick from one of Max's perfect little wrists for some trivial offense; perhaps accidentally walking in on Max enjoying her selfie with a trashy book borrowed from Alyssa.

Victoria tried to steady her breathing. Max had only reversed a couple of minutes of time and seemed to pay for it with a migraine. There was no evidence she could do anything more substantive. Still, that was more than enough to dispose of someone in a more conventional fashion. Knowing exactly where and when someone was going to be, a suitably deranged or motivated person could engineer a "terrible accident". Drop a paint can on her head or something. Images of Max wearing that psychotic face from earlier in class were bouncing around Victoria's head. Max had only started glaring like that after she and Taylor had indulged some playful banter with Kate, so Max's anger had to be in response to that, right? What other reason could she have for suddenly flipping her shit mid-class? Then there was that ad hock lecture from the equally sage and attractive Mark Jefferson:

"...people aren't always how they appear at first glance... their true natures are sometimes very different from how the present themselves and act around others. That terrifying display by Max is a near-perfect illustration of this."

Even Mark Jefferson agreed with her that Max had looked psychotic! And Taylor had gone one worse and labelled her a postal worker. Victoria intimately understood how much a person's true nature could differ from external appearances; most of the Vortex would have a fit if they knew she was about to complete her collection of "Generic Animu Agent Bluberry" merchandise (the last shipment of collectables was due any day now). But if Victoria was a geek in wolf's clothing, could Max be the reverse?

Victoria realised her options were incredibly limited: Reporting the waif in the back row for having the power to violate causality had two probable outcomes. It would either result in Victoria's ridicule, or being assigned new, padded accommodations and hideously unfashionable tops with excessively long sleeves. No one would believe her. And the alternative, directly attacking someone that possessed time powers, seemed all but suicidal. For probably the first time in her life, Victoria had no plan, no clue what to do.
Eventually, Victoria came to another realisation: someone was snapping their fingers an inch away from her face while simultaneously grasping her by the shoulder and shaking her body.

"God Victoria, I know you have this... Thing with Calf-field, but I've never seen it affect you this badly before."

It was Taylor. All at once, Victoria became cognisant of her surroundings. There were only four people left in the classroom: herself, Taylor, Kate, and Max the apparent Demigod. Oh yeah, and Mark, so five people. Funny, that was the first time Victoria had forgotten about Mr Jefferson. Well, as attractive as he was, a photography teacher just didn't have much on a human TARDIS (which ironically may or may not be about to exterminate her). Victoria tried to get herself back in order; to resume thinking the way she trained herself to think long ago. There was a way to take control of every situation, and every situation was an opportunity for her. But when she stared across the class at Max, who at that moment was sharing a very sincere conversation with Kate; cool, calculating Victoria was nowhere to be found. Instead there was only angry Victoria, a thin pathetic shell of rage behind which hid a meek closeted geek. She stood up, knowing she must look like a beaten dog, barking as loudly as possible but one step away from turning tail and cowering in the corner. She flooded her mind flooded with hateful thoughts, in a desperate attempt to drown out the screams of terror echoing inside her and take some control of the situation.

"Look at you Max Caulfield, puffed up like some knight in shining armour trying to rescue that hypocritical whore Kate. Get a clue, that's no Maiden you're saving, and there's more than enough video evidence to prove that. You're no hero either, if you're planning on retaliating against a normal person with superpowers you seem to have just pulled out of your.-."

But Victoria's chain of hatred was effortlessly shattered when both Max and Kate looked up at her simultaneously, and Max smiled and gave Victoria a little wave with her right hand; her time controlling hand! Victoria's face went pale. She stumbled backward and nearly doubled over in shock, just managing to lower herself back into her chair. Taylor sighed, apparently mistaking Victoria's abject terror for some other emotion.

"God. Why don't you just drag her into the bathroom or something, and do *whatever* you need to do in private. If you keep this up, someone's going to notice that cares more about the Vortex club's rep than you; or worse, wants to kick you off the top of the vortex club's totem so they can move up a peg. I need to meet Courtney and exchange class notes, so maybe we should meet up later outside the girl's dorm?" Taylor didn't wait for a reply; Victoria was always a bit embarrassing after photography class, so she always left as soon as possible. It's just that it wasn't usually this bad, and usually more focused on Jefferson than Max.

There were a great many things Victoria might have normally said, in response to what she considered Taylor's complete misinterpretation of the situation. Most of them were concise enough to be written in under five letters. Yet she couldn't manage to get anything out. Her heart was thumping in her chest too quickly, sounding closer to a mechanical engine than a human organ; her breaths short and rapid; the image of Max's delicate little hand, the most powerful thing on the planet, stretching out toward her was etched in the back of her mind. Finally Victoria looked down at her self: she was still here; there had been no erasure from existence. No acme anvils or equally cleaver traps had descended from the heavens either. She was on the verge of relaxing when another possibility occurred to her: Max might have somehow tampered with her mind. By modifying her past experiences, Max could conceivably change her personality. Victoria was filled with another moment of abject horror, as she imagined herself transformed into the female version of that disgusting boy Warren. She had witnessed him follow Max around campus with almost stalker-like obsession, and heard Max express consternation to Kate and Dana that he'd spammed her phone with dozens of text messages. She breathed a slight sigh of relief after confirming she still wore...
impeccable cashmere as opposed to two filthy tee-shirts. "You're fine, Victoria Chase, just carry on as normal," She told herself, "get up, go see Mark Jefferson and hand in your winning everyday heroes entry".

But as soon as Victoria stood up, she found a strange feeling gripping her; she was definitely not fine, something was fundamentally not right, but she couldn't quite figure out what. All at once, her face turned cool, and her vision began to tunnel toward nothingness, not unlike what happened to an old valve-based TV when you shut the power off. The last two things she realised were that her legs no longer supported her weight, and that the hard corner of her desk was very rapidly approaching her head. If Victoria were still able to speak, she might have laughed at the irony of it all. She was fainting, all because of her hysterical panic over Max and her time powers. She'd overstressed her system with fear, and quickly standing up had proven to be the straw that broke her back, or more accurately her head, since in a stroke of incredibly bad luck her head was falling directly into her own school desk' sharp corner. Max didn't need to use her powers to do her in. Just the casual wave of her hand, and the fear it induced had been sufficient. Victoria had always prided herself as being able to manipulate and control her fellow students, but Max had just given her a final master class in manipulation.

A few seconds later, Victoria's consciousness began to return to her. Evidently, her head was still intact: something must have gotten in front of her and prevented her from falling. Feeling returned, and she could feel the thing that saved her; it was clutching her wonderfully tightly and keeping her propped up. It was smaller than her, and smelt rather nice, in a shower soap and budget-brand deodorant sort of way. In fact Victoria might not have minded staying like this for a while. The idea of slumming it with something less than French perfume was strangely appealing to her at that moment. Victoria might have labelled her subsequent thoughts a little dirty, but then realised how silly it was to apply such a label when discussing something that smelled of soap. Then Victoria's consciousness completely returned to her, her thoughts switched from lurid to lucid, her vision returned, and she realised what, or more correctly whom, this budget-soap scented saviour was. Max Caulfield.

Victoria looked down at the waif-like form still clutching desperately to her, and realised almost at once that there were tears spilling out of Max's eyes. She cursed herself at her own stupidity. Victoria had assumed Max thought in a vicious amoral fashion. That just because Max might have felt incredibly angry, and had a full-proof means to express that anger without being caught, she'd use it. That probably said some rather unflattering things about her rather than Max. No, Max fancied herself the quiet little hero, and her competition entry was proof of that. She must have been so terrified on seeing Victoria fall, that she'd actually been reduced to tears. Whatever the case, Victoria now had conclusive proof that Max didn't want her hurt. If she did, she'd have just stood there on the other side of the class watching Victoria fall while crying "oh lord, the humanity!" No, this had all been a horrible accident brought about by Victoria's own hysteria. And Max had saved her from one of the most ignoble ends imaginable: having the coroner declare "table" as her official cause of death.

Something else rather belatedly occurred to Victoria. The sight of her saviour, Max Caulfield, physically supporting her while consciousness returned, might be misconstrued by a suitably crude and unintelligent individual. She glared across the class at the whore. There was nothing but concerned relief in her face.

"Well, Kate was watching along with Max at the moment I began to faint, and she probably recognised the symptoms preceding syncope from her first aid course." Victoria's reasoned. She would have been entirely happy with that answer, but a little voice inside her head seemed to insist on an addendum: "You know, the one they make everyone that waste all their free time helping the elderly do."
Victoria replayed her last couple of thoughts in her mind and couldn't help but feel ashamed for some reason. Perhaps she should back off any more "friendly jests" with Kate, at least for the immediate future. It wasn't good Karma. Especially now there was someone with actual god powers around who might decide to start enforcing said Karma. In spite of how benevolent "Goddess Maxine" seemed to be, it seemed unwise to continue antagonising the friend of someone with powers to control the space-time continuum. Now, since Kate wasn't a problem, she'd better check the other two people in the room.

She glanced at Mr Jefferson's desk, who seemed busy with some menial paperwork, apparently oblivious to the entire scene. No problem there, though it was a little upsetting that he wasn't distraught at missing her usual after-class visit.

She then glanced toward the door, where Taylor stood wide-eyed, a hand covering her mouth. Apparently she hadn't quite left the classroom when Victoria fainted. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Victoria tried to reason about the situation. Taylor was, for some reason, completely loyal to Victoria; she didn't hand out the "number one slave" position easily. Taylor wouldn't blab about something she'd mistakenly believed she'd seen to just anyone. The only problem was, she would blab to someone about it. It was hardcoded in her nature to gossip. And the most likely audience would be Victoria's "number two slave", Courtney Wagner, whom Taylor was on her way to meet and believed loyal as well. But Victoria knew differently: Courtney Wagner had ambitions beyond her station.

"Victoria, can you stand?"

The soft voice of Max Caulfield made Victoria table any further consideration of Vortex Club politics for a later date.

"Victoria, I'm glad you're head isn't… leaking, but I really need to get back to the girl's bathroom."

Victoria's mind was spinning. Right, priorities. That Blue Demon's life was in danger, and Nathan's freedom as well, for that matter. She doubted any lawyer could get him off a murder charge, if it was found he'd shot an unarmed girl, inside a girl's bathroom, in a school where even carrying a gun was expressly prohibited. Minor social scandals would have to wait.

"I'm going with you."

"Victoria, you just fainted, nearly cracked your head against the table. Well, actually did crack your head against the table. It was awful, except that I…"

Victoria saw the trickle of smeared blood on Max's hands, the look of sadness in her watery eyes, and understood. Max had actually seen her fall, seen the result. Got her hands bloody cradling her and checking for vital signs, then decided to reverse time to save her. Victoria found herself automatically withdrawing a tissue from her pocket to dab Max's cheeks dry of the tears. Along the way she observed, with a surprising amount of disinterest, that Max had probably messed up her Cashmere sweater too; transporting Victoria's own blood back in time on her hands, and accidentally spreading it on to the sides of her shirt as she grabbed her. Normally desecrating the Cashmere was a capital offence, but since it was done in the course of saving her life, and Max was apparently the ultimate power in the universe, Victoria felt some discretion was warranted. At least it was a dark coloured sweater, so it wouldn't be so obvious.

"Max, I'm feeling better now. It was just the shock of it all: the shooting, and then the… time thing."

Victoria's eyes shifted their focus to Max's right shoulder involuntarily, and traced their way down the contour of her arm. She cursed inwardly at herself for failing to suppress a shudder. "But I
couldn't live with myself if I let a shooting happen, and thought I could do something about it. Lead the way."

The unlikely alliance were just leaving the class room when another soft, yet commanding voice stopped them dead in their tracks.

"Girls, a moment!"

Victoria's ears pricked at the sound of her favourite voice in the world. Under normal circumstances, she'd be thrilled to hear Mark Jefferson calling her over. Right now, she was kind of on a deadline.

"I'd never let two of photography's future stars forget handing in their photos."

"Here it is" Max began, once again handing the photo to Mr Jefferson. "Though I'll admit I'm not that confident. I feel like such a loser displaying my work publically."

Victoria couldn't help herself. Max seemed to be repeating her part verbatim, but the idea of impressing Mr Jefferson by pre-empting him with his own lines was too appealing to pass up. Plus acting like less of a bitch might help improve her standing with the resident hipster-cum-timelord, and Mr Jefferson as well.

"Even John Lennon felt like a loser half the time Max, so there may be just a sliver of hope for you yet." Victoria said, in all things considered, a surprisingly sweet and sincere tone.

"That's very true Victoria, and I'm glad to see you and Max are behaving in a more cordial fashion. I hope you don't give Max too big a head though. After all, the other half the time, John Lennon thought he was God almighty."

Jefferson's reply made Victoria's face blanch, and she found that her eyes were, yet again, drawn to Max's hand. If only Mr Jefferson knew how appropriate that quote really was. She resolved to never offer up a quote in future, unless she knew the full context.

The remainder of the conversation with Jefferson went largely as it had before. Jefferson volunteered his two "star pupils" of them to work together for extra credit, and gave them a lecture no doubt based upon his own life experience. A brief eternity later, both girls were out of the class and charging down the school corridors toward the toilets. Midway down the corridor, a thought crossed Victoria's mind and she seized her companion by the arm.

"Max, I'm sorry but I have to know. How long have you been able to-"

"To rewind time?" Max responded, resuming her walk towards the bathroom, and watching Victoria squirm with some amusement when she explicitly stated her power. "Only since I saw that girl being shot."

"Oh that's just typical of you isn't it. You cast yourself as a hero in your competition entry, and then decide to become an actual superhero to give it legitimacy."

Max paused a moment, uncertain. Was this an attempt by Victoria at friendly banter? It was still antagonistic as hell, but seemed too absurd to be taken seriously. Perhaps antagonism was literally Victoria's only means of self expression?

"Victoria, you know my photo's supposed to show that anyone, can have heroic moments. Even you. Though… If you want to be my sidekick instead, I might be amiable to some sort of arrangement."
"Hah. If anything I'd be the Batman to your Superman. More money, more intelligent and more popular."

"Careful Victoria, the whole superhero analogy thing make it sound like you just want us to publicly display our underwear. Plus you seem to be showing a little too much knowledge of comic characters for someone who portrays themselves as this cool as-."

"Don't you dare even try to question my public image, Max Caulfield." Victoria snapped automatically before backing off a little, the understanding that one of them possessed superpowers returning to the fore of her mind. "You should just be happy I've decided to help you save this girl."

However the truth was Max would have preferred it if Victoria hadn't volunteered herself to help. She really needed water from the bathroom wash basins, and not only to splash on her face this time. There was a certain message she'd found scrawled on her hand, in her own handwriting, and Max was now convinced that following its instructions was one of the worst thing's she'd ever done, the results so horrific that they'd literally reduced her to tears. She absolutely had to erase it off her arm without anyone seeing; especially Victoria. It said rather simply:

"Be sure to wave at Victoria when you're back in class."
Max Caulfield had a trademark nervous gesture: in times of great social anxiety (usually several times a day), she tended to grab one of her arms at the elbow joint with the other. Today the habit had proved to have a rather more practical use. By incorporating a bit more of a twist in one of her arms, she neatly concealed a note scrawled on her hand by her future self. And it was essential no one saw this note, least of all the school's queen bee that presently accompanied her.

Be sure to wave at Victoria when you're back in class.

It seemed innocuous enough, a friendly gesture that many would have suggested was more than Victoria Chase deserved. But when delivered under exactly the right set of circumstances, namely Victoria having only recently learned that your hand could bend time, the panic-turned-fainting episode it triggered had nearly booked Victoria a trip to the emergency room.

It was barely believable. Clearly, there were moments in time where even the tiniest prod, executed in exactly the right way, could have enormous and cascading consequences. A normal person would only ever manage to trigger these accidentally, but this "Future Max", with her foreknowledge of events, could instruct present Max to trigger them on purpose. It felt like she was perched blindfolded on a mountain top, a plethora of innocent people in a valley below, and alongside her an assortment of precariously balanced rocks. The slightest push in the right direction could cause an avalanche of consequences, and there was a voice whispering in her ear to "trust her" and push the second one to the right exactly two inches forward.

Max had to decide what to do if, or more likely when, she received another instruction from the future. The last one was designed to trigger a chain of events that led to a serious head injury. She winced as she remembered Victoria lying on the ground, head at a decidedly unhealthy looking angle, blood pouring from the side. Max still had some of that blood on her hands, blood which remained on her in spite of the rewind, from an event otherwise erased from time. What the hell was future Max thinking? It wasn't like Max was going to leave Victoria lying there with her head split open. No, Max had immediately charged out of her seat, rushed over to Victoria's broken body, and rewound until it "unbroke". In hindsight, she could have probably just rewound all the way back to before she'd waved at Victoria, and averted the whole thing, but that'd involve a rewind of minutes instead of seconds. She remembered the long rewind back from their first foray into the girls' bathroom. The longer she rewound for, the more pain she felt welling in her temples, and the worse the headache was at the end. No, it was definitely easier to mitigate the resulting event than try to go back far enough to eliminate the cause.

Max again regarded the blood on her hands, and found her thoughts drawn to the state of her hoodie, currently residing in her bag. Before the first rewind from the girls' bathroom, Kate had pointed out Max's hoodie was soaked in a red substance; a substance that Kate, in her infinite innocence, had assured her was probably wet paint that Max had accidentally leaned on.

Max scoffed. It was now clear that her future self had viciously lashed out at someone in class, severely injured them, then rewound time and dismissed the event as never having happened, a possibly mortal injury inflicted for what? Stress relief? The lulz? Given how disturbed her future self seemed to be, could Max really trust in blindly following her instructions? Yet the first things future Max had suggested were helping Kate, and putting Max in position to prevent a school shooting. What if the next thing suggested protected another life, and ignoring it damned someone? Further
thought on handling a potential future crisis would have to wait, as Victoria interjected to draw Max’s attention back to the current one.

"And there's the door to the toilets. So how do you want to play this, Super Maxine?"

A wave of revulsion ran down Max's spine as she heard Victoria's use of "Maxine" to address her.

"It's Max, Victoria. Never Maxine. And I don't know. Maybe go inside the bathroom and hide again, then intervene when we see Blue Bandit and Nathan Headcase appear?"

Victoria responded with a shake of her finger.

"Intervene? That sounds incredibly dangerous. What if he just shoots you the moment you step out? I think I've already got enough of a dry-cleaning bill without having your blood added to the stains on my Cashmere."

"I presume you have a better alternative then."

"Why of course I do: just wait out here, let Nathan in to the bathroom but block that Blue Bitch's entry and explain what will happen. That way the combatants are isolated and we prevent the shooting. At the same time, we only have to deal with an unarmed girl. It shouldn't be that difficult. Right?"

"Typical Victoria MO", Max thought, "Asking for ideas after she's already thought things through, and come up with a great plan. Then, once she's confirmed that her plan is better, your idea gets trashed and she espouses on how clever she is." Still, Max had to concede that it was the better idea. In fact there was only one obvious flaw in it.

"What if the Blue Bandit doesn't take kindly to being blocked?"

Victoria was somewhat hesitant to answer that, and seemed to take on the slightest edge of nervousness. Max gathered from Victoria's earlier description that this Blue-Haired girl had something of a reputation. She certainly looked the part too, with all that lean muscle and general badass-ery. What was it Victoria had said, she'd been expelled for the crimes of "almost everything"? Max was confident there was something of a strength disparity between Blue Bandit and Victoria, let alone between the Bandit and herself. How do you block someone like that?

"I'll just have to be persuasive."

Wowser, looks like we're dealing with a badass.

"Victoria, to use her own terminology, that girl looked 'hella strong'. In fact I bet she could just about carry me from the town centre all the way up to the light house at Arcadia heights, in one go. I don't know the first thing about fighting, so I don't see how I can be much help. And I guarantee you if she actually lands a swing, it won't be pretty."

"Maxine, don't you think you're overestimating her physical condition, just a little? From what I understand she's mostly unemployed, sitting at home in a weed induced stupor all day. She only leaves her home to put up those damn Rachel Amber missing posters. In any case I took Taekwondo for years in my childhood. I was awarded enough coloured belts to accessorise at least a third of my wardrobe, which I assure you is of considerable size."

Her words seemed confident, but the way Victoria said them sounded like she was trying to convince herself rather than Max. And using 'Maxine' again? Probably another part of the Victoria MO: assert some subtle level of control by redefining how someone should be addressed. She
probably didn't even realise she was doing it. Granted 'Maxine' was a hell of a lot better than 'Slave number one' and 'Slave number two', but still, Max felt she didn't need to put up with it.

"And I've had dealings with her back when she hung around that whore Rachel Amber. She always backed off then. But you're right in that someone of your limited physical development probably wouldn't be any use at restraining a beast like her. Your best use is probably just to sit in the corner, and make sure you can rewind if something unthinkable happens."

Max threw her hands up in resignation. If Victoria wanted to have a turn playing the hero, then fine! She'd just assume she knew what she was doing, and hide around the corner to provide an escape by way of rewind if time proved that she didn't. But there was one thing she absolutely couldn't take from Victoria, something she felt it absolutely essential to kill this instant.

"Victoria, you've called me Maxine twice in a row now. It's Max. You call me that again, and you'll be known hence-forth as 'Tori'."

Victoria's jaw dropped in incredulity.

"What? Tori!? Who the fuck's ever called me Tori? Last I checked, Maxine was your proper name."

"Tori's so nice though, like the name of a five year old girl's fantasy doll."

Max made a point of sighing wistfully and staring off into an imaginary horizon. Doing so seemed to put Victoria on the verge of ripping her own hair out.

"Wouldn't it be so much fun to waste money collecting Tori's designer outfits, practice the wifely skill of cooking on Tori's pink coloured fake plastic stove, and go on dates with Tori's three fake plastic boyfriends. Maybe screw up designing a video game and get Tori's computer infected by a virus, which Tori's three boyfriends naturally fist fight for the honour of fixing (because Tori can't)."

"Go fuck your selfie, Max."

Max couldn't help but smile at that. Back to Max again. And the "go fuck your selfie" thing was funny, in a baby's first meme sort of way.

Suddenly they both saw her striding down Blackwell's corridor: a jet of blue fire capped in a black beanie and cloaked in a leather jacket. A couple of cheerleaders stood in her way, gossiping in front of a pair of fire doors. A single glance up at her face and they found somewhere else to be. A couple of football players were next, apparently enjoying the view of the cheerleaders. A fist full of words from her and they moved off even faster. Max sighed. She was incredible.

"Any last minute suggestions coach?"

Max snapped herself out of a dreamy stupor to see Victoria staring impatiently. "I have complete confidence in your abilities," she quickly replied. Well, if she didn't have anything better to say, positive reinforcement seemed a safe bet. "Try not to get killed?" She added helpfully.

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Chloe Price marched into Blackwell like a motherfucking boss. And why the hell not, at least all the shit that had happened to her over the past few years had garnished her with a certain reputation. Sometimes it felt like life itself was trying to kick her in the ass, so she'd made it her mission to grab life (and anything else that pissed her off) by the ass and kick it right back. There were a few good memories, of course, mostly dating back to when Rachel was still around. She remembered a party organised by "the Chase family's hope for the future", that she'd attended as Rachel's plus one. A grin spread across her face, causing several cheerleaders to flee for their lives. The repair bill for the
windows in that hall had apparently been enormous, though the cost of hospital care for the guy she'd tossed through them was relatively minor. They were only ground floor windows, after all, and there was a rose bush underneath them to break his fall. What else was a girl to do when she caught some lowlife spiking some long-legged innocent-. Ok she couldn't finish that sentence. Spiking some long-legged vortex club bimbo's drink. Needless to say, Victoria Chase had been furious. There was a heated discussion between them, starting with Victoria's frank opinion on Chloe's future employment prospects, and ending with Chloe's opinion on Victoria's future respiratory prospects. Sadly Rachel had insisted on breaking it up before Chloe had a chance to give any practical demonstration as to the merits of her argument.

Still, life seemed to be upping the ante recently. She owed three grand to Frank Bowers, her dealer. And it wasn't even for drugs, but fucking auto repairs. Rachel had come to her, told Chloe it was absolutely essential to get out of town as soon as possible. They had planned on leaving together anyway, so why the fuck not? Chloe conned Frank into loaning her the money, but by the time her truck was out of the shop, Rachel had just up and vanished. That was six months ago, and now Chloe was stuck in Arcadia Bay, desperately searching for Rachel, all while Frank was becoming progressively more aggressive in demanding his loan's repayment. Last time they'd met, he actually pulled his switchblade on her. Held the blade an inch from her eye, and threatened to cut it out unless she paid up.

Today was a chance to make a big score, enough to completely pay off her debt, courtesy of the town's most entitled teenager Nathan Prescott. The little bastard had managed to slip her a date-rape drug, during one of Chloe's 'fleece the rich' bar operations, and taken her back to his dorm. Chloe had to give him credit, his sleight of hand was far better than the footballer she'd defenestrated back at Victoria's party. Of course, that probably meant drugging girls was something he'd had a lot of practice in.

Speaking of footballers, there were a pair of them in her way. A quick reminder about how their punt receiver, affectionately nicknamed 'Nacho', had received a punt out the window at her hands and they made themselves scarce.

She turned her thoughts back on Nathan: she had to make herself as mean as possible to pull this off, and thinking of what nearly happened at his hands put her in the right frame of mind. For whatever reason, the drugs in Chloe's system had worn off earlier than expected, allowing her to flee in a half conscious state. She liked to think it was her superior metabolism, but it could have just been that he was using watered down product. Whatever. Anyway, she'd managed to stagger the fuck out of there, and was now armed with enough first hand blackmail material to extort three k off him easy.

"Become the remorseless badass you know you can be, Chloe Price." She told herself. "The guy's a mentally fucked up joke. Pile on the pressure, and he'll cave. The way he throws around money, he'll barely notice three grand anyway. And there he is now."

Chloe watched from a distance as Nathan enter the bathroom, before making a move herself. No sign of security, no sign of teachers. Her hand was reaching for the door when a familiar voice interrupted her, it's tone like razorblades dipped in honey.

"That's far enough, dropout. Don't you have an overpass to get back to living under?"

Busted at the last minute. Fuck. Still, it was only Victoria. Not a teacher. If she hurried, she could still extort Nathan and get the fuck out before any authority figures caught her. She just needed to knock queen Vag out of the way, something she'd secretly been hoping for a chance at anyway.

"You were expelled you deaf punk. Get the fuck out of school and back to McDonalds so you can pay for all these fucking Rachel Amber posters and whatever else it is you do with your life. And
maybe get a clue while your at it, and realise Rachel is gone."

You shouldn't have brought up Rachel, queen Vag, bad move.

"You are right about one thing:" Chloe finally replied, her voice cold and menacing. "Rachel isn't here. But that just means she can't hold me back this time. You've got three seconds. Get the fuck out of my way, or pay the Price."

Chloe cracked her knuckles and stepped forward. She was honestly surprised, Victoria wasn't backing down. Perhaps she had more backbone than Chloe had credited her with? Then again, Chloe could fix that.

Max watched from across the hall, witness to possibly the shortest fight in Blackwell's history. She wasn't quite sure what started it, but it seemed that Victoria panicked when the blue haired girl advanced, and struck preemptively. She had to admit it was a very good looking punch, crisply delivered with perfect form, just like every highly choreographed martial arts movie Max had seen. It had landed straight on the punk's cheek too. She was sure there'd be a bruise there tomorrow. The trouble was, it didn't quite knock the demon out. The retaliation from the demon was nowhere near as impressive looking. It was really just a flurry of blows that seemed to be too fast and too fleeting to have done anything, in spite of Victoria emulating a sack of potatoes under the influence of gravity shortly after a few of them got past her guard. That was, until Max discovered she could rewind time in slow motion and saw the full effect of a fist connecting with Victoria's upper gumline in reverse: her head being pulled out of a nasty snapping action by the backward flow of time, and several teeth flying back into her mouth. Jesus. She quickly rewound further, ignoring her growing headache, until Nathan and the blue bandit were nowhere to be seen.

"Any last minute suggestions coach?"

"Victoria, I know you've got a wardrobe full of belts but she's a literal badass monster. Do not provoke her or they won't be identifying you from dental records."

Victoria looked dubious for a moment, before Max's look of earnest concern convinced her.

"You had to rewind time, didn't you. God, was I really that pathetic?"

"Honestly, I thought you were very brave Victoria. Like a condemned man facing a firing squad."

"I'm so going to sue that Taekwondo dojang."

"Look, don't fuck around with cliché throw-down dialogue or provoke a fight. Just tell her straight up that Nathan's packing."

Chloe watched from a distance as Nathan enter the bathroom, before making a move herself. No sign of security, no sign of teachers. Her hand was reaching for the door when a familiar voice interrupted her, sounding like razorblades dipped in honey.

"That's far enough, dropout. You take a step in there, and you're dead. Nathan's got a 9mm, round in the chamber and waiting."

Chloe thought long and hard. Was Nathan really crazy enough to bring a gun to school? Of course he was. The smart move would be to turn around and get the fuck out of there. The only problem was Chloe had exhausted her other long-term options. She needed cash, or Frank was coming after her. Chloe rated her chances against some snotty rich kid as hella better than a fully grown and inked-up drug dealer. Surely, if Nathan realised his gun wasn't going to help him, he'd cave? For
him, 3K was nothing; definitely not worth risking his life over, right? And Chloe just happened to have an equaliser ready for this type of eventuality.

"Didn't you hear me you dumb slut? He's going to shoot you."

But Chloe had already stepped into the toilets completely ignoring Victoria's tirade. As the door swung closed, Victoria had an awful feeling. Chloe had placed her hand within her jacket after being tipped off about Nathan's gun, as if checking for something. The gesture did nothing to assure Victoria; she had a dreadful idea what it was Chloe had checked for and what was about to happen. She might have been a tad hasty when labelling Chloe 'unarmed'.

Fifteen seconds later there was the bark of gunfire - three shots this time rather than one. Victoria noticed a small hole appear in the bathroom door a foot from where she was standing, and across the hall heard a dreadfully high pitch scream, apparently from Logan the football player. Logan, who up until that very moment had been shoving famine-resistant art student Daniel DaCosta into a locker, had collapsed on the ground. His eyes were clamped shut in agony and he grasped his left leg with both hands. In spite of his best efforts, pulses of a crimson hue were leaking from him, and seeping across the floor. The bathroom, on the other hand was eerily silent.

Max rushed over to join Victoria, and together they pushed the bathroom door open, bracing themselves for the inevitable.

The blue haired demon was still standing back to the door, a revolver in her left hand levelled in Nathan's general direction. Based on their positions, it must have been the shot from Nathan's gun that went wide, passed through the door and hit Logan. Speaking of Nathan, he was lying on the ground. He looked more or less himself, thin rat-like eyes and a self-aggrieved grimace. The only thing amiss was his nose: he had a roughly figure-eight shaped hole where most of that should have been, and fragments of something pink and sticky had fallen out the back of his head.

Victoria began retching at the sight. Max just barely held it together enough to rewind.

"Any last minute suggestions coach?"

"Yes. Fuck this plan," Max responded succinctly, as she took Victoria by the arm and dragged her into the bathroom.

"What the hell, Max? I thought we agreed that-"

"Victoria, your plan was great in theory, but just didn't work when tested. You try to drive the demon off by force, and she just beats the shit out of you. You warn her that Nathan's packing, she's ready with a gun of her own and blows his head open. Nathan even squeezes off a round wildly and hits a bystander in the process."

Victoria pouted and crossed her arms in frustration, causing Max to absent-mindedly wet her lips with a brush of her tongue, and consciously reach for her camera.

*click*

Max knew she had much more important things to be doing than photograph a pissed off Victoria, but really couldn't help herself. Plus it was what she did the first time around right? Might as well minimise changes to the timeline where possible.

"Sorry Victoria, you're just so, um, so 'photogenic' when you put on that angry, frustrated, imperiously indignant look."
"I guess that makes you my ultimate fashion accessory then. So what's the plan. It had better be something smarter than jumping into the line of fire, Caulfield."

"Maybe we could just stay hiding and trigger the fire alarm? There's a switch right where we were hiding last time around, almost like destiny."

"Oh, well when you say it like that it sounds so obvious. You know, I think you just want another chance at taking that damn Butterfly picture. I probably trounced that blue bitch."

"Think whatever you need to think to protect your ego. I wouldn't want it added to the parts of you I've already seen bruised today. But since we're here…"

Remembering to switch the 'fucking flash' off (thanks Victoria), Max lined up the butterfly for the second time today.

Almost as soon as Max had taken the butterfly photo, the bathroom door swung open. Fearing discovery, both Max and Victoria had the same idea: grabbing each other and pulling toward their hiding place behind the last stall. Carried by an unexpected excess of momentum, their bodies came to rest pressed tight against each other, with Victoria's back pinned to the stall dividing wall.

"Great," Victoria mumbled, "How did this end up like one of my average Friday nights?"

Max responded quickly, shoving her left hand over Victoria's mouth to muffle her ill-timed sarcasm, her right hand making the shush gesture against her own slightly parted lips. Physically gagging Victoria for the second time in a day? This was at risk of becoming a habit. Meanwhile Victoria mused sardonically that the addition of the gagging probably upgraded this to one of her better Friday nights. But somehow, the sarcasm slowly dissolved as Victoria found herself entrapped by the doe-faced girl's gaze. She absentmindedly noted the great many freckles spread across Max's cheeks; her mind made a token effort to count them, but she found herself constantly interrupted as her attention was stolen back by Max's innocent blue eyes. Victoria sighed, it was almost like everything about Max was designed to frustrate her in one way or another.

"Wrong. You've got HELLA cash."

What the hell, had they really spent that long staring awkwardly at each other? There was precious little time before the Blue Badass was shot! Max started toward the alarm switch when Victoria waylaid her, instead pointing to the camera in Max's bag while mouthing the word "evidence". Nice last minute addition to the plan, Victoria. Max pulled the camera and waited for the telltale line. The one that would signal Nathan had drawn his pistol. She felt a tinge of frustration as Victoria suddenly shot her a concerned stare. Jeeze, the flash is off, calm down.

"You don't know who the fuck I am or what I'm capable of."

"Lucky for you asshole", thought Max. Her previous rewinds had shown precisely what would have happened, had the blue haired girl been forewarned, and been ready to draw her own gun. It put a whole new spin on "got your nose".

Max took two photos: the first one had Nathan and Badass together, the second was carefully framed to catch Nathan alone. By normal photography standards, the second photo was a sloppy shot - Nathan was off hard to one side to keep the blue bandit out of the frame. Still, most people would assume that any imperfection in the shot was due to the pressure of the whole life-and-death situation. Max would have liked a shot of the Badass Punk by herself, and only partially for evidential reasons. It may have just been the work of her (clearly over stimulated) imagination, but it was like Max could sense a certain welling of fun and hyperactive energy beneath that angry punk
exterior. It was something Max had only seen in one other person, and that was in her distant childhood. She knew instantly that Badass would make the most ‘hella’ incredible muse and model.

"No one would even miss your punk ass, now, would they?"

Enough fucking around with photos. They were getting close to a rather literal deadline. The alarm needed to be triggered now. Max looked at the fire alarm switch and was instantly hit with a wave of dismay. It was an ancient model, with a thick (and probably not safety) glass screen. There should have been a hammer alongside it to facilitate breaking the glass in an emergency, but it seemed it was MIA. Max was about to bring her hand up to rewind, give them time to work out something, when Victoria shoved her fist straight through the glass. The pane shattered instantly, and she groaned slightly as several of the shards bit shallow gashes across her knuckles. Guess she did know some kung-fu after all.

The sound of the alarm grabbed Nathan's attention for a split second, and his eyes came off blue badass to stare vacantly in the direction of the nearest wall mounted siren. That was all the time Badass needed. Her left hand grasped at Nathan's pistol, and directed it away from her body. The right latched onto his over-gelled hair with almost enough force to scalp him. Her knee came up, and Nathan buckled over instantly. One thing you could say about Nathan Prescott: he may have been a craven bastard, but at least he had balls. Badass wasn't finished though. Her knee rose for a second time, and simultaneously, she pulled his head down to meet it. There was a thump as the knee met face, followed by a second thump as face (as well as the rest of Nathan) met bathroom floor. Nathan was down for the count.

Max made a decision. Now that Nathan had assumed his rightful place as a Prescott, she finally had an unobstructed view of the Blue Badass. It was the perfect moment to get that last shot. Badass seemed busy leaning over Nathan, taking his gun and rifling through his pockets for good measure. Max had just leaned out from hiding and pressed the Camera action when Badass looked up and Max got her first proper view of her dead-on through the Camera Viewfinder.

Her hair was shorter (and blue!), her face was a little longer, her voice had gone from spunky-cute to hardcore-badass, but there was no denying her true identity. Max slowly lowered her camera and stepped out of hiding, and the two of them gazed at each other in disbelief.

"Max?"

"Chloe!?"

Max extended her hand, reached out toward her oldest friend, once and still the most incredible person Max had ever known. She found only bitter disappointment as, after a moment of indecision, Chloe Price recoiled and dashed out the bathroom exit.

Chapter End Notes

I think I should start by apologising to everyone who's created a fan-work with Victoria referred to as "Tori". I've thoroughly enjoyed countless fan produced works (all Maximum Victory) where Tori is used as a term of endearment by Max, and who knows, maybe it'll come to be used as that in later chapters of this fic too ;).
And surprise, Chloe already had the gun. To be fair, in the actual game Max notices it's already been stolen by the time she and Chloe first visit the Price residence together, so it actually fits with the canon timeline!

You might have also noticed Chloe is a little more 'badass', or more correctly 'consistently badass' (see what happens if Chloe takes on knife/gun wielding Frank with nothing but her fists in the canon game and Pompidou isn't around, damn!) in this fic than canon. There might be reasons for that introduced later on beyond shameless fan embellishment.
The pixie-cut queen of Blackwell peered cautiously around the last stall in the girl's bathroom, just in time to see "The Blue Demon" (also known as Chloe Price) dash out the exit. Nathan was still lying unconscious on the floor, twice a victim of Price's ascending knee of justice. Max Caulfield was staring dumbly at Chloe's departure. Victoria wondered if the waif fully understood what she'd achieved: not many people could say they'd made Chloe Price turn tail and run. Generally the opposite happened. Or they got knocked out. Or thrown through windows.

"Alright Hipster, we have to decide what to do-"

But Victoria's speech was suddenly interrupted, as Max seized her in a fierce hug, her face buried in the crook of the taller girl's neck. What the hell! No one hugged Victoria, at least not overtly. Even her dear slave Taylor would never do more than put an arm around her shoulder in public, and that was after they had both consumed sufficient alcohol for plausible deniability.

"Victoria. We did it. We saved that girl's life."

Damn. When put that way, some minor celebration was, perhaps, understandable. Victoria resolved to teach Max a more refined manner of expressing jubilation though, like making dinner reservations at a French restaurant. And really, what did Max mean by 'we'. It was Victoria who had done it all: she had smashed the glass with her bare hands and triggered the fire alarm, and had the cuts to prove it. All Max had done was wrest control of time from the universe, apparently using nothing but her own force of will, and reversed its flow allowing them to get into position with the right foreknowledge to save her. Ok, maybe they could share line honours, just this once.

"I wish you'd told me though. Told me it was Chloe."

Oh, of course. She should have guessed that the resident shy cliché geek was childhood besties with the town's most famous delinquent badass. Wait. Did this mean that literally everything could have been resolved if Max, rather than Victoria had gone up to confront Chloe before she could enter the bathroom? Fuck. Well things had worked out somehow. Best not to rewind and tamper unnecessarily with the universe.

"You really didn't know? Then all this Blue Demon slash Bandit slash Bitch was actually name replacement and not just healthy derision of a high school dropout?"

Twisting her arms slightly, Victoria made a token attempt to extricate herself from Max. It was ultimately futile, Max was like a limpet, clinging to her with strength beyond what Victoria thought the smaller girl capable of. Truth be told, a small part of her was actually starting to enjoy it, and she had to consciously restrain herself from wrapping an arm around the smaller girl in reciprocation.
Come to think about it, this was the fourth time Max had grabbed her today. Granted the other three were in extenuating and potentially life and death circumstances. Twice, Max had been forced to quiet Victoria while they were hiding from a berserk Nathan, by way of gagging her with her hand. The third time was to stop her from falling and hitting her head on her desk. Maybe close contact with waif-hipsters was addictive, sort of like licking those hallucinogenic toads?

"You were the only one who used 'Blue Bitch', Tori. And what do you mean, Chloe dropped out of School!!"

Max finally decoupled herself, looking startled and bewildered at the revelation that the girl who looked like a cliché rebellious high school dropout was in fact a high school dropout. Victoria was left with an odd feeling of loss at Max's sudden withdrawal to a more socially acceptable distance. This probably accounted for her not immediately raising an objection to, and barely even noticing, Max address her as 'Tori'. It could have also been the relief at finally being able to fill her lungs again. Max had some surprising arm strength.

"Max, I think we have more pressing matters to attend to. Specifically what we're going to do about…"

Victoria pointed in the direction of Nathan, who was starting to stir. In doing so, Max finally noticed the shallow gashes along several of Victoria's fingers and knuckles, where they'd been cut by broken glass from the fire alarm switch. They ducked back behind the stalls, watched, and waited, as Nathan slowly staggered to his feet. He paused for a minute to examine the large knee-cap shaped bruise spreading across his left cheek in the mirror, and then hobbled out the door, complaining about how shitty the day was.

"Should I rewind?" Max asked, after the door swung shut. "We could leave first and report him, get him caught on the girl's bathroom floor. If I rewound far enough, I could fix your hand too."

"No." Victoria responded emphatically. "Not since your degenerate friend stole his pistol. If we choose to report him and he's caught in here without the gun, it'll raise too many questions. If we let him get away, he'll have a period where he could have disposed of the gun somewhere. Then it's not a big deal for him to be found unarmed."

She paused to regard Max's right hand, finally finding it in herself not to quiver at the thought of what it could do.

"And I don't want you wasting your superpowers on trivial things. I've noticed how overuse of your rewind seems to cause you some sort of debilitating headache. What if that stops you from using your powers when it really matters, or it's a symptom of deeper effects to your health. Besides, an injury caused by the school's own fire alarm? They'll be terrified I'll sue and less likely to question any discrepancies in our stories."

Max really had to hand it to Victoria, she knew her intrigue. Keeping herself at the top of the Vortex club hierarchy probably required the occasional piece of deft political manoeuvring. Still, something worried Max about how Victoria had said "if we choose to report him," and she said as much as she moved to the nearest sink and began to scrub her hands clean. She still had Victoria's blood on her hands, both figuratively and literally, and more importantly the incriminating note scribbled on the back of her hand from her future self.

"Well, Lady Macbeth," Victoria began, watching Max expend considerable effort scrubbing her left hand. "For argument's sake there is the null option. We don't show the photos to anyone, and hope Nathan pulls himself together."
Max was as emphatic in her rejection, as she was inwardly glad Shakespeare was wrong. Both blood and ballpoint pen apparently do wash off.

"Not even worth considering. In his condition, he's a danger to everyone. Anything could set him off, and he could just source another gun and open fire on a whole classroom of people next time. And if he does that, it'll be life or the death penalty."

At that, Victoria found herself deeply conflicted. She and Nathan had been friends for years. Perhaps longer than Max and Chloe, if you took into account the five year stretch where they’d been separated. She didn't want to see him sentenced to jail time or even get a criminal conviction. But Max was right in that Nathan needed some sort of intervention. At the moment he was a grenade with a loose pin. The anguish was clear on her face as she turned to Max.

"Agreed. We do something about him."

At that, Max brought out the photos she’d taken at Victoria's prompting. It occurred to her that these were possibly the most important photos she'd taken to date: each one was capable of deciding someone's fate. The first photo was the most straightforward: Nathan holding a gun on Chloe.

"Walking into the girls' bathroom, and threatening someone with a gun. No way Nathan can dodge hard time with that."

It seemed simple enough to Max, but the hesitant look on Victoria's face told her that it wasn't such an easy decision for the school's queen bee.

"Max, I'd like it if we can avoid getting Nathan charged with anything too serious."

Max just about exploded in response.

"Are You Fucking Cereal? Victoria, we sat behind that wall and watched him work himself into a frenzy and then shoot someone, shoot Chloe!"

"And didn't you say Chloe was carrying a gun too, and actually shot him in the head when we warned her?"

"That was different. It was self defence!"

"And Nathan's had a fucked up upbringing. His dad is worse than Hitler and Satan's bastard stepdaughter put together. Just- Can we look at the other options first. Please?"

Max sighed, and pulled the next photo.

"Moving on, a shot of Nathan with the gun, carefully framed so Chloe's not visible."

"That's-, that's not your best composition Max. Still I suppose it was challenging to catch Nathan with his gun, but keep that Blue Gorrilla out of shot. Fortunately, I don't think evidential photos are graded for artistic merit."

"Since Nathan could just be waving the gun around randomly, he'd probably get a more minor charge right? We could say he looked in the mirror, started talking to himself, pointed the gun around the room. Not mention Chloe at all."

"He'd definitely get suspended, but only face a criminal charge of reckless use – a misdemeanour charge that wouldn't amount to much in the way of criminal sanction, especially if they used some sort of psychological defence."
"Then he'd get court-ordered psychiatric help, and probably be refused reenrolment in any non-secure school."

That sounded like a direction more amiable to Victoria. Max was less enthused. Anyone who tried to hurt Chloe deserved the book thrown at them in her opinion. And for said book to hit them in the head.

One more photo, and this time no Nathan. Chloe Price's head was tilted slightly down, but was otherwise looking straight into the camera. She was crouching and had Nathan's gun in one hand, a surprised and almost guilty look on her face, while that bloody butterfly sat on a sink in the background with its wing mid-flap. No doubt being caught in the act of theft and possession of a firearm by anyone, let alone by her oldest friend and bastion of morality, would have put her in a culpable frame of mind. Even if she was stealing from someone who'd tried to murder her. Nathan's unconscious form was nowhere to be seen: it would have been directly below the photo's bottom edge.

"Well, this one more than makes up for the poor framing in that last shot, Caulfield. You'd better not show it to anyone, though. It makes her look like the guilty party. Such a pity, it's a striking pose, and you actually managed to make that blue backed gorilla look beautiful, fragile even."

Max knew Victoria intended that as a compliment, but felt prickles run up her back none the less. In her mind, Chloe was beautiful, always had been, and there she'd demonstrated no particular skill beyond pressing the camera action. Her response was swift and harsh.

"Let's hope I can manage the same feat taking your photos for the extra-credit project, then."

Victoria recoiled at the jibe. She didn't respond in kind though, she needed Max onside. If Max chose to head straight for the principal's office and hand in the most incriminating evidence she had, Victoria would have no chance to stop her. The ability to rewind time would let her evade any attempt on Victoria's part to pursue and restrain Max or steal the photos. An increasingly large part of Victoria was of the opinion that she shouldn't have suggested Max take the photos in the first place. Well, Victoria didn't get the luxury to take back her bad decisions. Apparently that was entirely Max's privilege.

"Whatever Max. Which path are we going to take?"

Max and Victoria stepped out of the toilets into a strangely desolate corridor. The alarm siren was still blaring and the building had been completely evacuated. Seconds later David Madsen, the school's head of security, appeared from around the corner and immediately set upon the pair.

"What in tarnation are the two of you still doing in the girl's toilets? Can't you hear that fire alarm?"

To be fair, it was an entirely reasonable question, but Victoria immediately launched a counterattack. Apparently there was some ongoing antagonism between the Vortex Club and the head of campus security.

"Oh. My. God. Are you really asking for a description of what happens in the girl's potty? I'd heard rumours that there was a pervert amongst the school's staff but-"

"Now don't get cute with me missy," Madsen cut back, "you know exactly what I meant. But come to think of it maybe you could explain what happens. Maybe you could explain how the girls toilets always end up smelling of reffer, straight after you and your Vortex clique are seen frequenting them. I've had 'reports' last Tuesday lunch at 12:56 pm, and, oh yes, Friday afternoon at the traditional time
of exactly 4:20 pm."

Victoria seemed only mildly concerned with these revelations. It seemed rich and influential parents let you get away with a lot at Blackwell. Never the less, Max chose to intervene and use Madsen's appearance to bridge the matter of Nathan.

"Victoria there's no point winding him up. Let's just show him the picture." She interjected, presenting the photo to David Madsen. Five seconds later they were both practically being dragged into the principal's office.

Principal Wells dabbed his forehead with a handkerchief. The fire alarm had caught him at an inopportune time, shortly after his regularly scheduled afternoon meeting with one Jonathan Walker, so he was already suffering from a temporary increase in blood pressure. Photo evidence of Nathan Prescott waving a gun around had him on the verge of a hypertensive crisis.

"So let's go over this one more time" he began, addressing Max, who sat across from his desk alongside Victoria. David Madsen had been offered a chair as well, but elected to remain standing with an incredibly rigid posture by a bookshelf. "You and Victoria were in the toilets together, when Nathan came in and just started waving a gun around."

"N-not to start with, he started talking to himself first. Saying things like how he owned the school and could blow it up."

Wells sunk back into his chair. This was just sounding worse and worse. Meanwhile Victoria reached over to Max under the table and gave her hand a quick reassuring squeeze, a rarely seen honest smile on her face. She would later explain both away as just being so glad Max had chosen the "reckless use of a firearm" plan, rather than the "attempted murder" one. She continued from where Max left off seamlessly.

"At one stage he was talking directly at his reflection in the mirror. Then he started yelling. The gun came out. I think he even cracked his head against something. I was so scared, I…"

Victoria held her hand up, displaying the cuts on it.

"...I triggered the fire alarm."

"The hammer for that alarm switch had detached from the unit and was found on the ground in one of the stalls. It's absence from the switch meant Ms Chase had no choice but to use her hand to-.

"Yes, thank you Mr Madsen. I can see that."

"Yet another problem", Wells thought. The Chase family could conceivably sue the school for inadequate safety equipment: the fire alarm switch was so obsolete and poorly designed that it couldn't be safely operated. He'd have to treat this with particular sensitivity to keep them placated. He sighed and placed his head in his hands. There was really no choice open to him on how to handle the matter. A serious accusation with the two students least likely to collude as witnesses, and photo evidence, all of which had already been seen and heard by David Madsen. There was no sweeping this under the rug. He'd have to suspend Nathan, at least pending a police investigation. Then it wouldn't be his responsibility anymore. Let his Father, Sean Prescott, lean on the police instead of Blackwell.

"Alright then, I think we have all that we need for now. Just sign your written statements, and you are both free to go. Don't be surprised if the local police conduct a separate interview process in due time. Ms Chase, though you keep insisting that your hand injury is superficial, I'd suggest getting the
Max felt exhausted as she finally stepped out of the Blackwell Academy building and onto the well-trimmed lawn that flanked the school's main entrance. Looking around, it was obvious how much Blackwell sold itself on Mark Jefferson's presence in the faculty. Dotted around the lawn were excerpts from Jefferson's most famous photo sets, each blown up on two metre high weather-proof boards. She allowed herself a moment to relax. After all, she had finally managed to separate from Victoria, who was getting her hand seen to, so things were bound to be less stressful for the moment. The probable absence of any more gun wielding lunatics helped in that area as well. A few students were scattered around the place, doing everything from studying the exhibited Jefferson photos to flying a drone. Mrs Grant the science teacher was out in force as well, desperately trying to get students to sign a petition against a new surveillance system, which had apparently been installed in the academy quietly by Principal Wells and David Madsen.

A jingle from her phone alerted Max of an incoming text. On seeing the sender ID, she instantly experienced a headache as bad as that caused by any rewind.

Warren Graham.

Max had been, very politely, trying to explain to Warren that she had less romantic interest in him than McMurdo base had in freezers. For some reason, Warren didn't take the hint. Then, two weeks ago, she made a critical error. Max accepted Warren's offer to lend her a USB drive filled with low quality pirated movie rips. Warren had seized on that as an opportunity to get his metaphorical foot in the door, heedless of Max repeatedly slamming said door on it. And what's worse, she hadn't even found the time to watch any of his movie collection. The drive had sat, unused, on her desk the whole time. There were now 12 unread messages from him today. Most of them were lame attempts to ask her out "for coffee", but the most recent was sadly something she had to respond to.

Warren: Hey Max, have you perused my library of stolen classics yet? Seriously, I kind of need the drive back today. If you haven't watched anything, you can always copy the files to your computer's hard disk.

Max: Sorry, running late. Insane day.

Warren: Can you bring it to the parking lot, I'll be waiting with a surprise.

Max: Alright, I'll bring it and my usual enthusiasm. :)

Max immediately regretted use of the smiley emoji after sending it. He'd latch onto it as a positive sign, completely oblivious to the sarcasm imbedded in the text.

"Hey, Max!"

Looking around as she put away her phone, Max recognised Stella Hill, one of her fellow students from Mr Jefferson's class, calling out to her. Stella had the reputation of a serious student, who worked a part time job to help pay for Blackwell tuition, and often stayed up to the early hours of the Morning polishing her homework assignments. That made her a little grumpy when she finally woke up the next day, but somehow Stella always seemed alert and focused by the time classes started. Max had no clue how Stella managed it, she generally went to sleep far earlier and could still barely keep herself awake in class!

"I just wanted to say congratulations. I heard you were one of the front runners in the 'Everyday
Heroes' competition. Everyone's saying it's between you and Victoria."

Wowser, news travels fast here. Max had handed in her entry roughly an hour ago, to an almost empty classroom. Now "everyone" knew about it?

"To be honest, I'm kind of jealous of you two, getting all that attention from Mr Jefferson! If I was in your position Max, I might even consider making a move."

Max's mouth hung open in disbelief for a moment. "A move"? The quiet, studious Stella Hill was that thirsty for her teacher? Not that Max hadn't harboured a tiny crush on Mark Jefferson when she'd first joined his class. All of the female students (and probably several of the male students) had. But suggesting someone "make a move" on their teacher was just fucked up, and bound to result in humiliation. The fallout could also seriously tarnish the teacher's good name and even force them out of the school. Max felt it in everyone's interest to play down the chances of such a union.

"To be honest, I don't think Mr Jefferson has any of that type of interest in his students. I mean, Victoria practically mounts his leg after every class and all he does is reach for the spray bottle."

"You've got a lot to learn Max," Stella countered, "Victoria just isn't his type. Sadly, I don't think I am either. But that missing girl, Rachel Amber? She definitely had sex with him! At least, that's what I heard from a good source."

What the hell Stella? Everyone knew "Good source" meant "baseless speculation" in ninety percent of cases. Still, Rachel Amber? Max had seen the missing person posters of her dotted around the town. According to Victoria, Chloe was the one putting them up. It was all so mysterious, and Rachel had this captivating, almost mystical beauty to her. If any student could seduce a teacher into impromptu bedroom Olympics, she felt like it'd be Rachel. Max imagined someone like her could capture anyone's heart, and she obviously meant something to Chloe. Against her better judgement, Max decided to inquire further.

"What was Rachel like? All I've seen of her are those missing posters. I mean it's obvious she was incredibly alluring and attractive, almost like a femme fatale from a pulp detective novel."

"Actually, she looked a lot like you."

Max's brain practically exploded. She somehow resisted an overwhelming urge to somersault backward, and restricted herself to blushing furiously.

"Same height, and was pretty much the same size. In most dimensions anyway," Stella elaborated. "Mr Jefferson really liked her photography work too."

"In most dimensions anyway?" Max thought. "Thanks Stella." She decided that she really wanted out of this insane conversation.

"So what were you up to before you called me over?" Max asked, hoping Stella would get back to it.

"Oh, I was just studying the jewel in the crown of Mr Jefferson's career. Do you know how many complaints, narrow minded critiques and outright hate the set this shot was from generated? I think it shows so much artistic integrity that, after all that, he still insists on its public display."

Stella pointed to the weatherproof board directly behind her. The photo printed on it was from "Implied Consent," the most controversial series Mark Jefferson had produced. Most of the frame was taken up by an attractive teenage girl, her shoulders largely bared by a spaghetti strapped top, her eyes downcast in some combination of guilt, shame, or unwilling submission. A clearly older man loomed behind her, his fingers gingerly pawing at the tip of her shoulder. Max found the series
itself unpalatable, and frankly a little creepy, but sometimes wondered what it would be like to explore that sort of controversial field herself. At the same time, she harboured doubts about being able to tackle it in a sophisticated manner, her "artistic resume" was presently rather limited after all. Stella, on the other hand seemed utterly smitten both by the photo and photographer – apparently convinced anyone who took a negative point of view 'just didn't get it'. Max made a mental note to avoid anyone else who coveted the photo, and possibly add their names to a community warning list.

"I think it's incredibly impressive, and brave, that the school agreed to publicly display it."

Those with political aspirations take note and bow, the hipster thought. She'd avoided giving any personal opinion on the implied consent series, or what she thought of Mr Jefferson producing it, and what she had said could be interpreted as either being impressed with the school acting as patron to an underappreciated artwork or having the balls to display something so tacky. Basically, she'd said nothing substantive. Maybe she'd be a fit for the vortex club yet?

"Well I don't want to get between you and your art appreciation. I'd better get going."

Max quickly made herself scarce before Stella could respond. Doing so brought her toward a group of skaters, congregated around the stairs at the Blackwell academy street entrance. Only one of them, Trevor, was bothering to try and skate; the rest were just sitting around the stairs, denouncing the Vortex Club as posers with slightly lethargic speech, and criticising the only guy actually bothering to skate for "bailing" on his attempts to land something called a "Tre flip". Max always felt a little giddy around skaters, in spite of their obvious overindulgence in certain herbal supplements. They brought back memories of chasing Chloe around a skate park with her camera, and Max found herself entranced for an indeterminate period reliving those times.

The screech of a skidding vehicle snapped Max's attention back to reality. She looked up in disbelief as a passing car swerved out of control, rode up onto the sidewalk and crashed into the stairs. The skaters, high as they were, had no chance of escape. Trevor, the only one separated from the group by virtue of him actually skating, turned in shock to see the mangled remains of his friends poking out from beneath the vehicle. Screams from the other students echoed around the place, and Mrs Grant abandoned her petition to summon an ambulance. First a shooting in the bathroom, and now this? It was almost like the school was cursed. Max took a step closer before freezing in shock. Something long, pink and stringy had unravelled under the force of the car's still spinning tyres, amidst the sea of broken limbs and blood. It took her a moment to realise what it was, and that it really shouldn't be outside of a person's skin. Then she realised the person it belonged to was moaning softly, still conscious and in agony. Unable to take anymore, she looked away gagging. She had already seen people shot today, but that was clean in comparison to what was currently on display. Eyes still wide in shock, she summoned the strength to throw her hand forward and rewind time. There seemed no chance of stopping a speeding car; the only hope was to somehow motivate a bunch of stoners to move.

"Get the fuck off the stairs! A car is coming! You're all going to die!"

Needless to say, honesty proved somewhat less than effective. All it really achieved was making Max look as unbalanced as Nathan. Considering the next thing she did was throw up in front of them, she probably actually appeared more unbalanced than Nathan. Amidst jeers from the skaters, and several other onlookers, and a cheer from a handful of people who thought she was walking around school heavily intoxicated, she wiped her face clean, rewound time again and told herself the only thing she could.

"Get it together Max! You were given these powers for a reason, and part of that has to be to avert what you're seeing in front of you. None of it is real anyway, not if you undo it. Now come up with
a plan, and save those morons!"

Allowing herself a moment to regain her composure, Max tried to find another option that would get them to move. Perhaps offer to take photos of them skating? She was supposed to be training herself to be a photographer after all. Why not just go up to them and ask to take some pictures? Wasn't that what she was supposed to be doing anyway, building her portfolio?

"Check out the Max, come to thrash?"

As Max approached, one of the other skaters, Justin, called out to her. It suddenly dawned on her that he had been the one she'd seen eviscerated. She tried to push the memory to one side, think of it only as a possibility that was going to be averted.

"Um, maybe?" What the hell does 'thrash' even mean? "I was hoping to get some action photos for the portfolio. I can't skate worth shit, but an old friend of mine was a total badass, so I have some experience in skate photography."

"Damn, what was her best trick? We'll line up Trevor and see if he compares."

Trevor's the only one who fate hasn't lined up though. She needed everybody else. And how the hell was Max supposed to know something as technical as trick names? She had been too busy appreciating the more aesthetic elements of skating, like Chloe soaring majestically through the air, and was currently too preoccupied with the horror she'd just witnessed, to think of anything.

"Um, jumping, I guess?"

"If your friend really told you that "Jumping" was the name of a trick, she's a total poser. And if you can't name a single trick, you should walk on."

Wowser, that was a bit hurtful. Max was almost tempted to take their advice at that point, "walk on" and let karma deal with them. But the sight of that soon to be out of control car just turning into the street, and the horrific memory of twisted limbs beneath steel convinced Max to persevere. She had a couple of alternatives – maybe rewind and parrot some of their own lingo back at them, see if it stuck. But there was one other thing Max thought she could try. For some reason, it seemed a certain blue haired punk had a lot of leverage around here. She wondered how a name drop would go.

"Chloe Price used to call her favourite move a jump. Admittedly, she was 11."

There was a sudden pause.

"No way you know the Price."

Max quickly fished around in her bag, and pulled out an old shot of Chloe carried in the back of her diary. "An angel taking flight", as Max liked to call it when she was in a sickeningly saccharine mood; the photo showed Chloe mid 'jump' (or whatever the name of the trick was), with the camera angled up from below. It had been a dangerous shot to take: Max had needed to lie down almost in Chloe's path to get the angle, so there had been a risk of the board (and Chloe) landing on top of her. Totally worth it though.

"Check out the sick baby Price shot. She got way more air as a grommet than you do now Trevor."

"Bro, she knows the Price…"

"Shit. You just called the Price a poser, Justin. When's the funeral? And can I have your shoes?"
The sudden turnabout was incredible. And damned if one of them even started the Wayne's World "we're not worthy" bowing act, with apparent sincerity. Still, Max knew exactly when Justin's funeral would be: in about thirty seconds unless she thought of something quickly.

"So, what's the first trick you want to shoot?"

"What's he best at?" Max inquired with some haste, praying his crew would all get up and watch if Trevor brought out his A-Game.

"Trevor? He destroys rails with his noseslide and-"

"Noseslide then!" Max said all at once, acutely aware that the crash was imminent.

Max thought Trevor's noseslide (executed along a nearby bench) was really quite good, but the other skaters remained largely apathetic, anchored to the stairs and restricting themselves to some small applause. As Max heard the screech of the car going out of control for the second time, she brought her hand up quickly, unwilling to witness the aftermath of the crash for a second time. Her head was now positively throbbing from the repeated rewinds, and she wondered if she had another rewind left in her. She needed to pull something out now or this would all end in disastrous failure.

At that moment, with all the thought on failing, it occurred to Max that failures were often more interesting than successes. And there was that one move they kept hassling Trevor for failing to land. What was it called again? Oh yes…

"Um, I'd love to see a Tre flip."

The skaters looked at each other grinning, before vacating the stairs to watch. Yes! Clearly the spectre of Trevor being immortalised humiliating himself was something they had to witness up close. Trevor, thank god your friends are all assholes.

"Check it Trevor, the lady wants a Tre flip. Get on that action."

Max readied her camera. With the added pressure of an imminent photograph, his crew making the effort to get up and watch, and being compared unfavourably with an eleven year old Chloe Price, Trevor never had a hope. He certainly tried, though, as over exuberance and incorrect placement of his back foot on the kick down sent the board spinning upward on the wrong axis, and he found himself caught twice in a rather sensitive place, first literally by his skateboard and second somewhat more metaphorically by Max's camera immortalising the moment of impact. Indulging her inner Victoria just a little more, Max took a second shot showing the delayed results: Trevor collapsed on the ground holding his crotch in agony. His doped-up friends slowly staggered toward him, offering a combination of commiseration and light-hearted ribbing, finally getting themselves completely clear of the stairs just as the screech of the out of control car reached Max's ears.

There was just enough time for Max to take one final shot: the moment of impact between the car and the stairs. Max recognised the terrified face behind the wheel of Alyssa Anderson, another Blackwell photography student with famine resistance on par with Daniel Decosta, gripping the steering wheel for dear life while her foot continued to pump ineffectually on the car's brake pedal.

Looking back at the now stunned skaters, Max had some sympathy for Trevor, suffering public humiliation and injury. Still, his small sacrifice protected the many, and that had to be morally justifiable, right? She took a seat under one of the trees on the lawn and watched the crash cleanup as she nursed her headache, all while still trying to convince herself that the horrific scene she'd witnessed never happened. She was not alone in this regard, as other students and members of the public came out of the woodwork, flocking to gawk at the crash, and whispering how lucky
everyone had been to avoid injury. If they only knew. Subsequent events seemed to blur together: Mrs Grant helping a stunned Alyssa out of the car, police arriving to examine the crash, and finally a tow truck to get the wreck off the stairs. She was finally snapped back to reality by another text. Oh right, Warren wanted that damn USB stick. Still, witnessing a car-crash up close was a pretty good excuse for running late. She wondered how much longer she could milk it for as she reluctantly checked her phone. There was a brief moment of surprise, then relief, then surprise at her relief, when the identity of the texter came up.

Victoria: HIPSTER GET YOUR MALNOURISHED ASS TO THE DORM.

Max: Victoria, a phone as expensive as yours has to be able to text in lower case.

Max: And how did you even get my number?

Victoria: I GOT AN early warning. A traitorous whore is planning on spreading shit about us.

Max: OK so why should I even care about Vortex kiddo-politics?

Victoria: They're targeting both of us Max. They're going to attack you to smear me.

Honestly, you hang around Victoria for one afternoon and this shit gets thrown at you? Suddenly, another text arrived, this time by an anonymous sender.

Unknown: Check out the latest romantic comedy courtesy of Victoria Chase and Max Caulfield!

Unknown: blackwellVids-dot-com/MaximumVictory

Looking around, Max could hear the "message received" jingles play on pretty much every student's phone in the area. Odds were, the link was being mass textoed to the entire student body. Moments later, Max could feel the eyes of every nearby student turning on her, watching her, judging her. Normally she'd find it horrid; the last thing Max could stand was being in the public eye. However being witness to, and subsequently preventing so many tragedies had a way of putting things into perspective. Downgrading this from horrid to just unpleasant. None the less, she decided to seek a quieter locale, and made a beeline for the path connecting the Blackwell main building to the dormitory. It was, mercifully, devoid of people at that moment. She took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. Alright, time to see how damaging this video really was.

Max quickly followed the url on her phone. One positive: there wasn't anything explicit like the rumoured "porn video" about Kate (not that Max had done anything explicit with Victoria to record). The content was taken entirely from Max and Victoria's adventure that afternoon, following them from Jefferson's class to the bathroom, with pretty much every physical interaction between them misconstrued to be some sort of awkward romantic encounter. They did have a surprising amount to work with: that wave Max had given Victoria, resulting in her immediately collapsing back into her seat in shock; that moment where Max had to rush over and grab Victoria to prevent her from cracking her head on the table (played up as a "passionate embrace the moment class ended", jeeze); the time Victoria grabbed Max midway down the hallway to ask questions about her time power; and of course Max snatching Victoria by the hand "in a commanding fashion" and dragging her through the bathroom door "to get some privacy". They had also capitalised on the fact that a lot of the looks on Victoria's face when she was just sitting in class were rather easy to misinterpret, especially when she was looking in Max's direction. Absentmindedly, Max noticed something odd about the camera work: the entire video seemed to exclusively use high angle shots.
The video had been cut, remarkably competently, in the style of an old silent comedy. It was complete with black and white filter and played just a little bit faster than the recording speed for added comedic effect. Under other circumstances, Max might have actually smiled at the shot of her waving, which immediately cut to Victoria falling back into her chair in shock, and the caption "be still my heart". Except that Max knew the truth about what was happening there, that Victoria had worked herself into a state of abject terror because of Max's newfound power over time, which had nearly led to tragedy. Max also knew immediately that Victoria would hate the video, that it would hit her far worse than Max. Victoria's entire position in school and sense of self-worth was based around her cool, commanding and in control persona. This video publically ripped that away and portrayed her as a flustered and inept dork.

Max realised she was correct in that assessment, as the gentle tap of shoes on the concrete path signalled she was no longer alone. Looking up she saw the normally statuesque form of Victoria Chase walking toward her looking oddly deflated. She was slightly hunched over, a forced expression on her face, and hands busying themselves wiping something from the corner of her eye.

Chapter End Notes

So… rather than just Kate's video, there's now also a Max/Victoria video. But rather than something explicit, it apparently makes Victoria look like a Charlie Chaplin character. O_o

Victoria's more about seeming cool, dignified and in charge, so a video of her appearing pathetically flustered as a result of Max of all people might be quite effective at damaging her rep. After all, she goes completely insane over the momentary humiliation of that one paint photo in the canon game, and this seems worse.

Also in case anyone's wondering why there isn't more Chloe in this fic (it's allegedly a "Maximised Price of Victory ship"), there will be. She'll officially join Team Max in 2-3 chapters, but we'll probably check in with her before then.

Finally, I should probably give a little warning to any Warren fans (who for some unknown reason have decided to read a fic listed with only the girls as main characters). He may 'suffer' a little in future chapters, so ensure you have a stiff drink on standby when they come out.
A despondent figure slowly shuffled her feet along the concrete path, which linked the main academic complex of Blackwell Academy with the Dormitory buildings. The sight of her, downcast and pathetic, nearly broke Max's heart. Max never imagined feeling that way about Victoria Chase. But Max never imagined Victoria Chase in such a sorry state.

Victoria was supposed to carry herself with a certain majestic arrogance. Yes they'd occasionally (or perhaps rather more frequently than that) traded barbs, but she had always bounced back from them with little more than a transient angered expression or temporary flush to the face; both of which, truth be told, Max rather enjoyed provoking. But seeing her skulk around all hunched over and dishevelled was just wrong, somehow; not like her Victoria at all. When it was clear Victoria planned on walking past Max without any acknowledgement whatsoever, Max stepped in front of her, and gently seized her by the upper arms. She drooped backward in response, wishing escape but in too feeble a mood to really force it. God, how do you snap Victoria of all people out of a depression?

"Max, don't-"

There was an almost pleading tone in her voice. It seemed so incredibly weak and broken.

"Tori, I can't stand to see you like this."

Max thought she saw Victoria's spine straighten in an instant of reflex indignation, the incredulity at being called "Tori" asserting itself. It was all too fleeting though, she quickly reverted back to her twinned states of mental depression and postural vandalism. Victoria tried once again to move away, but found doing so impossible. Her eyes briefly focused on each of Max's hands, pinning her with surprisingly vice-like grip-strength, and an expression of contempt briefly passed over her before reverting once more. Finally deciding escape was impossible, at least with the effort she was prepared to expend, she relented and began to speak.

"I suppose you've seen it then?"

"Victoria I really don't think it's that bad, just a bunch of entirely innocent physical interactions, that have been badly misconstrued. Anyone with a brain can work out they've been cut together out of context. It's not like we're ripping each other's clothes off on top of Jefferson's desk."

"I might have preferred that." Victoria mumbled.

What?!

Max let go of Victoria in shock. Victoria's eyes suddenly grew to the size that Max's had become moments earlier, and she realised she probably needed to elaborate on that.

"I mean it would almost be preferable." She quickly clarified, stepping past Max as not to face her. Part of Max was actually relieved at Victoria's verbal slipup: the resulting 'flustered Victoria' was a vast improvement to 'depressed Victoria'. "Rather than looking like a dork I'd have at least appeared decisive, empowered, and-"

"-And have an excuse for walking everywhere hunched over?"
Max was expecting a particularly pithy reply, but instead was met only with a pause, as if Victoria's mind had unexpectedly become engrossed in something, and was too busy to think of a comeback. Growing tired with the unexpected delay, Max pressed on.

"Victoria is this really just about the video?"

"The video was pretty bad Max, but it was just an opening gambit designed to rattle me before an important meeting. It seems I've upset a few people."

Max raised her hand over an open mouth, looking in no way genuinely shocked.

"No…"

"Fuck your sarcasm, Caulfield. It's rather obvious you don't actually care. You've even had to write a reminder on your hand just to be nice to me."

A pale hue suddenly shot across Max's face. But she'd erased that incriminating message scribbled on her hand! Hadn't she? She looked down at her hand. A message was definitely written there in red pen, in her hand writing.

"Consult notes in journal, and be nice to Victoria, take care of her problems."

It was a completely new message from the future. When had this happened? When had future Max 'assumed direct control' and left the message for her. Max found her mind drawn back to the events following the car crash at the stairs. Her recollection of the accident clean up was, in hindsight, rather blurry. She'd assumed it was just stress at the time, but she may well have been 'possessed' by her future self. That meant it was time to make a decision: last time Max had followed a seemingly innocuous instruction from the future, Victoria was grievously injured, and only saved by way of subsequent time rewinding. Still, this seemed just about the least likely thing imaginable to lead to harm. How could trying to 'be nice' to someone cause harm to anyone? In any case, Max felt she'd better come up with some sort of excuse for the note. As much as things had improved between Victoria and herself, they just weren't at the stage of a friendship where you could explain being fed information from your future self, who was intent on manipulating everything for god knows what endgame. Failing that, she supposed she could always just rewind time again.

"Victoria", Max began, "I know you're really a good person. You injured your hand helping me save Chloe. It's just I'm used to seeing you acting in such a, well, a mean way. I thought I'd better write myself a reminder. The consequences of me acting on a momentary spiteful thought seem so much greater now, since-

"-since 'you're a wizard, Harry'."

"You're going to hold that whole 'Evil Hermione' thing over me forever, aren't you?"

"Yes. Though I guess I should be slightly grateful. At the very least, all these awkward moments, and little slipups show you haven't been winding back time to manipulate conversations. I'm sure it wouldn't be that difficult to use your foreknowledge of a conversation as the ultimate confidence trick."

"Oh, right." Max replied, glad Victoria still had her back to her as she lowered her right hand, having deemed a rewind unnecessary. "So continuing with the shocking revelation that you'd pissed some people off…"

"Look Max, certain disgruntled members of the Vortex Club have been manipulated by a traitorous slut into passing a no-confidence vote on my leadership and ejecting me from the club."
"Wait, they completely kicked you out? Not just removed you from leadership and threw you back into the Vortex Club's proletariat?"

"Actually they tried to make me the new club's secretary. I guess they thought it'd be funny to get me to do all the menial work as an added punishment. At the time, and with that video circulating, I was so angry with the lot of them that I just up and quit. Probably a mistake on my part. The secretary is still a powerful position within the club, and I might have managed a counter-coup somewhere down the line. Of course normally if someone tried to pull this, I'd just remind them that Nathan finances a lot of the club's activities, he and I are good friends, and to shut the fuck up or the only spirits they'll be able to afford for the next vortex event's bar will be of the methylated variety."

"But we just had Nathan busted."

"Yes, and with that a lot of my leverage evaporated. At the same time, I've been having a strong difference of opinion with two of the Vortex Club committee. As I said, with Nathan on my side it wouldn't have been an issue, but he just had to go try to commit a murder."

Wowser, a committee and no-confidence votes. Max had thought the Vortex Club was little more than a pass for rich assholes to drink while underage and use drugs on campus. Apparently they were a 'proper' incorporated society. Maybe that was why its members were always declaring how good it looked on a CV.

"Victoria," Max began slowly, about to propose something the now former Vortex Queen might find difficult to go through. She was glad that she'd somehow snapped Tori out of a momentary depression, apparently by doing nothing more than flustering her then pissing her off. Though based on her previous experience, that seemed to almost be a panacea for any Victoria related aliment, as well as their normal pattern of conversation. Perhaps the most important thing was just trying to be there for someone in a way they were comfortable with. It would be a shame to make Victoria relive the event that had put her in that state, but at the same time doing so could get Victoria her club back.

"Do you think you'd be able to do better, if given a second chance?"

Victoria was momentarily rendered speechless. A strange expression crept over her, a bizarre mix of fear, hope and possibly even reverence. When finally spoke again, it was in a surprisingly hushed tone.

"Are you talking about taking me back in time with you? Can you do that?"

"I did manage it on my first rewind. I think it's just a matter of grabbing onto you tightly. All the other things I'm carrying seem to stay with me when I go back in time so, I guess it's just a matter of convincing the universe that you're, um…"

"Go on…", Victoria responded, a slight hint of vitriol in her voice. It seemed Victoria already knew what Max was about to say.

"One of my possessions?" Victoria's eyes narrowed. "Like a coat! Not anything weird."

Victoria sighed, deciding she should shift the topic back to something more relevant.

"Max, I'll admit it's a difficult offer. On one side I'd risk reliving one of the most humiliating experiences in my life. On the other, I'd potentially erase it from existence. The other thing is that you'd be using your powers for something, shall we say, not immediately life threatening. I think someone both smart and beautiful warned you against that, given how your powers seem to take a physical toll. I'm sure they'd hate to appear too hypocritical, and might even feel a touch guilty, if something bad was to happen as a result of you overtaxing your powers for their personal gain."
Wait a minute, had Max actually detected some concern for her wellbeing from Victoria? Still, there was the extra matter of her future self's endorsement: "be nice to Victoria, take care of her problems." Clearly her biggest problem at the moment was losing control of the Vortex Club. Still, she couldn't exactly spell out to Victoria that she'd had a tip from the future. She'd have to come up with an eminently reasonable excuse instead.

"I think this is a special case. My time senses are tingling." She smiled rather stupidly and idly glanced at the writing on her hand. Victoria, meanwhile, still wasn't sure what to think. Max's reasoning sounded utterly moronic, and she'd made a big show about Max saving her powers for an emergency. At the same time, it was a chance to expunge a humiliation from the timeline, and it was rather gratifying – even humbling, that Max would apparently use her powers to help her.

"And I really have to test whether I can reproduce pulling someone back in time with me, just in case I need it for a life and death situation in the future."

At last a non-moronic reason. Victoria finally nodded for Max to proceed.

"Victoria, how long ago did the committee meeting take place?"

"Around ten minutes, but-

Ten minutes? Probably further than she'd tried to date. Damn, this was going to be painful. Well, they had made testing Max's powers the excuse for this rewind, so they might as well see how far back she could go...

"Don't let go of me."

Victoria suddenly found herself caught in a bear hug, everything turned a sickening red colour, and disembodied voices ghosted around her. Victoria looked into Max's face, and watched it slowly contort in anguish, as the stress of unwinding time took its toll. They reached a moment where Max grabbed at her head with one hand, as if it had just smacked against some sort of invisible wall. Was this the limit to her power? But Max grit her teeth and refused to stop. Suddenly the two of them jolted into motion. They now barreled through both space as well as time, sucked toward positions that their previous selves occupied. Initially they were pulled in different directions, but they clung together, and ultimately the pull on Max proved dominant. Still holding one another, they past straight through several students like ghosts, before surging toward a tree in Blackwell Academy's front lawn. Normal time reasserted itself, and in that instant they noticed a crowd gathered round a tow truck, which was busy extricating a wrecked vehicle from the front entrance stairs. Clearly, they'd travelled back to the cleanup of Alyssa's car crash.

Both Max and Victoria found themselves moving at some speed when rejoining the timeline proper. They immediately stumbled, and began a rather short trip toward the ground. Fortunately for Victoria, something was already there to break her fall. Unfortunately, it was rather thin and bony.

"Victoria", Max began softly, "can you please get off me?"

"In a minute", Victoria replied nursing her head, "I think I've got concussion."

"Well then I've got concussion and time rewind migraines," Max shot back. It seemed that they'd had something of a head clash on falling. Max mused between throbbing sensations in her skull that real life could be nasty; things were so much simpler in those Japanese romantic comedies, where the shy yet plucky main character was practically guaranteed a soft landing on collision with the schoolyard queen.
Max gave Victoria a gentle shove, rolling her off the waif and onto her back. They both stared upward for a minute, blue sky and white clouds dancing around the tree's canopy of foliage. A brief pause later, their vision ceased spinning and Max felt confident enough to pull herself into an upright position. There were still students loitering around the grounds, however the mangled car wreck on the stairs seemed to have captured the sum total of their attention. None had noticed Max and Victoria snap into existence in an equally dishevelled pile under a tree. It was just as well too: with that video about to be released, the last thing they needed was another easily misinterpreted public sighting.

"Honestly, if you have to rewind time like that again, I'm wearing a crash helmet."

Victoria brought her left arm up to check the time on her Swiss watch, decried it as "worthless", then withdrew her Smartphone.

"Seems once I push back past a certain point, things sort of go out of control", Max explained. "We seemed to get pulled back to my old position in space as well as time, and lost fine control in selecting the time. That must have been what happened the first time we travelled back in time from the toilets to the classroom. I think that's about as far back as I can go in any case."

"Well, looks like your 'Maximum' is a twenty one minute rewind," Victoria noted while checking her phone. "Oh, and any regular clock you're carrying doesn't seem to be affected by your rewinds. Fortunately, phones synchronise their clock based on a GPS satellite, so should display the time you've travelled back to."

They both staggered to their feet, and once again began making their way to the Prescott dorm.

"Victoria?"

"Hm?"

"Before the rewind you were saying something about a 'traitorous slut'?"

"Oh. Courtney Wagner, the Vortex Club Secretary. A position I, in my infinite benevolence, gifted her. She really is quite competent in her role, but has been attempting to assume control through a series of laughably bad coup attempts ever since. She doesn't seem to have realised that so far, I've quietly had each and every one of them thwarted either, she just thinks circumstances conspired against her."

"So she's basically the Starscream to your Megatron?"

"I'm sure I have no clue about your geek subculture references Caulfield."

A familiar tapping of shoe soles began to ring out, as Max and Victoria reached the concrete path leading to the Prescott Dorm.

"Alright then, who's in the committee?"

Max found herself surprisingly intrigued. The whole idea of the Vortex club actually being some sort of weirdly influential organisation, like the 'student council' in half the anime she and Chloe used to watch, was strangely fascinating.

"There are three main officers: Naturally, I hold, or used to hold, the chair position. Courtney held the position of 'secretary', mostly so I could farm off all the tedious administrative work to her. Nathan was the treasurer, since on the odd occasion that we blew out a budget, he could just shove a bunch of Prescott money in the till to make the books balance. Below that, there's Taylor, Dana,
Juliet and Hayden. They're also considered part of the committee but their roles are far less well defined. Basically, busywork gets farmed off to them, should it fit their skill set, and in exchange they each get to make up their own impressive sounding and official (but meaningless) title to go on their résumés in future. The whole committee showed up, except for Nathan and the vote was 4-2 in favour of ejecting me: Taylor was the only one who took my side. Oh, I suppose the committee also includes the member of Blackwell Faculty nominally in charge as staff supervisor, but he didn't show up either. Come to think of it, he rarely gets involved in any part of the Vortex Club beyond suggesting we farm out part-time work at parties to various less fortunate students."

"Does this supervisor have a name?" Max asked, trying to imagine a teacher prepared to supervise and take responsibility for a club dedicated to school-aged vice. She imagined some aging loser, suffering from a midlife crisis and desperate to remain cool in the eyes of the current youth, which frankly did cover a lot of teachers.

"Why, Mark Jefferson, of course."

Oh of course, and another reason Victoria was so passionate about the Vortex Club.

"I'm actually surprised he hasn't offered you a job. I guess you might not have the physique to make a popular bar wench, but at least you could mop the floor or collect coats or something."

God, what was it about Victoria, and having to bring up Max's body constantly? This had gotten to the point where some mild retaliation was in order.

"I'm sure 'Mark' thinks I already have enough money, thanks to that scholarship he judged my photos worthy of."

The sight of Victoria bristle, first at the mention of Max's scholarship and doubly so at her use of Mr Jefferson's given name, brought a smile to Max's face. It was actually the first time she'd ever called him that, and it felt so deeply wrong doing so. But at the same time, seeing Victoria's reaction to it felt so right.

On reaching the Prescott Dorm, Max and Victoria Immediately took up positions behind the side of the building, peering around the corner toward the building's main entrance. Max imagined they must look pathetic, like a couple of perverts intent on covertly glimpsing something through a girl's dorm window. There really weren't that many students there, just Logan and Zachery throwing a football to one another, and Kate Marsh sitting alone to the world on the most distant and isolated bench she could find. Samuel the slightly creepy caretaker had erected a scaffold in preparation for repainting a portion of the dorm building near the stairs, and was presently stirring a few cans of paint. A handful of Blackwell rent-a-cops were just leaving, apparently having searched the Dorm for some reason. Max wondered if it was a surprise drug inspection – it was quite unusual to see so many Blackwell security guards patrolling together, particularly so early after school. The only guard regularly seen during the day was their chief, David Madsen. Courtney Wagner and her rebellious cabal were nowhere to be seen: the twenty one minute rewind had given them some extra time to work with.

A pair of decidedly feminine figures suddenly emerged from the Dorm entrance, distracting Logan enough that he completely forgot about catching the football, which instead caught him squarely in the head. For some reason Zachery had almost the opposite reaction, refusing to make eye-contact with the new arrivals and excusing himself from the scene while mumbling "fuck this shit".

"Oh look, its team cleavage." Victoria commented snidely, and Max quickly recognised the two new arrivals as Dana and Juliet.
"Team cleavage?" Max wondered. Well it did sort of fit. Max had, during the occasional outbreak of cattiness that seemed endemic to high school, made certain uncomplimentary judgements about how Dana and Juliet dressed. Juliet, no matter how Victoria chose to disparage her journalistic skills, certainly lived up to her role as reporter for the school newspaper in one way: she was very good at showcasing recent developments in her own body. And Dana was even worse, or perhaps better? Max supposed it depended on your point of view. With so much of her upper torso on display, Max had difficulty understanding how she was able to walk around without escaping the confines of her shirt. She also clearly enjoyed male attention, and was rarely seen without a boyfriend, usually not the same one too many times in a row either. The only trouble was, Dana was actually a very nice person, probably second only to Kate Marsh as according to Max's 'Blackwell niceness index'. She and Kate were the only people in the dorm who really went out of their way to be friendly with Max, and any temporary bout of jealousy toward Dana was always followed by a burst of self-recrimination.

Max supposed Victoria's lack of charity was understandable: 'Team Cleavage' were about to vote for her removal as chair of the Vortex Club.

"Well well, it looks like there's some trouble in exhibitionist paradise. What a shame."

Victoria was right: there was something very much amiss with their behaviour. Normally Dana and Juliet were thick as thieves, huddling together to exchange all manner of inane gossip, launching barrages of "OMG" and giggles between updating their social media via Smartphone. Today they stood apart, arms crossed, barely prepared to make direct eye contact with each other.

"I've never seen them that cold toward each other. Victoria, did something happen?"

"Oh, that. Well someone may have sent a few tastefully erotic texts to Juliet's boyfriend, then erroneously told her they had been sent by her 'BFF' Dana. Can't imagine who. Anyway Juliet took the bait without bothering to confirm anything she's been told. Real reporter material there, right up there with the best whores Fox News has to offer. Then she got into a fight with Dana over it, and they un-LGBFF or whatever. Don't give me that look, Max, I know both of them are going to vote to eject me as soon as the meeting comes to order."

"That's only because you pissed them both off." God, Victoria could be such an asshole. She couldn't help but feel the Vortex Queen might actually deserve being kicked off her own club, that she'd brought this on herself. At the same time, Courtney seemed little better, and had directly attacked Max with the whole Max-Victoria video leak. Victoria also had a couple of mitigating factors going for her: the whole reveal of Max's supernatural powers seemed to have rendered Victoria a little easier to handle. Then there was the matter of the most recent future message insisting Max help Victoria out.

"I'll try to talk to them before the meeting", Max finally declared. "Maybe I can get them to change their minds somehow. You'd better make yourself scarce so they don't realise we're in league."

Max left Victoria and made a bee-line for the dorm's main entrance. A tired yet sincere smile came across Dana's face as she saw Max approach. Juliet remained guarded and impassive.

"Dana, Juliet. You two look like you're waiting for something."

"We just got a text from Courtney about some emergency Vortex Club meeting. She wouldn't say what it's about, just to come to the stairs."

Courtney probably didn't want the nature of the meeting being leaked to Victoria ahead of time.
Though it seemed someone figured it out and tipped off Victoria anyway.

"Is that all, I mean you both seem so upset."

Of course, Max knew exactly why they were upset, Victoria sexting Juliet's boyfriend and accusing Dana of having done it. But asking them directly felt like a chance to segue into a discussion on the relative merits of Victoria versus Courtney, and somehow make them think the later was worse than the one who'd publicly humiliated them.

"Oh. We're a bit messed up because-"

Dana was suddenly cut off by an outburst from Juliet.

"-Um, why do you care? You've never really talked to us before. You just sit weirdly in the corner with your camera, then ferret through people's things when you think they're not looking."

Max felt this was something of an exaggeration. She didn't really "ferret" through other peoples' things. It was more that she couldn't help but notice things that had been left out in the open. And it wasn't entirely her fault she just sat in the corner. She was shy damn it!

"But now you hear there's some gossip at our expense, you jump in. Honestly, you probably don't even know our full names."

"Juliet, be nice. Max is just-"

"What are our full names?! Come on, prove me wrong, Max Caulfield."

Max felt Juliet was on the verge of flipping her shit. And Dana looked to be at her most protective, ready to drive her boot down the throat of her friend to defend Max from an act of bullying. Max didn't want to provoke a meaningless fight. She automatically gave the correct answer.

"Dana Ward and Juliet Watson."

Jeeze, as if she'd get that wrong. She'd memorised the names of everyone in the girl's dorm on her first day, in a desperate, angst driven attempt to seem less of a shy cliché geek. Sadly, it hadn't helped much. Knowing people's names meant nothing if you lacked the confidence to try talking to them. Still, it seemed to save the day this time. Why, for a second there, the two members of 'Team Cleavage', both previously resolute in their hatred for Victoria, and all but guaranteed to vote for her expulsion from the Vortex Club, had looked like they were about to turn on each other... Oh.

Max slowly raised her right hand.

"What are our full names?! Come on, prove me wrong, Max Caulfield."

Rather than answer immediately, Max paused, and tried to look as shy and bewildered as possible. This seemed to only increase Dana's protective instinct and Juliet's frustration.

"Um, well she's Dana Ward." Max finally answered. Dana gave Max a kind maternal nod, making Max feel like a timid preschool student who'd just been praised for counting to five for the first time.

"And you're Juliet… Patterson?"

Dana's face collapsed into an anguish riddled smile. Juliet completely lost it.

"Watson. Juliet Watson. Maybe you should stay out of other people's business and belongings and fuck off back into the corner."
"Juliet! Don't be so horrible!" Dana snapped, utterly horrified at the vitriol behind her friend's attack on Max. She practically leapt into action and immediately interposed herself between them. "You blamed me for some stupid text Victoria sent your boyfriend, and now you're attacking Max for being shy, after she finally gets the courage to try to talk to you. If you're going to act this immurely, I think you should take your own last piece of advice."

Juliet looked stunned for a moment, scarcely able to believe her best friend Dana had sided against her, in spite of how obviously strained their friendship was. Shocked at having lost her boyfriend, then apparently her best friend, she spun around and walked away in tears.

Damn it. Max felt incredibly guilty. She had just broken up the strongest friendship in the school, just by unleashing her limitless stockpile of weapons-grade awkward. Max had promised herself that she'd rewind and put everything back the way it was, if the spat she provoked had no practical benefit. But Juliet had outright up and left, and that meant one less vote against Victoria. Now they'd only needed to convince one Vortex Club member, and Victoria's position was secured.

Max's Machiavellian considerations were cut short by Dana pulling her into a friendly embrace, leaving Max feeling painfully smothered by guilt and exposed skin.

"Oh Max, I'm so sorry. Juliet's normally better than this, but she's bitter over being made to look like a fool. Now she's managing to look that way all by herself."

"Not entirely by herself, Dana." Max's conscience whispered in the back of her head. She tried to rationalise what she'd just done. Yes she'd pressed the proverbial detonator, but Juliet had put on the suicide vest, wired everything up and handed said detonator to her. She had to take some responsibility for blowing up too!

"Dana, why is the Vortex Club so messed up? I mean I know you're in it and you're one of the nicest people in the school. But some of the other members…" 

"Oh thank you, Max. And I guess by other members, you mean Victoria? Well, what can I say, she just framed me for slutting it up with Juliet's boyfriend, when it was her trying to grab his football."

So, the first thing that came to Dana's mind when prompted with "messed up" and "Vortex Club" was Victoria. Things aren't looking good Tori. Max decided to see how the competition compared.

"What about Courtney?"

"The Vortex Club Secretary? As far as I know, she mostly hangs around Victoria, sort of does her best to imitate her which is bad enough. Hasn't done anything overwhelmingly nasty though, like accusing you of sexting your BFF's BF."

Max had no doubt that opinion would change in a few minutes, when Courtney leaked that video.

"So what are you up to Max? Just decided to come over and have a random chat on the stairs."

"Actually I'm supposed to be returning Warren's flash drive to him."

Dana's eyes suddenly lit up, detecting the chance for 'boy gossip'. And after driving a stake through Dana's and Juliet's friendship, Max kind of felt she owed her. Even if it meant talking about...

"Warren huh? So are you planning to reel that bitch in and put a leash on him?"

Max tried desperately not to visualise that.
"You know he really seems to like you. He texts you how many times a day? And he's always trying to organise dates with you, right? Oh, you could definitely come to the school's Halloween party with him as a cute geek couple. Borrow one of my old Halloween costumes."

They'd have to be very old costumes of Dana's if Max was going to fit them. And Dana was getting far to cereal about Max and Warren. Max felt it critical to nix this line of conversation as quickly as possible.

"I've already got a bitch to deal with, unfortunately."

"Oh?"

"Mr Jefferson assigned Victoria Chase to work with me on a special photography project for extra credit, so I'm not sure I'll have the time, or be in the mood for any romantic rendezvous."

"Oh my god Max, that's awful. I mean its great Mr Jefferson is giving you extra credit, but having to work with Victoria? No thanks. Probably best to avoid Warren then, if you two were an item, Victoria might try sexting him as well."

Max couldn't help but crack a smile. The idea of the Vortex Queen sexting Warren Graham was so far out there it almost defied imagination.

"Well I'd better get that flash drive anyway."

"Um, Max. This drive didn't happen to have a bunch of old movies on it, did it? I might have borrowed it to watch while I studied. Just pick it up from my room. I didn't bother to lock up since I'm going back up there after this meeting."

"Right, thanks Dana." Max replied, before ascending the dorm's staircase.

As befitting a cheerleader, Dana Ward's room oozed 'Blackwell Spirit'. Pennants and posters of their football team 'The Bigfoots', swim team 'The Otters' and cheer squad (which Dana was easily the most prominent member of) adorned its walls. Max would have honestly made a straight line for the USB flash drive (still plugged into Dana's laptop), but found herself having to detour around several conspicuous items that, all things considered, it might have been best if she hadn't seen. First there was a family planning book, then a home pregnancy test which indicated positive, then a note from a clinic specialising in women's health advising Dana of an appointment for "a procedure"; finally she saw a note from that loser from the football team, Logan, explaining how pathetic he had been in not supporting her (in Max's opinion it didn't go far enough). Geeze, having to go through all that must have taken its toll. Max found it incredible that Dana had stayed so calm and in control dealing with both an unplanned pregnancy, and the idiot drama involving Juliet. And then Max had gone and made things worse, stirring things up between her and Juliet as a cynical exercise in Vortex Club politics.

Deciding she'd already seen too much, Max quickly set about retrieving the flash drive. She repeatedly tried the "safely remove hardware" option, and was met with the usual "device is in use but I won't tell you which program is using it" windows dialogue box. Fucking Microsoft. Afire momentarily with righteous indignation, Max simply yanked the drive out. After all, if the files corrupted or the drive stopped working, maybe Warren would be upset enough to leave her alone for a while.

Max rushed to her own room, plugged the flash drive into her own laptop (it was still working, damn), and started copying the movies as Warren had suggested. While the transfer proceeded, Max
busied herself with two tasks. Firstly, now she was finally in private, she could safely read the notes Future Max had entered into her journal. Secondly, she needed give Victoria any last minute information relevant to swaying the Vortex Club vote.

Flicking through her journal, Max quickly found what she was looking for: a letter she had never seen before, written in her own handwriting.

Dear Us,

I know you must have questions about some of the things that happened today. You've probably been questioning whether to outright ignore any 'future correspondence'.

There is a conspiracy centred within Arcadia Bay, orchestrated by completely amoral and sociopathic individuals. I wish I could identify them for you, but it is critical that you remain ignorant of their identities, at least for the moment. Any strange or questioning behaviour on our part may tip them off prematurely.

I know you had particular concerns about Victoria, and certain instructions I gave that almost led to her injury. I do not wish her harm, quite the opposite in fact. Through a number of trying experiences, I discovered that we needed her advice, friendship and loyalty as quickly as possible, and that required we demonstrate emphatically that we weren't a threat. Saving her life seemed like a good place to start, even if we had to put her in danger in the first place. She's really not that bad a person, once you get to know her. Especially when you keep her on a tight leash.

There is one more matter. We'll need to buy a cheap cell phone before the end of today. We should have enough in your bank from that birthday money your parents sent. Somewhere lying at the bottom of our bag, is a sim card. After installing the card in your new phone, you'll find contacts labelled 'one' through 'eight' stored on the card. Text 'three' through 'seven' with the following message:

"Plans have been put on hold. Do not attempt further contact directly or by phone until contacted again from this number. Do not visit dark room."

Don't message the others for now. Don't message 'one' under any circumstances! Set the phone to completely silent operation, put the microphone on zero volume and don't answer any incoming call. Seriously, keep it locked and in your bag so you don't butt-dial accidentally. Them catching on to us will have fatal results. And on that note, destroy this letter after reading it.

Realising that she hadn't inhaled once while reading the letter, Max quickly took a deep breath. This was like some crazy James Bond act. Well, except that she had to use her own birthday money to pay for spyng accessories. That in mind, it was probably closer to how the actual British Secret Service operated than the fictional world of Ian Fleming. Working quickly, she tore the letter from her journal, saved the portion detailing the message she had been instructed to text, ripped the remainder of the message to shreds, and dropped the resulting confetti in her rubbish bin. Wowser, she really was playing spies.

Oddly, Max found it easier to think about the content of the letter after she'd destroyed it. Her future self certainly seemed quite the piece of work, apparently having orchestrated Victoria's demise, just so her present self could rush in, save her and become friends. Honestly, what sort of fucked up plan was that? It was fine to call others amoral sociopaths, but from the sound of things, Max's future self was scarcely any better. Just how far into the future was "future Max" anyway? How long did it take to transform into a cynical ends-justify-the-means manipulator? She thought of the spat between Dana and Juliet that she'd triggered. Perhaps she'd already begun that journey.
Conspicuous in its absence was any mention of the probable stabbing Future Max had conducted in Mr Jefferson's class. There was no direct mention anyway. But where else would this sim card have come from? She must have stuck the conspirator, then casually stolen the sim while they lay bleeding to death in front of the entire class, then rewound. That meant someone in Mr Jefferson's class was one of these conspirators. Damn, she'd have to pretend she hadn't figured that out, and act completely normally in front of that class, as to avoid drawing any suspicion. A new appreciation of why Future Max was so guarded with information dawned upon her present counterpart. If Max knew for sure a given person was some psycho murderer, she doubted she'd be able to conceal it from them.

Glancing out her window, Max watched as Hayden, Taylor and Courtney had arrived together. Both Taylor and Courtney were busy texting, while Hayden didn't seem to have anything on his mind but looking around and enjoying the scenery. Max could appreciate that: the Blackwell Grounds and Arcadia Bay in general were certainly picturesque, though she did find it somewhat suspect that he biased toward appreciating the scenery in Dana's general direction. As they approached the stairs, Max realised the meeting was moments away from starting. If she was going to supply Victoria with any last minute advice, it'd need to be now. She quickly began working on a text.

Max: Alright Tori, I somehow enraged Juliet enough that she just up and left, so won't be around for the meeting. I guess that means you win if you can turn one person. Dana is understandably upset after you accused her of sexting; she doesn't think much of Courtney either, but she hasn't pissed her off to the same extent as you yet. I think she'd just value people acting sensitively and maturely toward one another. I don't know what Hayden's deal is.

As Max's finger hovered over the send button, she had an awful thought, regarding an addendum to her message. Something she suspected both Victoria and her future self would approve of. Knowledge of Dana's appointment at the "women's clinic" would give Victoria all the ammunition she needed to compel a favourable vote from the cheerleader. But it would also destroy Dana if it became public knowledge, a humiliation well beyond some idiotic comedy video. Just the spectre of it's release when used as blackmail material would be horrible enough. Was it really so critical that Victoria stay in charge of some rich prick's "get high" club? Of course, Max had already outright eliminated Juliet, one of the people guaranteed to vote against Victoria. That represented a significant shift in the odds. She'd already hurt both Dana and Juliet in doing so, but that was infinitesimal compared with the damage this could cause. Were decisions like this what slowly transformed her into her manipulative future self?

After mulling it over for what seemed to be an eternity, Max decided to hit send, without any addition to her message. She wasn't "Future Max" yet, and she just couldn't bring herself to do something so hurtful, regardless of the possible consequences down the line. Victoria quickly sent a response.

Victoria: Thanx, only one traitor needs to be turned ftw then. BTW It's good to see you frustrate others as much as me, Max.

Max glanced at the transfer status on Warren's movies: 54%? Are you cereal? The flash drive was slow as shit. The vortex club's meeting would be over long before this damn thing was done. Max's thought stream of expletives regarding the quality of Warren's drive was interrupted shortly thereafter, as Max's phone began receiving a decidedly unwelcome text for the second time that day:

Unknown: Check out the latest romantic comedy courtesy of Victoria Chase and Max Caulfield!
Unknown: blackwellVids-dot-com/MaximumVictory
It seemed the opening gambit in the Vortex Club power struggle had been made.

Outside on the ground level, Victoria waited for Courtney to convene the Vortex Committee. She’d walked all the way around the back of the Prescott Dorm; the idea of being caught peeking around the corner of the building by people about to vote on her integrity was one she did not wish to entertain. Max had done surprisingly well in removing Juliet from the equation. Her insights into Dana were not entirely useless, but she’d have preferred some trump card guaranteed to turn her, over a vague description of her mental state. Still, no one gets that lucky, right?

A brief vibration ran through Victoria's phone once more, as her one other ally sent her last minute warnings about the meeting. In the last iteration, Victoria had shown up at the meeting early in hopes of dissuading it's continuance, so she'd never received these texts.

Taylor: Courtney's got to Hayden. I overheard them discuss the plan to oust you together. I don't think he'll support you, regardless of what you say or promise.

Taylor: Victoria, you totally need to get here now, or sooner. Or your last words as chair will be, like, et tu, Courtney.

A classical studies reference? Victoria reflected that perhaps she occasionally underestimated Taylor. But maybe that wasn't such a bad thing, it did lead to being pleasantly surprised. Still, the earlier message made for grim reading. If Hayden had completely sold out, then Victoria's survival as chair relied on that cheerleader slut Dana Ward, and she presently despised Victoria. That fictitious trump card was really sounding like her only chance.

Victoria discarded the stub of a cigarette, her 'excuse' for skulking around the back of the dorm if anyone bothered to ask, and began sucking a pair of breath mints. Now came an awkward moment: because she’d moved to the far corner of the dorm, the fastest way back to the entrance was to walk past Kate Marsh. No doubt the religious puritan would enjoy the irony that Victoria was now the subject of her own video, so soon after Victoria had leaked that video of Kate hooking up with half the attendance at the last Vortex Club party.

Chin up and chest thrust out, Victoria tried to march straight past Kate in her usual imperious manner. She almost froze when one of Kate's petite hands reached out and gently touched her arm. She braced for the inevitable barrage of spite and vengeance.

"Stay strong, Victoria. No one deserves to be publicly mocked."

For the second time that day, Victoria decided that the bloody wind must have blown something in her eye, as she brought a tissue up to remedy the situation. And damn Kate and her total sincerity. To Victoria, being the object of pity cut worse than any insult might have. Still, that meant she'd taken the worst she was likely to face. She'd been pitied, she'd already seen the video, she'd been viciously mocked by the rest of the Vortex Committee, and knew what the worst case scenario of the meeting was. They could do nothing to ambush her anymore. No, now it was her turn to surprise them.

On the other side of the building, Courtney's emergency meeting was off to a rough start. Victoria's apparent no-show had slowed things down, and while she could start the meeting without her, it seemed the video that she'd just had leaked was proving a hindrance to proceedings rather than a help.

"Where is Victoria, the meeting should have started by now."
"Probably in Max's room, did you see the video link someone just texted"
"OhMyGod."
"Damn, that hipster got some game."
"Come on, they probably just wanted to discuss the extra credit work Mr Jefferson assigned them."
"Oh you mean like a threesome?"
"Look. Can we just start the meeting without the chair?"
"Yes, if we come to the determination that she's otherwise engaged and can't attend the emergency meeting."
"I'd say she's engaged, did you see the thirst as Max dragged her into the bathroom"
"She just looked pissed off to me."
"Well, for Victoria, pissed off and aroused are almost interchangeable-"

Courtney had had it. The video was supposed to make Victoria appear embarrassing to the rest of the vortex club, and demoralise Victoria if she dared to show up. Instead the entire meeting was threatening to derail with inane commentary on Victoria and the resident hipster's new (probably) fictitious relationship.

"Alright that's enough! Victoria is clearly unable to attend, so I'll act as chair for the first motion: 'The Vortex Club committee has lost confidence in Victoria Chase as permanent chair, and resolves to replace her with the criminally underappreciated current secretary, Courtney-"

The mouth of Courtney Wagner hung open midsentence, completely taken aback at the appearance of the most vicious and merciless looking person she'd ever seen clad in gold jewellery and a cashmere sweater. Victoria looked like she was ready to kill someone. No, on closer inspection she looked like she already had killed someone. One of her fists was bandaged, as if she'd beaten something until her knuckles bled, and a myriad of small stains were visible on her sweater, all of which looked an awful lot like dried blood.

"Courtney Wagner chair the Vortex Club for even a single motion?" Victoria's voice bellowed. "That is bad comedy. The currently elected chair will handle proceedings."

The rest of the club committee exhibited a wide spectrum of reactions. Dana Ward found herself slightly dumbstruck, the only one completely unaware that the emergency meeting was an attempted Vortex Club coup, but quickly found her enthusiasm for events rising. It seemed that after all the shit she'd pulled, Victoria might actually get what was coming to her. Taylor, on the other hand cheered Victoria's arrival, while her eyes shot daggers at Courtney and Hayden for their disloyalty in plotting the coup. Hayden stood with Courtney but didn't seem to have much of a definite facial expression, possibly due to his recent partaking in what he referred to as "dank OG bud". Victoria stopped less than a foot from Courtney, and for the moment completely ignored the other attendants. Her voice was quieter now, but no less menacing, an impossible combination of sharp and sweet.

"Nice striped shirt, Courtney; it makes you look like a zebra crossing, which is both the most and least appropriate thing imaginable. On one hand, I am about to walk all over you. On the other, next time I see you on the street, I'm not breaking."

She circled the smaller girl, intent that regardless of the meeting's outcome, Courtney Wagner would know fear. It worked to some extent, but Courtney clearly felt she was holding all the cards. She fixed Victoria with her own glare and retaliated.

"Victoria. You know, we were just watching a little amateur video of you. I'm sure Mr Jefferson was heartbroken when you found a newer model of hipster to replace him."

"Funny how the link to that video was transmitted moments before this meeting", Victoria shot back. "Exactly when doing so would be most beneficial to you. It's almost as if you ordered its release
yourself, just to influence proceedings."

"And so what if I encouraged the leak of that video. You can't say you don't deserve it, or haven't done far worse to others."

Victoria could tell Dana shared that opinion. She needed something to turn that around, quickly. Victoria cast her eyes skyward, as if looking for some inspiration from on high. Instead she saw a tiny figure peering down at her from Max's dorm window. Her brain apparently deemed that an adequate substitute though, furnishing her with an idea. And why not: with her newfound powers, Max was probably the closest thing to a divine source of inspiration anyone was likely to come across.

"What about the other party in the video?" Victoria quickly asked, surprised that her voice seemed to have some genuine feeling behind it.

"You mean your new crush, the zero-fashion hipster Max?"

"I understand she's rather shy and utterly reviles being in the spotlight. You dragged her through the mud just to get at me. Lovely."

Courtney and Hayden were completely unaffected, but a look of guilt worked its way across Dana's face. Well, well. Perhaps she just pulled something out of the bag. Courtney seemed to realise as much as well, and attempted to rush proceedings.

"Enough time wasting" She quickly announced, "The motion is that Victoria be removed as Vortex Club chair, and either placed in the position of Secretary, so she can learn some humility doing her own work for once, and won't have enough free time to embarrass the club by failing at hitting on hipsters of all ages and genders; or removed from the club's register entirely."

Victoria sighed. She didn't really have anything else to try. Might as well get things over with while Dana was feeling emotionally messed up.

"The motion is… no confidence in the chair. I'm not saying the rest of that shit. Is there a second?"

Hayden raised his hand.

"Those opposed will raise their hands now."

Both Taylor and Victoria raised their arms. Victoria glanced at Dana, who looked deeply conflicted. For a second it seemed she was going to join them, but her hand remained down. A triumphant smirk spread across Courtney's face.

"And those in favour?"

Courtney and Hayden voted. Dana's hand remained uncommitted.

"Dana, you have to vote!" Courtney insisted.

"I'm abstaining." Clearly Dana had decided they were both as bad as each other.

"Well, there's a first time for everything." Courtney quipped, searing with anger.

A smile slowly worked its way across Victoria's face. Partially because it seemed she'd won, partially because she'd also immediately seen the irony in Dana's use of the term 'abstain' when she was widely regarded as the anti-Kate Marsh, and partially because Courtney was dumb enough to utter it
out loud while the matter of leadership had not been conclusively resolved. Now was not the time for making new enemies. Utterly destroying your current ones had to come first.

"So that's a tie. Two votes for and against. I believe in these circumstances the chair has a casting vote." Victoria began.

"Not so fast." Courtney shot back. "Our constitution allows for absent members to provide written votes."

This was not how things had gone last time. There'd been no absentee voting. On the other hand, Juliet hadn't lost it and run off before the start of proceedings, and Dana hadn't 'abstained' from voting either. That meant there was no reason for Courtney to reveal her own trump card. Damn. There were only two possibilities as to the identity of this voter. The first, and by far the most likely in Victoria's opinion, was that Juliet had left a written vote when she stormed off.

Courtney presented a piece of paper. The writing, if you could stretch the term broadly enough to encompass the barely legible scrawl on the paper, was not Juliet's. In fact there was only one person it could belong to. Courtney seemed to take a certain perverse pleasure in reading it aloud, for rather obvious reasons.

"Nathan Prescott wishes to cast a vote against the current chair, whom he decries as having fallen in league with and most likely been despoiled by, a rabid feminazi."

Well it certainly sounded like authentic Nathan Prescott, or at least parts of it did. No doubt Courtney had suggested some of the wording. On sighting his signature in the corner, the note's legitimacy was beyond doubt. But Nathan's vote against them revealed a situation that made Vortex Club politics insignificant by comparison. Nathan and Victoria were supposed to be the closest of friends. For him to suddenly turn on her like that, meant he must have figured out Victoria had reported him for his antics in the girl's bathroom. That meant the 'feminazi' that had 'despoiled' her was probably Max. Victoria snorted at the stupidity of that statement. In spite of what Courtney's video had tried to imply, she doubted Max Caulfield had ever 'despoiled' anything other than her selfie.

Suddenly, at the thought of that fucking video, it all came together. The video showed Max dragging Victoria into the bathroom just before the 'almost shooting'. It was quite possible the unedited footage had actually caught Nathan and Chloe entering the toilets straight afterwards. If Nathan had seen that, he'd have known exactly who had seen and reported him. That stupid bitch Courtney had probably gone to Nathan with the footage, completely unaware of his imminent suspension and confused as to why Victoria, Max, Nathan and Chloe Price had all entered the bathroom together. She probably couldn't believe her luck when Nathan suddenly turned on Victoria, and practically handed out the keys to the Vortex Club.

"Three for and two against. Seems you were pipped at the post, 'Secretary Victoria'. I think you'd better get started writing the minutes of this meeting. I expect a detailed account."

Rage exploded behind Victoria's eyes. She tried to look away, think of something other than defeat. Unfortunately, there was very little to distract her. Just Samuel 'probably not a paedophile' the Caretaker, ascending his scaffold with a second can of paint to finish up painting the wall. It was no use, her mind kept being drawn back to Courtney and the instruction she'd just given. Type the fucking minutes of her own ousting? She'd throttle that backstabber! Victoria advanced on the smaller girl, causing her to back away cautiously. The deposed Queen prepared to put her one un-bandaged fist to its best use, confident that Courtney Wagner had significantly worse odds in a fight than a certain blue haired monstrosity.

Victoria's vengeance was forestalled by the appearance of a small figure, standing next to Kate and
waving rather enthusiastically. It was Max Caulfield. But wasn't she still in the dorm? No one had seen her come out the front door, so she'd either taken the fire escape and somehow avoided setting off the alarm, or there was time manipulation afoot. Whatever the case, she seemed to be gesturing frantically that Victoria not advance any further, and in fact maybe take a step back. Victoria acquiesced to Max's instruction, and Courtney Wagner luxuriated in what she believed to be a final triumph, Victoria having apparently backed down on any physical retaliation. A second later, there was a snapping noise as the handle to Samuel's paint can broke.

A Cheshire grin spread across Victoria Chase's face as Courtney Wagner stood before her humiliated. The paint can landed just over a foot from Courtney, spraying her with a thick uneven coat of all-weather acrylic gloss. Thick rivulets of the white paint ran down her, saturating her designer clothing, face and hair.

"Hold that pose." Victoria instructed, extracting her Smartphone and snapping several high resolution shots. Courtney was so stunned that she just acquiesced, trapped in what Victoria was sure Mr Jefferson would consider a 'moment of desperation'. She'd been humiliated in front of the current Vortex Club committee on the first day of her rule as Chair, and that humiliation could spread across the entire school, depending on what Victoria did or didn't do with those photos.

"Now I think we should discuss that video you just put up." Victoria began, her voice at its most sadistic. "I expect it to be down within the hour, or I'll post these shots all over social medias. It'll be a rough start for a new Vortex Club chair, though in your case it's admittedly no worse than a typical Friday night. Oh, and your new Secretary does look forward to writing those minutes. Be assured that this incident in particular will be covered in all the detail it warrants."

Courtney said nothing in response, instead gingerly making her way into the dorm in search of a shower a change of clothes, and the ego she'd just had stripped from her and launched into the upper atmosphere. Victoria watched her go with a perverse enjoyment, before turning back to the remainder of the group. She wasn't done yet, and Courtney had just made a rookie mistake.

"You know, I don't believe she concluded the meeting. I guess the Secretary will have to temporarily take over the chair. Is there any new business?" A series of bemused shrugs emanated from Taylor, Dana and Hayden.

"Well I happen to have one. Max!" Victoria yelled, beckoning her waif-like saviour over. "I know you've repeatedly expressed how much entry into the Vortex Club means to you."

That much was true, though the answer was generally zero.

"I'm sure we're all aware that any officer of the club is empowered to grant general entry, which for clarification, I have just done. However, it takes a vote of the committee to elevate a new member into the committee. Therefore, I move that Max Caulfield be elevated into the committee immediately. Do I hear a second?"

Taylor immediately raised her hand. Her most important role within the Vortex Club was to second anything Victoria moved.

"Hold on, the chair isn't even here. And all the positions in the committee are taken. You can't." Hayden tried to interrupt, but was immediately shutdown.

"The chair chose to leave without closing the meeting, which allows for another member of the committee to fill in – the Secretary or Treasurer, if available. I assure you everything is consistent with the Vortex Club constitution. And as for committee positions, we'll just make a new one up. After all, the only positions with actual relevance are the Chair, Treasurer and Secretary. Perhaps we
could use a new 'Cultural Attaché'?

That was, no doubt, in reference to the most nebulous position in a diplomatic embassy, and often used as a cover for the resident spymaster. Apparently it sailed over everyone's heads.

"No, wait, we can't have a hipster representing the Vortex Club's culture, or anything mainstream. 'Counter-cultural Attaché' then. Now, I take it you're opposing this motion. Is everybody else in favour?"

Taylor automatically voted in the affirmative. Dana also voted in favour, as she had nothing against Max and was still thoroughly embarrassed about Juliet blowing up at her. She was somewhat bemused as to why Victoria would first defend her favourite victim and artistic nemesis, and then make them a senior Vortex Club member. Could there be some truth behind that stupid video after all?

Victoria raised her own hand, making the vote three to one. Max was now somehow one of the Vortex Club inner circle. Not one to have her own trick used against her, Victoria quickly declared the meeting over.

Taylor rushed over and announced she couldn't wait to give Max an official vortex club makeover. Apparently, she was going to be Taylor's "greatest challenge to date!" How very charming. The group quickly dispersed leaving Max standing bemused alongside Victoria.

"Victoria…” Max began, still trying to process recent events. "What the hell just happened?"

"Congratulations. You're in the Vortex Club committee."

Max felt this was a nightmare on par with any tornado.

"Look Max, when it gets out Nathan was suspended, he won't be able to keep his position. That means Courtney will be down to Hayden as a supporter. Now, with you and Taylor voting for me, I'll only need one more vote to outright restore myself to my rightful place. Why, I'll probably end up back in charge before the end of the week." Victoria paused for a minute, and when she continued her voice was almost unbearably sweet. "You'll vote for me, won't you Mad Max? After all, I did help save your friend today."

Max made a show of appearing to give the matter a lot of thought before finally answering. So much so that Victoria became genuinely worried.

"Well of course I will, Tori."

Chapter End Notes

So this is the longest chapter to date (over 10000 words, and therefore also over 9000 words!), and it was almost all based on Vortex club politics! I'll have to make this up to everyone with something shorter and decidedly more lower brow next time. I apologise for it taking so long to come out, I was originally intending it to be much shorter, and will have to endeavour to break up my story into easier to write and digest pieces in the future. It's also rather depressing that certain amazing fic authors are able to produce this
much every day. I clearly have a long way to go.

You might have also noticed that there were eight contacts on… Whoever's Sim card that was that Future Max stole (I'm sure you all know who it belonged to). You might infer from that, that they have a considerably greater support base than in the canon game, so Max must be playing on new game+/hard mode. Hopefully that means she can get an ending with more "imagination :"

You might also have noticed (since it's a bloody plot point) that I've tweaked Max's power, so if she rewinds back too far, the rewind pulls her back to whatever previous position she occupied. That's a little attempt to bring consistency what's seen in the canon game, where Max's first rewind takes her back to the class room from the toilets for some reason, but subsequent rewinds don't. Since the start of the game is closely duplicated in this fic, I thought I'd better close the plot hole.

So tune in next time (hopefully with a shorter wait) for the appearance of a character I know everyone has been desperately wanting to see a lot more of… Warren Graham!

( Oh, and Chloe might show up too. )
Chloe Price took a drag of her cigarette, her back resting against a brick retaining wall that partially fenced the Blackwell school car park, while her jacket lay slung across a shoulder. It had been over an hour, and she was still periodically relapsing into cold sweats, shivering involuntarily in spite of the warm afternoon sun, and the heat it had baked into the brick wall. Chloe could still feel the muzzle of Nathan's gun jabbed into her gut, see the insanity in his eyes staring into her. Then a glance downward at the gun had revealed his finger in the trigger guard, trigger already at half pull. She had been sure she was dead, that nothing could save her.

In the end, she'd been proven wrong. The fire alarm had been triggered at the last instant, a distraction executed by Chloe's long estranged friend Max; a tiny angel. Chloe had quickly taken the opportunity on offer, kneed Nathan in the balls, then in the head, then robbed the fucker blind, and escaped. Max had come out of hiding just in time to see the robbery; in hindsight, probably not the best impression to make on her oldest and most dear friend after being separated to five years. After bailing, she'd had to dodge "Step-Dork", the school's chief rent-a-cop. Step-Dork had been basking in the momentary authority the alarm gave him; he stormed around, accosting students and ordering them to the exits like it was his one thrill of the week. To be fair to her Step... Father, David Madsen, it probably was his only thrill of the week.

Things had actually gotten slightly better between Chloe and David in the last couple of years. He'd suddenly made an overture to her, offering to teach her "practical gun safety". No way was Chloe going to turn down the chance to shoot shit up, even if it meant hanging around with the Porn-stache'd hick, and there'd been a few positive steps from there. Chloe had generously reflected that in her use of nouns: "Step-Douche" and "Step-Fucker" had largely given way to the vastly more civil "Step-Dork". Still it would have been hella awkward to be caught by him on the grounds of the school she'd been expelled from. Anyway, after a few near misses with the Step-Dork's henchmen, who, for some reason seemed to be rushing around the place on high alert, Chloe had finally doubled back to her ride in the parking lot. Her rusted old pickup was exactly where she'd left it, conveniently blocking all the disabled parking. Since then she'd been trying to calm herself by way of massive nicotine transfusion.

Chloe flicked a cigarette butt under the nearest vehicle and reached for another. The carton was empty. Fuck. She'd been so worked up after having the gun pulled on her, she'd gone through the
whole packet. That pack was supposed to last her till the end of the week! Her hand slinked into her jacket pocket and she relaxed a little, feeling the wad of cash an unconscious Nathan had so generously donated. Four hundred dollars in tens and twenties; it wasn't enough to pay back Frank, but it would keep her topped up on nicotine for some time. It certainly complemented her previous total liquid capital of 86 cents nicely. Still, remediating substance cravings seemed the least of her worries. In spite of improvements with David, other things in her life were still spiralling out of control: extorting Nathan was supposed to get her the cash to get one dangerous psycho off her back. Instead she'd just attracted another.

Chloe lamented that the gun she'd 'borrowed' from David had proved next to useless. She had felt incredibly vulnerable ever since awaking, still semi drugged, with that rat faced bastard Nathan Prescott standing over her. Vulnerable wasn't something Chloe was used to. She was lonely, completely out of control at times, angry with everyone and everything. But never so immediately powerless. Then the bastard had done it again, surprised her with his draw, giving her no chance to pull her own gun in retaliation.

Chloe liked to think that, had she been forewarned and ready, she could have out drawn him if he'd tried anything. Not that she'd actually shoot, of course: she was sure any half-sane person would give up once they realised the other party had lined them up. But that whole situation demonstrated the fundamental weakness in using a gun defensively: it was considered hella bad manners to draw unless someone was already threatening you. And if someone already had their gun out threatening you, you usually had no chance to draw without being shot. No, unless you were the aggressor, or the bad guy was a complete moron, the utility of a gun was actually pretty limited. By stealing the gun, she'd probably ruined all the progress she and David had made too, for a weapon that was in most circumstances pretty useless. And as far as Chloe could tell, nothing short of a time machine that could point out the bad guy and his intentions ahead of time could remedy that.

Chloe's strangely prophetic train of thought was, at that very moment, interrupted by the sound of sobbing. A student had just sat down across the parking lot, head buried between her hands, and well on the way to filling the Blackwell Gym pool with her tear ducts. "Probably boy trouble" Chloe snorted, to no one in particular. It seemed utterly ridiculous. She'd just escaped certain death, and yet the one crying was some rich Blackwell school girl, most likely Vortex Club, upset she no longer had a dick to suck. Talk about first world problems.

When the sobbing went up another ten decibels, Chloe decided she couldn't take it anymore. She did her best to banish the memories of Nathan, and walked over to the emotional wreck in her most badass fashion. Sadly, her display of bad-assery was entirely wasted. 'First-world problems' kept her head in her hands, completely oblivious to her saviour's arrival.

"Alright Chloe, now say anything other than 'are you ok'. There's nothing more retarded than asking someone crying if they're ok."

Chloe eventually settled on "What's your name?" For some reason, this only worsened the girl's tears. "God, what am I gonna do," Chloe thought. "This girl is hella sad."

The girl finally looked up at Chloe, and seemed immediately shocked out of her bawling by Chloe's appearance. To be fair, between her above average height, arm tattoo sleeve, dyed blue hair capped with dark beanie, and lean, toned muscle, Chloe did look a tad intimidating. It got even worse if they figured out who Chloe was; ever since someone caught one of her defenestrations on video, creatively titled "Arcadia asshole pays 'The Price'," Chloe found herself elevated to the status of local meme and urban legend. Honestly, you get yourself expelled from school, push a couple of thoroughly deserving people through glass panes, maybe break a pool cue over someone's head, and suddenly everyone's either terrified or reveres you.
"Look, I'm exactly 9 seconds from hugging the shit out of you." Chloe declared to the stupefied girl. "I'd prefer to be on a first name basis before that, but I'm hardcore enough to fucking hug a complete stranger. If she needs it in my professional opinion. Chloe Price, by the way."

First world problems suddenly became deeply confused. Her heart pumped like a steam engine as her mind became trapped between terror at the revelation she was face to face with "Chloe 'the football team didn't really need their punt receiver' Price", and bemusement at the absurdity of both Chloe's line and how she somehow delivered it with a straight face and insane confidence. The absurdity of it all more or less won out and the slightest outline of a smile finally cracked across her face. Her heart remained pounding though. "Juliet Watson." She replied, still sniffling.

"So this is what, boy trouble, Juliet?" Chloe asked.

"Pretty much-" Juliet began about to relapse into another bout of tears. Chloe suddenly cut her off.

"Time's up!" Chloe announced, and gently pulled Juliet into a close embrace. Juliet was startled momentarily, but quickly found herself hugging Chloe in response. She was right, Juliet thought. She did need this. And to be honest Chloe had probably needed it more, being so on edge after the whole nearly shot thing. Chloe had planned on lighting up her last joint when she got home, but had to admit that this was a nice way to calm down too. Perhaps not quite as relaxing though. Juliet had quite the body. An impressive décolletage framed by a low-cut shirt, and ample yet firm thighs extending from her short orange skirt. "Don't perv the emotionally vulnerable, Price", she reminded herself, to limited effect.

After a brief eternity, the hug lessened in intensity, to the point where Juliet and Chloe could fill their lungs enough to actually handle conversation. "Want to give me the cliff notes?" Chloe asked.

"I had the best boyfriend in the school, and I found out he was sexting with another girl. I wanted to talk it out but he won't even answer his phone." Juliet blurted. Chloe tried her best to conceal the roll of her eyes at that statement. She was sure the 'best boyfriend' in the school wouldn't be sexting behind his girlfriend's back. Or maybe he would, Chloe had learned through some not so pleasant experience that boys were pretty much all gross. "H-he's the football team's quarterback." Juliet explained, which Chloe gathered was her entire criteria for judging him 'best'. "I got so stupid jealous losing him that I accused my best friend of being the one that stole him. And I wasn't even right. Then I snapped at the most timid girl in the school, and that was the last straw for my former BFF, and now I've ruined that friendship as well!"

Jesus, what a sob story. Chloe searched around her pockets for her least-used handkerchief, while trying to work out what to do. Should she tell her to get back with some asshole cheater? Dump his ass and move on? Forget men entirely and join her in a garden of lilies? Chloe smirked in self-depreciating fashion at how weeb that last thought was. Keep telling yourself you didn't dye your hair to match your favourite animu, Price. You'll eventually believe it.

Gently turning Juliet's head to face her with her free hand, Chloe began to carefully wipe the deluge of tears and runny mascara from Juliet's cheeks. Juliet's still watery eyes met Chloe's, and Chloe Price felt her throat go dry. If only you were the no fucks-given-asshole your publicity makes you out to be, Chloe Elisabeth Price.

"Have-" Chloe paused, uncomfortably noting that Juliet was hanging off her every word. "Have you thought about how you want to handle this? Get back together with him or dump his-"

"G-get back with him of corsh."

Fuck. Juliet had the most adorable little lisp that kicked in when she was upset.
"But I want a little revenge first. Make him feel how I felt. I can be quite devious in my own way so I've come up with a cunning plan…"

OK, you were right not to reel this one in for yourself, Chloe. She's Yandere as fuck.

"…Basically I'm going to hit on his best friend, Logan, a bit in public. They're in the football team together, so it'll be awkward as anything."

As far as plans went, Chloe probably wouldn't have labelled Juliet's as "cunning"; at least not without cracking her head against the wall a couple of dozen times and changing her name to Baldrick. Pseudo-cheating in retaliation seemed like a good way to break up a relationship, not bring it back together. And using Logan from the Blackwell football team? Chloe remembered him creeping on Rachel and her at a party last year while heavily drunk. His pickup line practically consisted of an explanation that he didn't have any protection on him, but that the three of them could "do it like good Catholics". Not the most enticing sales pitch. And Juliet would probably have to skank all over the guy for ages just to make sure she'd be seen.

"And you're sure that'll get you back together?" Chloe asked rather incredulously. "Sounds more like something that'd drive you apart."

"I know my man." Juliet replied, with a disturbing quiet confidence.

Chloe sighed. Well if she was intent on this patently moronic plan, perhaps she could at least mitigate the worst aspects of it. Keep her away from that bastard for starters.

"Alright, but Logan's shady as fuck. You don't want to use him for this, trust me. And you'd be much better off sending a photo of yourself hitting on someone, than doing it in real life every chance you get, on the off chance he's looking. Hell if you really wanted to make the guy jealous, you could just take a few photos with me."

Chloe sat grinning at the absurdity of her suggestion, until it finally registered that Juliet had nodded intently at her every word, all while fishing out her phone and adjusting the camera settings. Chloe turned to face Juliet, their gazes met, and Juliet immediately flushed while her tongue absentmindedly transited her lower lip. Chloe Elisabeth Price, What the hell have you gotten yourself into now?

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Across the parking lot, Warren Graham leaned against his 'new' 1978 hatchback. He'd been waiting diligently for the future love of his life, Max Caulfield to arrive, so he could display this icon of unbridled manhood. Warren had great plans for Max, and their future together. Her accepting the loan of his flash drive and its collection of pirated movies was only the first step. With that phase now finally completed, they could move on to something even more daring. Warren planned to ride his mighty 3 speed chariot to Newberg with her, where they'd watch the original King Kong at a drive-in cinema. And then, with the two of them finally alone together and miles away from anyone that knew them, well, he had to adjust his trousers just thinking about it. He was anxious to share these plans, especially as he'd now been waiting over an hour for Max. His eyes scoured the parking lot, desperately looking for evidence of Max's arrival.

Max was, sadly, nowhere to be found. Instead he noticed an unlikely pair of rather attractive girls sitting by the far wall together. Warren found his eyes wandering. He was loathe to betray the trust Max would surely invest in him one day, but he'd been sitting in the parking lot for over an hour, and he'd just finished draining the batteries in his laptop, so couldn't otherwise entertain himself. His eyes drank in the two of them, but his brain somehow managed to retain enough blood circulation to provide its considered opinion.
One of the girls was a classical beauty by the name of Juliet Watson, known to be currently dating the school Quarter Back. Warren knew he had no chance with her. The other was an androgynous, blue-haired punk of undetermined identity and remarkably striking face. Warren knew he had no chance with her either. It was times like this Warren was glad for his unrivalled imagination, and quickly concocted a rather implausible scenario of comforting them, after they were suffering issues with their current boyfriends.

Warren found himself especially captivated by the blue haired girl, as she immediately reminded him of the upcoming French Film "Blue is the warmest colour." He had heard bad things about it: the director had supposedly tormented the two lead actresses, and that the lesbian acts it depicted (including but not limited to simulated analingus!) were closer to pornographic than artistic. He was looking forward to the film's US release, so he could judge how bad it was for himself, repeatedly, and then register his disgust from an educated position on social media.

Warren was so engrossed in imagining the depravity he might see on the big screen, that he nearly missed something almost as interesting happen right in front of him. It began innocently enough, Juliet pulling out her smart phone and lining it up as if to take a selfie with the blue haired punk. The punk said something, and Juliet began blushing furiously, a nervous smile spreading across her face. They stood, gazed into each other's eyes for an instant, and Warren was sure he saw Juliet bite her lower lip. Suddenly, blue-hair had seized hold of Juliet, lifting her and pulling them both together, where their lips met in a passionate kiss. Juliet seemed receptive, her legs constricting around the punk's waist, and her free hand starting down blue-hair's neck on a journey of exploration. Blue hair pinned Juliet against the wall surrounding the car park, and their bodies crushed together, her hands gently cradling Juliet's head. When their lips finally broke apart, it was only to grant the punk access to the flank of the reporter's neck, and Juliet threw her head back in ecstasy as the punk's lips rained kisses upon it. All the while Juliet somehow managed to keep the phone on them, determined to record everything in a series of high resolution stills.

Roughly ten seconds later, Warren had come to the determination that he should probably be a gentleman, and offer to hold Juliet's phone for her. He was about to be bitterly disappointed. The couple suddenly ceased their amorous activity and returned to sitting together. Juliet was giggling fiercely, while the punk wore a smug 'still got it' expression. Warren tried to comprehend what he'd just seen, but failed miserably. He was just glad the punk's type seemed to be conventionally attractive statuesque beauties. If she ever turned her attention to say, diminutive waif-hipsters, Warren had no clue how he'd compete.

In the mean time, Juliet and Chloe were flicking though the myriad of shots taken during their ten second tryst for one suitable for making the School's best boyfriend jealous as hell.

"I can't believe I just did that." Juliet managed to get out amongst her giggles.

Chloe was trying to be more business oriented, coming up with reasons to reject photos and narrow the selection. After all, as far as meaningless romantic encounters with either gender went, this hadn't even scratched the surface compared with some of the things Chloe had gotten up to. "Too much tongue." "Face obscured by hair." "Makes it look like my hand wasn't just on your thigh to lift and support you." "Ditto, but for a different body region." "Will probably get him off rather than frustrate." "The perv across the park is in frame." Most of the reasons Chloe gave for a rejection did little to calm Juliet, and she sat nervously alternating her gaze between the photos and Chloe. "Wait. What about this one."

The photo Chloe had selected was mostly centred on Juliet, with Chloe acting as a framing device and background rather than a second focal point. Her tattooed arm framed the bottom left corner,
before reaching up to gently cup Juliet's face. Much of Chloe's face was buried behind Juliet's head and neck. It wasn't actually clear what Chloe was doing to Juliet at that moment, but the way her head was thrown back and mouth opened slightly, mid-gasp, made it clear that she was doing it rather successfully. It was as close to perfect as they were likely to get, at least without a photographer who actually knew what they were doing. The intent was to show Juliet at risk of being stolen away by some mysterious fem fatale, not furnish some local hick with delusions of getting a threesome, so Chloe had to be a mysterious background presence. After ensuring she had a copy (perhaps she could ask Max to review it's artistic merit if they were ever properly reunited and she wanted to see Max turn beet-red), Chloe supervised the text Juliet was sending along with it to the school's best boyfriend.

"Respond now or I'm done with u. I've already had very competitive offers."

Juliet's phone began ringing within 10 seconds of the photo being sent. Chloe listened to a few fragments of Juliet's part in the conversation:

"...no, I'm still prepared to stay with you if you stop acting like a himbo...
"...don't complain too much. You did ask for a special picture this afternoon...
"...well maybe if you work harder, you can get me to make the expression in the pic too..."

Fairly confident that things had, somehow, gone just as Juliet planned, Chloe decided it was time for the mysterious stranger to walk off into the sunset. But she couldn't help but give one more tiny push before she left.

"Call me if he gives you any more trouble and you want to talk. Or anything." Chloe said, close enough to Juliet to make sure the phone's mic registered it.

A second walk of ultimate badass-ness later (she had to keep up appearances for the little perv across the car park), Chloe was seated in her truck ready to leave. Just in time too, a couple of students were entering the parking lot. Knowing her luck, at least one of them would turn out to be a goody two-shoes and complain about her parking in the disabled bay. The school didn't even have any disabled students. She was about to key the ignition when she recognised the smaller of the two. It was Max. Her Max. And the larger one was everybody's favourite cunning stunt, Victoria. What the hell was Max doing with Victoria Chase? Chloe's hand dropped from the ignition key, and she just sat dumbly, watching them.

"And Nathan knows for sure that we busted him?"

"There's nothing else that would turn him against me so suddenly, Max. Whoever shot and edited that video must have handed it off to Courtney, and she showed it to Nathan. That's the only way she'd get his backing for the Vortex Coup so quickly."

The gentle tap of shoe soles against concrete rang out as Victoria Chase and Max Caulfield walked the path to the Blackwell car park. Between preventing fatalities from an automobile crash, and the drama that had led to Max's joining the Vortex Club, the return of Warren's Flash drive had been delayed by well over an hour. Still, they were almost at the parking lot so he'd have it soon enough. Max wasn't looking forward to the conversation: she'd have to dash any false hope he may have had of going on a date with her, and generally put him out of his misery. At the same time he always looked so pathetic when she did that. "Priorities!" She told herself. She should be far more worried about Nathan Prescott somehow taking revenge for their reporting him than anything Warren-related.

"Are we in danger, Tori?"
Victoria's brow furrowed, and she quickly broke eye contact. Damn Max and her expressions of earnest worry. She'd noticed Max casually slipping the name abbreviation 'Tori' into their conversations with increasing frequency. And right when Victoria was finally ready to call her out on it, Max had immediately brought up the risk of her personal safety and broke out her doe-face.

"Tori, is Nathan going to try something?"

It really wasn't fair: Max had chewed her out for using 'Maxine' and then immediately started pulling the same thing on her with 'Tori'. And Maxine was even the name on her birth certificate!

"If he's really a danger, I don't think we should separate too far. If he does show up and try something, I might be able to protect you with my time rewind."

Oh, and now it turned out Max was more afraid for Victoria's safety than her own? How do you chew someone out when they're being so… Heroic. Fucking Max! Damn her and her stupid heroic freckles. Victoria took a deep breath. She decided to relent on the whole 'Tori' thing, at least for the moment. She'd just have to be the bigger person. She smirked as she quietly wondered if that was how Max got away with so much, like sleeping through class. After all, next to Max, nearly everyone ended up being "bigger people."

"Max, if the school's done its job, he'll have been picked up and sent to the police. Depending on how his Father's lawyers play things, he might get bail, but I strongly suspect he'll be permanently barred from the school grounds."

"If the school's done its job". Considering how incompetent the Blackwell school administration seemed, it occurred to Victoria that they may have reason for concern after all. However Max was more focused on a little detail she had yet to share: the conspiracy her future self had mentioned. It was an interesting coincidence that her future self revealed this on the day the schools' richest student had a complete meltdown.

"Do you think he could be part of something bigger? Maybe a group that would-"

"Max." Victoria scoffed. "Nathan is part of the Prescott family, in terms of power nothing in Arcadia Bay is 'bigger'. Though if you're asking if Nathan was part of a gang or something, the answer's obviously no. He wasn't even a part of any sports team. The closest thing he had to school aged friends were the Vortex Club, and the only one of them he really liked, was, well, was me."

A sense of intrusion came across Victoria, as Max reached over and took her hand, squeezing gently. Victoria somehow found it in herself to tolerate it. After all, it wasn't as bad as the full hug Max had given her in the toilets. But at the same time, some part of her thought it wasn't as good either.

"Right now you've probably got more to worry about from your not so secret admirer. The one who practically stalks you, sends you twenty times as many texts as he receives and who owns that drive."

"That's an exaggeration Tori." Their text ratio was actually between nine and ten to one.

"Well, at least he's an obsessive nerd, and definitely not worthy of your time Max. Especially now that you're in the Vortex Club. In fact the only time you should give him is the time of the next bus, so he can save us all some trouble and throw himself under it."

"Victoria…"

"You know, I'd just tell him to fish for his flash drive, and drop it in the girl's potty."
Victoria really seemed hostile toward Warren. For some reason, Max's mind conjured the image of a cat arching its back, fur standing on end in an attempt to defend its territory.

"Victoria, I don't want to be cruel to him. I also just don't want him."

"Well that's the problem with you Mad Max. You don't make it clear when people aren't wanted. Now I wish I could help you, but I just don't suffer from your failure to communicate. With me, people always know where they stand."

Max wasn't sure that was entirely accurate. With Victoria, you definitely knew if she actively despised you or not, but once you moved above that there was a strong background level of antagonism she directed at everyone, even her closest friends.

"Where do we stand then, Victoria?"

There was a rather laboured, contemplative pause on Victoria's part.

"…You're in good standing. Anyway, we were talking about that quasi-pubescent lout Warren. I still think it would be in everybody's long term interests if you made an example of all this. Melted down the drive in front of him or something. You could even borrow my gold lighter if you need to. But failing that, at least observe some basic precautions: try to maintain a working distance with him, and if he comes at you, be sure to put something between yourself and him."

Those sounded more like instructions for dealing with an aggressive dog than a person. Well, they'd arrived. Warren was scarcely ten yards away and waving enthusiastically at her. Max's dread increased exponentially.

"Alright, there he is Max. I think I'll just loiter at a safe distance. If you really need rescuing, just stick your hand up, like a drowning person who's being pulled under."

Max wasn't sure if Victoria had meant that as a sincere offer of help, or an attempt to suggest the meeting with Warren was going to be her doom. Either way it was a failure: its most obvious effect was to make her imagine Victoria running across the beach in slow motion carrying a life preserver, and that, for some bizarre reason, seemed to lift Max's spirits.

As Max approached Warren, a smile crossed his face that somehow made her want to invest in a tube of capsicum spray. She quickly adopted Tori's advice, reaching into her bag for the flash drive. She extended it forward of her, like a sword placed in the guard position to discourage an enemy charge. Just in time. Warren's arms were spread wide, bathing Max in the scent of what seemed like half a can of aerosol deodorant, as he moved in for a hug.

"Here's your drive."

Warren winced slightly, partially at being shutdown, and partially because the plug end of the drive had poked him in his under-developed abdominal muscles. Warren was no Chloe Price. Max hesitated to withdraw the drive until Warren's arms had completely dropped to his sides and he had abandoned any hope of a hug. No point taking silly risks with a situation this dire.

"Hey Max, Check out my wheels." He announced, enthusiastically gesturing to the vehicle behind him after taking the flash drive in hand. Max was more than slightly underwhelmed. The '78 hatchback Warren was coveting looked like it had previously belonged to a little old granny. Briefly inhaling the air near an open window revealed that it smelled the same way.

"Very old-school, Warren." Then again, so was corporal punishment, and Max couldn't help but
draw a parallel between that and what she was currently suffering.

"So, I know you didn't have time to watch my movie bootie, but tell me you at least buried those treasures in your own hard drive so you can dig them up later?"

"I did practically spend my childhood playing pirates. They're stowed in the hold." She immediately regretted sharing that detail with him. Those memories should have been kept between her and Captain Chloe.

"Yo- ho-ho." Warren laughed. "How appropriate," Max reflected internally, she'd probably need a bottle of rum if this kept up.

"And, I uh know it was your birthday recently. I got you something."

"Warren really? You didn't need to do that."

He really didn't need to do that. A present from warrant meant a cycle of guilt where she'd be obliged to give Warren something in return on his birthday, hence instilling him with a sense of hope. It would be a feedback loop that could only end if one of them were exceedingly rude and didn't reciprocate in gift giving, or alternately died in a fire. And Max had no reason to think she could rely on the latter happening any time soon.

Warren reached through his car window and presented Max with… a shirt. It was the wrong size, and absolutely not something she wanted to be seen in, because she'd really be seen in it. It wasn't that the shirt was showy, at least not in the way Dana's and Juliet's were. But it was several sizes too large for her, and the bagginess coupled with how loose the neck was meant you'd be able to see straight down it if she leaned over. Maybe Max could salvage it, wear it as pyjamas or something, but the idea of taking something from Warren into bed made her shiver, and not in a good way. Meanwhile, Warren was desperate to point out the print on the shirt's front, apparently his sole consideration when he purchased it. It had some sort of old-fashioned looking computer cable on it, beneath which was a single line of letters and numbers:

R U RS-232?

Max didn't get it at all.

Throughout their conversation, Max had been trying to find somewhere else to look. Something, anything she could use as an excuse to politely leave. Suddenly her righteous indignation peaked. Some asshole had parked their rust-bucket pickup truck over the disabled parking. Over all the disabled parking. And they were just sitting there in their Truck! They probably thought they could get away with it, since they had the most incredible intense blue eyes peering straight at her, and a strikingly beautiful face that was framed by dyed blue hair and a dark blue beanie. Oh god, it was Chloe.

"I'm sorry Warren," Max said while flushing rather uncontrollably. "I just saw someone I haven't talked to in five years!"

"Wait! I never got a chance to tell you about... The ape drive-in movie." But Max showed no sign of hearing him, as she rushed toward her old friend.

While understandably disappointed, the note on which Max left had Warren feeling oddly hopeful. After all, compared to waiting five years just to see Max again, a one to two hour wait in the parking lot actually seemed rather good. This hope did admittedly crack slightly, not unlike what you'd expect from a wrecking ball entering a china shop, when he realised Max's "friend" was the "blue is
Max headed straight for the pickup truck, for Chloe. She had no idea what she'd say when she got there, though no doubt it would be trite and awkward as fuck. She gathered her courage, and resolved to say the first thing that came into her head. After all, if she completely fucked up, she could rewind and say something else. She rapped her knuckles on the passenger side door.

"Hey Chloe. Um. Do you mind if I sit down and talk with you?"

Chloe wore a sardonic expression. It was matched perfectly by her tone when she spoke.

"Oh sure. It's not like I've been waiting for you to say that for five years."

Chloe opened the passenger side door for Max, while trying to rationalise some deeply conflicted emotions. Chloe wanted to be angry at Max. She felt angry. But she couldn't be angry. Not when Max had saved her life less than two hours earlier, and not when Max was clambering into the seat beside her, her eyes in full 'fragile fawn' mode. Hell, just talking to Max again was enough to make her want to break out in an impromptu tap-dance. She fought back a smile as Max finally finished sitting down, and settled for being mildly disgruntled. Mostly for appearances sake.

"Five years, with barely a word. I could almost understand it when you were off living the dream in Seattle. It feels worse that you've been back in Arcadia Bay for a month now, and didn't bother to look me up. Too busy with Queen V and Romeo?"

"Barely a word?" A pang of guilt ran through Max as she realised Chloe was actually going easy on her. To the best of Max's knowledge, she hadn't sent Chloe anything at all. Though Seattle really hadn't been 'living the dream' for Max. She'd ended up withdrawing into herself, in a typically subtle Max Caulfield sort of a way. Sure, she still attended school and did everything expected of her, but there was always an uncertainty, an added level of self doubt that prevented her from achieving what she wanted. She never really extended her social interactions beyond her family, and didn't take the chance to befriend and network other aspiring artists and attend gallery exhibits. She just sort of stayed in the corner doing her own thing.

"I was going to see you. I thought about us having a grand reunion every night. I just wanted to settle in first, so I could show you how I'd grown, become less of a shy cliché geek."

That was Max's plan anyway. Now that she'd moved back to Arcadia Bay, she'd been hoping to shake off her shyness. Somehow transform herself. So far she'd mostly slumped back into her old pattern of shy isolation. Admittedly, that had changed with her time travel powers, though given how calculating and callous her future self seemed, Max was now worried about what she was turning into.

"You weren't very successful then. You're almost the same as the last time I saw you. Even the hair is still classic Max from her pirating days, well except for that unfortunate ponytail phase. And how long were you planning on delaying our reunion for Max, until after I died? Because you came very close to getting there."

She was right. Max's attempt to cocoon herself away while failing miserably at a social metamorphosis, nearly robbed them of a chance at reunion. In fact it would have robbed them of that chance, and left Chloe dead on a filthy toilet floor, but for Max's sudden manifestation of time powers.

"Though Classic Max does have some good qualities," Chloe quickly interjected, on seeing Max
grow downcast and despondent. "Like trying to keep me out of trouble. I guess rescuing me from being shot in the bathroom is slightly more impressive that trying to stop me spilling wine on the carpet, so there's some progress and growth." Chloe gave up the pretence of anger, and smiled at her again. "You hella saved my life from the shadows Max, like a ninja."

Neither Max nor Chloe could take it anymore. They fell into each other's arms and hugged in silent embrace for a good minute. When they finally broke apart, Max glanced through the truck's windscreen and noticed a crest-fallen Warren Graham quickly turn his back and begin walking toward the parking lot exit.

"So who's Romeo? And should I be worried about him seeking out an apothecary?" Chloe asked inquisitively.

"Oh, that's just Warren. Can you believe the shirt he got me?"

Chloe briefly glanced at the polyester monstrosity Max had with her, eyes immediately drawn to the print.

"Are you serial?"

"Exactly what I was thinking." Max agreed obliviously.

"Well don't end up feeling pity for Warrick, and his clumsy yet supposedly endearing attempts to woo you. That guy has a serious wandering eye. You know I caught him perving me earlier."

Max regarded Chloe suspiciously. There was something she noticed the moment she'd gotten in the truck, but didn't really want to bring it up unless she was sure they had reconciled.

"You weren't doing anything to draw attention were you Chloe? You, um, you do know you've got lipstick smeared on your left cheek. And your neck. And it's not your colour."

Chloe's hand shot to her rear view mirror, tilting it down to view the offending areas. She blushed slightly at what she'd just seen. For someone who desperately wanted to get back with her boyfriend, Juliet had been awfully enthusiastic with that piece of staged romance. Damn, she was blushing, Chloe Price never blushed. She was hardcore. Everyone knew how much of a badass she was. Well, everyone except Max, who remembered how she really was, and who's 'fragile fawn' eyes could see straight through her.

"I was just trying to help a girl get back together with her boyfriend. For your information it actually worked."

Max crossed her arms in mock frustration, a smile belying how dumb she thought that sounded.

"Wowser. So… how does that work? Was the plan to show her how bad the alternative on offer was, so she'd run back into his arms?"

"Careful Max. One day you might end up going through a rough patch with Warrick over there. Maybe he buys you a bad shirt or something, I don't know. Anyway, you too might need the love doctor Chloe to intervene. Show you just how bad the alternative is."

"Warren and I are just classmates Chloe. The only rough patch we're going through is trying to remind him of that."

Classmates, huh. Not even 'friends'. Damn, that's like a friend-zoning beyond friend-zoning. Chloe knew she should feel sorry for the guy, but instead the revelation left her almost ecstatic. She
attempted to busy herself by remediying the smeared lipstick with her handkerchief, but to little success. The handkerchief had already been used extensively in cleaning up Juliet, and it was hard to find a clean corner of it.

"You know, this reminds me of the time we borrowed Joyce's lipstick." Chloe recalled, while fishing around her glove box for something to wipe Juliet's lipstick off with. She eventually found an old paper napkin from some takeaway she'd enjoyed when she still had money. She quickly put it to good use.

"Yeah, I seem to remember someone insisting that we kiss each other's reflections you weirdo. It took ages to get the bathroom mirror spotless after that."

"That was nowhere near as messy as going to sleep without cleaning off the lipstick first. Though that did provide an insight into the nocturnal migration of a young Max Caulfield."

Max looked away shyly. It had been awkward enough that a thirteen year old Chloe had gotten them busted by ruining a pillow case, her lips smearing waxy red makeup across the white material. But Max waking up to find her own lip marks had stained the neckline of Chloe's pyjama top? That had nearly given her a coronary. Max knew it must have been entirely innocent, she always moved around a bit in her sleep. She'd probably just rolled over and nuzzled Chloe's shoulder blade, like they did countless times while they were awake, in need of a hug and wearing more clothes. Young Chloe had been great about it, not saying anything, hiding the top so her parents wouldn't see it, and washing it herself the next day when her parents left for work. Why did this evolved Punk Chloe have to make such a big deal about it so many years later?

"You still haven't told me why you're hanging with Cuntoria."

"Mr Jefferson assigned us to work together on a photography assignment."

Well it was the initial reason that had put the two of them together. Subsequently, there had been matters of time, saving a certain blue haired person's life, a video taken by some mysterious third party no one had noticed both in Jefferson's classroom and in the corridor, and the ensuing vortex club drama. But saying all that would have taken too long and certain details begged belief, like time travel and her being a member of the Vortex club.

"Don't be too harsh on her. She was hiding in the bathroom too, and did kind of assist me in saving you."

"I owe the Queen V my life? Fuck, just leave me to die on the bathroom floor next time."

"Don't even joke about that, Chloe."

"Fine. But owing my life to a friend of Nathan Prescott-"

"They aren't really friends anymore Chloe. Since she saw what he did, nearly did to you, they had a falling out."

"A- Are you sure Max?"

Max didn't like the way Chloe's tone suddenly changed. A slight undercurrent of fear seemed to have slipped into her normally confident delivery. She extended a slightly shaky finger, pointing to the car park exit.

"Because they're talking with each other right now."
Max's eyes quickly followed the direction Chloe indicated. Nathan was barely twenty yards away from them, engaged in a rather intense conversation with Victoria. Victoria was backed against a wall, clearly wanting to be somewhere else.

For a second Victoria and Nathan both relaxed, and it seemed any crisis had averted. Then, as Victoria turned to gesture at one of the cars, Nathan launched a gutless surprise attack, a hook punch to the jaw laying her out cold. Warren was yards away when it happened, on his way out of the parking lot. He tried to spring into action, but had an utterly pathetic showing, surprised by a head butt that sent him reeling onto the ground. Nathan followed up with a boot to the gut, badly wounding him. Max looked on in horror, as Nathan raised his boot, this time lining up an unconscious Victoria's head. There was a muffled crack as he brought his boot down on her temple over and over, while screaming "You betrayed me" at the top of his lungs.

A second later, Nathan joined Victoria on the ground, the brick wall behind him painted in a lumpy coat of red and pink. For an instant Max found it beautiful, in a strange macabre way. She almost reached for her camera, before she snapped to her senses and became utterly revolted in herself. All the death and violence she'd witnessed were starting to take their toll; she was becoming desensitised. Max looked to her right and saw the agent of Nathan's demise. Chloe had leapt from the truck with her revolver drawn. Her aim was as deadly as it had been in the alternate scenario that played out in the bathroom. Unfortunately, the single shot she'd fired was slightly too late to save Victoria. Her hands shook as the enormity of what she'd done dawned on her. Max rushed from the vehicle, wanting to reach her as quickly as possible.

"Max, I just killed someone." She whispered softly.

"Chloe, we can fix this."

"How?" Tears fell from her cheeks. "Nathan's brain is all over the wall, Victoria's had her skull crushed. Everything's fucked."

Max wanted to explain calmly, but decided there wasn't time. The longer she waited, the harder the rewind would be. And the easiest way to convince people of her power was a practical demonstration. With a short duration rewind, she could avoid the worst of the headaches, and avoid any risk of barreling out of control through space. She could even use the trick she'd learned after watching Victoria get beaten up by Chloe, and slow the speed of the rewind to make the experience less extreme for her 'passenger'.

"Chloe, take my hands."

While doubtful anything could help the situation, Chloe implicitly trusted Max. She reached out, their fingers interlocked, and the world turned to scarlet. She gazed around astonished, as it dawned on her that time was flowing backwards. The disembodied echoes of voices, their voices, whispered around them in reverse. She looked down at where their hands intersected, and realised she could see straight through them; they had become ghostly apparitions, sidestepping time and becoming spectators in reality. Waterfalls of pink matter suddenly began to flow backward off the wall into Nathan's skull, and a sense of relief washed over Chloe. Max, for all practical purposes, was her guardian angel. She had absolved her of what would have normally been a necessary evil, and given her a chance to do something better. A glance back up to the reassuring smile of Max's now semi-transparent face banished any lingering fears she may have harboured, and she basked in the moment.

The whole experience felt eerily familiar to Chloe, and a recollection of her happiest moment with Rachel flooded back into her mind. Just like with Max, they'd stood, hands intertwined, in a surreal out of body experience. Then too, any sense of causality and consequence was thrown by the
wayside as they watched as reality all but melted around them. Of course that had involved watching "The dark side of the rainbow" after they'd shared a few magic mushrooms, rather than having anything to do with time travel, but just like that experience she was left with a sense of incredible euphoria. In what an external viewer might describe as less than no time at all, Max had brought them back to the moment Nathan appeared, and they rejoined the rest of the universe. Chloe was lost for words, a scenario that was, in and of itself, preciously rare. Chloe being Chloe, it was also rather short lived.

"Max. You can reverse time! Like… like an actual ninja!"

All things considered, Chloe seemed to be taking the revelation that Max could time travel rather better than Victoria had. In as much as she wasn't hyperventilating or unconscious. Instead she seemed possessed by the inextinguishable excitement of a child on Christmas morning. Max had no doubt that Chloe would have endless questions, most of which were probably variants on when they could do it again. They would have to wait; lives were currently in the balance, and Max couldn't easily save them alone.

"I still need your help, Chloe. I still can't beat the shit out of Nathan like an actual ninja."

Chloe looked down at her hands, still interlinked with Max's, a gentle warmth running through them. They were no longer shaking. The sense of fear and helplessness Nathan previously instilled in her were gone. She and Max were back together, and there was no power on Earth that could stop them.

"Oh don't worry about that Super Max. Just sit back and leave everything to Captain Chloe."

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"We need to talk, Vic."

Victoria recoiled in shock. Nathan had come out of nowhere, and was suddenly standing a foot from her. Then again she'd been waiting almost directly in front of the parking lot entrance, so his sudden appearance wasn't exactly a feat of ninjitsu. Victoria tried to back away slowly. She found her path of retreat blocked by the parking lot's brick wall. Looking straight at Nathan, she immediately noticed his pupils were dilated in spite of the relatively bright late afternoon sun. He'd clearly indulged himself after the incident in the bathroom.

"I saw the video, Victoria. You change your preferences all of a sudden, and not tell your best friend?"

"That video was utter bullshit Nathan. Some sad pathetic loser edited it together to discredit me."

"I saw the unedited video." Nathan clarified. "You and hipster bitch entered the toilets straight before I did. So I know you were hiding behind the stalls when that blue haired dyke tried to blackmail me. You thought you were so clever, taking photos, then snitching on me. Too bad I got a tip off that you'd reported me to the brown shirts. Fucking wage slaves were so easy to dodge, I actually had time to get high."

Well, at least they knew why Blackwell Security seemed to be on high alert.

"Nathan, you were going to shoot that girl in the toilets. If you did that, you'd end up in prison forever. I even rigged it so you'd get a minor misdemeanour instead of attempted Murder."

"So you tried to have me kicked out of school for what, to save me?"

"You need help Nathan. Let me drive you to the police station. You'll get off lightly, get the help you need, and your dad won't be able to interfere this time. And it'll look much better if you walk in
yourself, than if some rent-a-cop drags you in. You can just say you realised you were out of control, so left the school grounds immediately to protect everyone. No one will know."

Nathan looked like he was seriously considering Victoria's offer. In that instant he looked so utterly pathetic, it broke Victoria's heart.

"Oh god Vic. I've really fucked up. Help me."

Victoria turned away from him and gestured to her Mercedes in the parking lot. In that instant, Nathan rushed Victoria, and his fist connected with her jaw.

Warren thought he'd been shocked when he saw Chloe and Juliet go at it. But the sight of Nathan striking a girl in broad daylight brought out his inner Ape. He balled his hands into fists and rushed Nathan, trying to land a haymaker. Nathan stepped inside the wild swing with contemptuous ease, and brought his head forward to deliver a Glasgow kiss. Their heads clashed, and Warren slumped to the ground.

"Leave her alone Nathan, you'll just-"

But Warren's plea, and his inner ape, were both thoroughly stamped out by a follow up boot to the gut. He lay sucking wind on the ground.

Nathan turned to Victoria. Her body lay motionless, head side-on to the ground. Irrational rage engulfed him.

"Did you think you'd get away with this Vic. You went to the FUCKING principal and snitched on me. You snitched on your oldest friend, someone you were supposed to have the back of." He giggled in a decidedly unsettling manner. "SNITCHES GET STITCHES, BITCHES!"

His foot hovered above Victoria's head. He was moments from bringing it down on her. Suddenly, he heard something incredibly loud, like a clap, and felt something slap the side of his head hard. He briefly looked around confused, noticing the ambient noise become muted. Less than a second later his left ear was in agony, like someone had taken a red-hot wire and plunged it into his ear canal.

Immediately after landing the strike, Chloe's cupped hand retracted back to a guard position. She watched Nathan stumble around, equilibrium shot to hell, but still intent on facing her. If he wasn't high, he'd probably already be paralysed in agony from the ruptured eardrum Chloe had just given him. Nathan tried to step toward her, but stumbled, and Chloe swung an elbow straight into his jaw. His vision blacked moments after it connected. Chloe wasn't done though. Mother fucker was going to pay for drugging her, trying to shoot her, for what she'd seen him do to Victoria before Max had undone everything. She charged his largely conscious-devoid form while launching one of the knees he'd learned the effectiveness of in the bathroom. Her momentum carried them both into a rather expensive looking dark grey car, with Nathan's head cracking against the rear right window. The sound of shattering glass snapped Chloe back to her senses. Nathan's unconscious form was slumped partway through the broken window, triggering a particularly obnoxious car alarm. Moments later, the unmistakable southern accent of David Madsen bellowed through the air, yelling at his deputies to get to the damn car park and see what the hell was going on. It was time to leave.

"Wait, take me with you and Max. I don't want to be left here with…"

Victoria was just coming around. She was still semi-delirious: the blow to the head had really rattled the poor girl, not to mention the sense of betrayal at getting cold-cocked by her closest friend. Wait, 'Poor?' Chloe shook her head in disgust. She couldn't imagine a word less applicable to Victoria, in any sense. Still, she felt a certain strange kinship with her, both having been the victim of Nathan's
psychotic episodes. Glancing back at the pleading look of Max in the truck, Chloe dropped to her knees, snatched Victoria into a bridal carry, and moved in a quick but remarkably nonchalant fashion to her truck's passenger side door.

"...You've got a really pretty face for a Gorilla."

Chloe thought Victoria very lucky she could already claim to be suffering concussion.

"Squeeze over Max, we've got a very imposing passenger."

Across the car park, Juliet Watson looked on in shock as cuboids of shattered safety glass lay scattered across concrete. It seemed the legend of Chloe Price was about to grow once more. In order, Chloe had shown up, fixed up Juliet's relationship with her boyfriend somehow through kissing her, and casually ended an assault on a female student by slamming the aggressor's head through a car window. She actually did the window thing! Then she carried the victim off in a manner that practically screamed to be set to a Witney Houston soundtrack, and driven off into the sunset. Now, the sun hadn't actually set yet, and the kissing thing was mostly Juliet's original plan, but some concessions had to be made when converting a story from reality to what people enjoyed reading in a school newspaper. Juliet's swooning and editing reality for print were interrupted by a text from Zachery, the school's Quarter Back, offering to take her out to dinner to make up for his sins. Oh that's right, she still had a boyfriend didn't she. Thanks to Chloe.

Chapter End Notes

Remember back in episode 1 of life is strange, Juliet announces she has a devious plan to get back at her boyfriend, then in episode 2 we find out said devious plan is just to be all over that sleaze Logan? (Max will comment that "she's really laying the smack down on Zachery" in ep 2 if you look at them.) Yeah, I couldn't let that happen in this universe, so Chloe had to make an ultimate sacrifice here to prevent that. Incidentally, that's the only type of ultimate sacrifice Chloe's likely to make in this fic. Imagination trumps canon endings here.

Other than that, you might note there's some hint as to why Chloe is a little 'extra badass' in this universe. For some reason, her relationship with David is a bit better, and they've been doing things like going out shooting together. I wonder how that could have happened.

Finally, I wonder if Chloe realises she's started calling Max a ninja, but still refers to herself as a pirate captain. Shouldn't that make them mortal enemies?
Riding in cars, with girls

A cacophony of shattering glass, followed by the sound of a car alarm, roused Victoria back to semi-consciousness. She squirmed on the ground, and her hands shot to her head in defensive reflex, desperate to stop the follow up attack to the one that had decked her. Nothing happened. How long had she been out for anyway? She twisted her head in the direction of the car alarm, and felt the world spin. She expected to see a deranged Nathan venting his anger on the defenceless parked vehicles. Instead she saw him hang limply, his upper body driven through the back passenger window of a dark grey car. Mr Jefferson's car, unless she was mistaken. Victoria tried to fathom what could take someone apart so thoroughly, so quickly. Her thought process was rendered redundant when Chloe Price entered her field of view. Oh right, she should have known the moment she saw the broken window.

Victoria looked back at Nathan and felt mostly emptiness. She'd done all she could for him, and had been betrayed and attacked in return. She didn't want to be left there with him. She heard an effeminate groan, saw that disgusting boy Warren lying next to her, and decided she wouldn't allow herself to be left there with them. She tried to sit up, leave on her own, but her head was still spinning. With no other option available, she called out to her apparent saviour.

"Wait, take me with you and Max. I don't want to be left here with…"

A pair of strong arms wrapped around Victoria, lifting her with little apparent effort, and holding her in a bridal carry tight against a singlet-clad body. Victoria shuddered involuntarily; she was unused to such intimate contact without prior ingestion of liquor. It was bad enough Max had been taking liberties in that regard, hugging her and holding her hand when she was emotionally vulnerable. Goosebumps ran up her arm as she remembered Max's delicate hand entrap her own, that fragile little hoof that could rewrite destiny on a whim. Great, now her mind was in a strange place. And being lifted and carried away by this blue haired behemoth like Fay Wray, and so soon after suffering concussion, did little to either assist her recovery or get her mind back on a normal track.

In an attempt to calm down, Victoria took a deep breath. This proved singularly counterproductive: her olfactory senses seized the opportunity to furnish her with a considered opinion of Chloe's scent, which some part of her mind seemed to take great interest in digesting. Chloe didn't really smell like any of the girls in Blackwell. Not that Victoria had gone around deliberately sniffing the entire Blackwell female population or anything, she just seemed to take note of it automatically. The residual scents of alcohol, weed and tobacco combined with the musky base notes from a modest application of male-brand deodorant. A slight hint of perspiration was still detectable, normally a red flag for Victoria, but in this case it just served as a reminder of how Chloe had struggled to save her. A princess rescued by a noble (though admittedly impoverished) knight? Normally Victoria would never entertain such an outmoded and sexist fantasy, but how could it be sexist if she was rescued by another woman? God, where was her mind going? No, Chloe definitely wasn't like the girls in Blackwell. If anything, she smelt like some of the more interesting boys Victoria had (briefly) gotten to know at parties. She became even more unsettled at that realisation.

Victoria found herself swooning, something she immediately blamed on the blow to the head Nathan had inflicted, and quickly filed away all the other strange thoughts she'd been having as being a result of that attack too. She resolved to put herself in a professional photography mindset. That would keep these errant thoughts at bay. She looked across from her bridal carry position toward Chloe's
face in profile. Max was right, she was somehow decidedly handsome, in that weird, esoteric, Amazonian way models needed to be if they were going to be noticed. It might be nice to photograph her one day. Professionally of course, on a full set. For some reason, Victoria thought it the most important thing in the world to verbally convey her discovery of Chloe's photogenicity. It was just professional courtesy between a photographer and a prospective model, and the least she could do in return for saving her. Her mind was drowning in dizziness as she struggled to find just the right words.

"…You've got a really pretty face for a Gorilla."

Chloe must have been appreciative of the sincere and completely professional compliment, because she actually seemed to speed up, rushing her to the passenger door of her pickup truck and depositing her in the passenger's seat with an aggressive sense of haste. Victoria found her daze overcoming her once more, but was happy the last thing she remembered was Chloe calling her something that she didn't quite hear but was sure abbreviated as VIP.

Max saw to the still dazed Victoria's seatbelt while Chloe rushed to the driver's seat and gunned the ignition. By an incredible stroke of luck, the engine turned over first time and Chloe's rolling tetanus vector screeched out of the parking lot just as David Madsen and his deputies arrived.

"So, regroup at Castle Price?" Chloe asked.

"Mind stopping in the town centre first? I, um, need to grab something from the electronics store." Max asked as Chloe gently brought the pickup to road-legal speed.

"No problem, Maximillian."

There was a strange serenity as Chloe's truck departed the school. Probably because Victoria was still groggy as anything. Max incessantly checked on her, worried the prolonged grogginess was a sign of swelling within her skull or some other condition she'd seen on the dozens of generic hospital dramas that pervaded television. Chloe noticed Max's gentle, if obsessive handling of Victoria and couldn't help but comment.

"Damn, you're awfully friendly with the queen V, Maximus."

"We're not that friendly, we seem to spend most of our time throwing barbs and vitriol – she even told me to 'go fuck my selfie'."

"Wow. Baby's first meme level."

"I know right." Max smiled.

An eyebrow suddenly raised on Max's face, in a moment of clarity Leonard Nemoy would have been proud of. "You're not jealous of Tori are you?"

"No. Well, maybe? I didn't get to see you for five years Max. Now you're all super-charged and even more hella awesome, I kind of don't want to share you. And Tori? Really Max, that sounds like a doll brand or some shit."

"I know. And Tori hates it when I call her that."

Max had looked straight at Victoria each time she'd said 'Tori', searching for a sign she'd been heard. She'd already established that pissing off Victoria seemed the most effective treatment at snapping her back to reality. A few disgruntled scowls passed over her face, which Max interpreted as a sure
sign of recovery.

"But you know, hanging around with her after school, saving her from certain death with your time powers, and nursing her after that beat down. Someone could conceivably wish they were getting some of that action."

Max found it a strange thing, that Chloe with all her no-fucks-given front, could bring out the puppy dog eyes on demand.

"Well, I also saved you with my powers Chloe. And it's after school and I'm hanging with you. As for nursing, you'd have to get yourself beaten down first. For some reason I just can't see that happening."

"Max. I'm not quite as invincible as my publicity suggests. I mean, I would have been shot in the bathroom without your distraction. And when I beat up Nathan, I used some hella dirty shots."

"So did Bruce Lee."

"Ok fine, I'm fucking 'Enter the Dragon' tier. But maybe I'll just throw a fight, just to receive the ministrations of the lovely nurse Max. Hey, if I'm hurt badly enough, I might even need a sponge bath."

"I don't think I've ever seen such a badass dork. Hey, Victoria's coming around."

Victoria returned to lucidity in what she considered a very good approximation of hell. The cabin of some incredibly shitty looking truck, with no air conditioning, and ugly cliché ornaments on the dashboard. Tasteless and artistically destitute graffiti covered the interior of the cabin; she pictured each inane scribble as the thoughts of some crass working class lout, yelling an uneducated and irrelevant opinion at their (struggling to remain) benevolent ruling intelligentsia. After all, that's what they became, if it was Victoria that was reading them. There was even a fucking Illuminati symbol scrawled in the back! She looked left at the vehicle's two other occupants. Great, the Doe-faced Fawn and the Hot Gorilla. This really was hell, and she'd been consigned to spend eternity with the two people who most fucked with her head. Maybe she could just pretend to have fallen into a coma. That way she could avoid any awkward-

"... Hey, Victoria's coming around."

Fuck. And of course Chloe was raring to have a go at her.

"You're looking pretty sick there Victoria – blood splattered Cashmere, and bandaged knuckles. Very Nouveau riche punk. Did you risk an unlicensed manicurist?"

Victoria’s eyes shot daggers at Chloe. She'd just woken up and Max's dumb muscle wanted to tangle? Fine! She knew she couldn't possibly beat her in a fist fight, but was fairly confident in her ability to verbally spar.

"I got them from extending aid to a local charity." Victoria shot back, baiting the trap.

"Oh? Paper cuts from an extreme cheque book mishandle?"

"Someone convinced me to help protect an endangered gorilla."

Chloe’s face showed a hint of momentary annoyance. Victoria awarded herself a point for that round, and another point for managing not to jump out of the moving vehicle. Momentary annoyance on
Chloe's face was occasionally known to have that effect.

"I hear some people find gorillas rather attractive. 'Really pretty' even." Chloe struck back.

Fuck. Had she actually said Chloe was 'really pretty'. Her memory of being carried off was blurry.

"Yes, well, if you get hit on the head hard enough, you'll find anything attractive."

"Good to know." Chloe retorted, casually flexing her knuckles while retaining a grip on the wheel. Victoria shuddered, most of her hoping that she hadn't just given Chloe an idea.

"Victoria was the one who triggered the fire alarm." Max explained, appearing to be acting as a mediator. "It was a really old model switch with a sheet of non-safety glass protecting it. The hammer was missing, so Tori punched through it with her fist."

Chloe raised an eyebrow at Max's answer. Victoria was actually feeling quite smug at that moment. She ignored a cautioned whisper from the back of her head.

"Wow 'Tori', that's actually surprisingly badass."

Being told you were 'badass' by the local incarnation of the word did wonders for the ego. But the voice in the back of Victoria's head was screaming out in warning, as if something akin to a virus were somehow spreading right in front of her but she hadn't consciously realised it.

"So 'Tori', are you feeling any better?"

So nice of them to be worried about her. Though there did seem to be a common thread in how she was being addressed, that made her feel not entirely dissimilar to two pieces of verging-on-critical-mass uranium that were being banged together.

"Because if you aren't, we might have to invest in the optional 'Tori's' craniectomy playset and hospital gown fashion accessory."

"Oh fuck the lot of you."

"Don't be like that Victoria. I'd totally buy a doll based on you. Especially if it was a 'talkie' one that told everyone to fuck themselves in your honey-venom voice."

Victoria disgusted herself by squirming slightly. Max liked her voice. Wait, why did she care about that?

"I'd also buy one, if I was in a position of fiscal stability. I'd certainly take one home and treasure it as my own if I saw it fall off the back of a truck; I'd yank it's chain every night so it could remind me what I should do to my selfie. Come on, say the line for me Vicky!"

They were mocking her. At the same time they both seemed almost desperate to hear her say the line. Victoria relented. After all, she didn't want to let down such adoring fans. And she was technically insulting them.

"...Go fuck your selfie."

Max actually applauded. Chloe wanted to join her but restricted herself to a healthy grin; she was apparently too safe a driver to take her hands off the wheel. Then suddenly, the smile on Chloe's face turned into a cringe, as her phone reported receipt of a single text message.

"Max check who that is." Chloe asked, passing Max her phone. Victoria peered over a shoulder,
more bored and nosy than actually interested.

**Step_Dork:** Chloe, I've got two students down in the Blackwell Parking Lot, one of them knocked out with his head smashed through a teacher's car window, and reports of a "really crappy pickup" fleeing the scene. That sound like anyone we know?

"Wowser, you have a stepdad, and he's one of the Blackwell security guards?"

"It's worse than that, Max. He's THE Blackwell security guard. David Madsen. Fuck sticks, what do we say. He'll want to know why I was there in the first place."

It was now Victoria's turn to crack her knuckles (at least the ones on her one unbandaged hand). To her the answer was obvious. But of course, to Victoria duplicitousness was second nature.

"Tell him you were hoping to reunite with your long estranged friend Max, when you saw Nathan show up in a crazed state and attack everyone. It's all true, so if he bothers to check up a little, it'll likely check out. And if he chooses to think it's the entire answer then that's his problem."

"Yeah do that!" Chloe added. "And Max, try to at least make it sound like me."

Max did her best. The sight of Victoria nearly falling out of her chair, even though seat belted into it, made Chloe insist on reading the message at the next red light, before allowing it to be sent.

**Chloe:** yo step dawg, i was down to meet my swag-muffin OG playa max. was chilling in the lot when some jive-turkey came in and hella fucking stepped to everyone. shit would have got real if I hadn't been there to fucking thrash. no choice but to hella 86 the fuck. hella. :)

She was glad she did. Chloe was shocked and ashamed. She acted decisively, deleted the emoji, appended an extra two hellas to the end and hit send. Victoria's jaw hung open in disbelief.

"He'll just assume I'm mocking him." Chloe clarified.

As the pickup truck arrived in the town centre, Max reflected that she was sandwiched between extremes. To her right, rose scent permeated the air, worn by the prim and always immaculately presented Victoria Chase; on her left, she inhaled the deeper, more earthly tones of Chloe Price: tattooed rebellious punk, serial defenestratrix of the (more) guilty, and oldest friend. Her limited knowledge of science had taught her opposites attract, it had also taught her that they tended to try and annihilate each other if they got too close. And therein laid the problem: she'd been acting as a buffer and moderator between them the whole trip. Though maybe not an entirely unbiased one, Chloe was her oldest friend and Victoria's frustrated reactions to being put in her place were really kind of adorable. Still, she'd prevented either side from completely savaging the other. On the other hand, the banter had continued all the way from school to the town centre. While cute at first, she was kind of tired of being stuck in no man's land facing Chloe and Victoria's respective artillery bombardments.

"This truck is horrid. The next time we have to plan an escape, Max, we'll take my Mercedes."

"Victoria, you're welcome to get out any time and practice your runway walk home."

Victoria pretended not to hear that. She'd worked out Chloe was sufficiently safety obsessed while driving that she was loath to take her hands from the wheel. Without the occasional worry of physical sanction from the punk, she'd become slightly emboldened.
"I really have to wonder whose vehicle is worse. Yours or that filthy boy Warren's."

Chloe felt that unfair. Her truck clearly still had all its windows!

"Well, I think we know whose car would win in a fight." Chloe declared. She was satisfied her truck at least had a certain physical dominance over Warren's blue 1978 Grandma-surplus hatchback.

"If this vehicle crashed into his, the only winners would be the manufacturers of tetanus booster shots." Victoria sniped back.

Ok that was it. Max came to a decision. She'd been tossing up whether to let them in on her communication with her future self. Now she had decided. Partially because she wanted their future input on how to handle information they might get from the stolen sim card, and partially just to quieten them down.

"Look, I've got something I need to tell both of you, and I'm not sure you'll believe me."

"Max, we've seen your superpowers and travelled back in time with you. I'd put money on us finding anything else you have to tell us completely believable."

"So would I. And thanks to Nathan, I actually have some!" Chloe patted her pocket, apparently now proud she'd mugged Blackwell's richest student. Then again, he'd tried to kill both her and Victoria, so she was probably bragging to a fairly safe audience.

Max took a breath.

"I'm being possessed by my future self each time I take a selfie, during which I suffer amnesia. Said future self writes letters and notes to me, advising of future events, ruthlessly manipulating things for god knows what end game, and triggering countless butterfly effects."

Chloe and Victoria looked at each other, then silently each handed Max twenty dollars. Apparently they were capable of agreeing on some things after all.

"It's true! I've got part of a note in my bag."

"Max if your future self is possessing you, then she'll have exactly the same handwriting as you. Showing us the note won't really prove that much."

"Just read it."

…There is one more matter. We'll need to buy a cheap cell phone before the end of today. We should have enough in your bank from that birthday money your parents sent. Somewhere lying at the bottom of our bag, is a sim card. After installing the card in your new phone, you'll find contacts labelled 'one' through 'eight' stored on the card. Text 'three' through 'seven' with the following message:

"Plans have been put on hold. Do not attempt further contact directly or by phone until contacted again from this number. Do not visit dark room."

Don't message the others for now. Don't message 'one' under any circumstances! Set the phone to completely silent operation, put the microphone on zero volume and don't answer any incoming call. Seriously, keep it locked and in your bag so you don't butt-dial accidentally. Them catching on to us will have fatal results. And on that note, destroy this letter after reading it.

"Ah. So that's why we're off to the electronics store. What did the rest of the note say?"
"It just uh, said that the guys running this thing were amoral and sociopathic. As the end indicated, I was supposed to destroy all of it straight after reading, but I decided to keep the message instructions so I could follow them exactly. Oh, and I should try to be friends with Victoria. It definitely said that too."

It also admitted to arranging a improbable accident that nearly killed Victoria, just to ensure her long-term friendship with Max. But she could hardly tell them that.

"Just Victoria?"

Chloe looked like someone had run over her pet cat. To be fair to her someone actually had, but that was a long time ago.

"I don't need to try, to be friends with you Chloe."

Chloe lit up like a Christmas tree, though now Victoria looked a little putout. Wowser, what did she have to do to satisfy them both, declare them both her love slaves?

"And this sim card is in your bag now?" Victoria asked doubtfully.

Max nodded, and quickly rummaged around for it. Unfortunately it was at the very bottom, so she had to completely empty her bag first. Victoria's lap quickly became a dumping ground as the content of Max's camera bag was systematically emptied into it from top to bottom. First the Polaroid camera itself, always at the top in case needed. Then came her pencil case and exercise books for class and journal. There was her hoodie and a few extra cases of film and… there it is, bottom left corner. Future Max had been nice enough to stick it in the plastic bag Max had kept her lunch in, to keep it clean and make it easier to locate. She turned to triumphantly display the sim card to Victoria, only to find the Blackwell Queen looking aghast at the scarlet-soaked item of clothing in her lap. Oh right, that hoodie.

"Max. Is… is this blood?"

Chloe slowed the vehicle as her interest piqued, unwilling to take her eyes off the road if she was proceeding at speed. Only after the speedometer dropped to 15 miles an hour, did she risk turning to glance at the item of clothing. For someone with such an out of control reputation, Chloe seemed a remarkably cautious driver. Of course, Max knew the reason for that; William Price's death in a car accident. Cautious, but completely uncourteous to those following her. Horns sounded from the trailing vehicles in response to her sudden slowdown. A glance in the rear-view mirror as she exited a bend revealed a quartet of impatient motorists: The red sedan, blue hatchback, red hatchback, red station wagon. What is it with people wanting red cars? She casually wound down her window, flipped them off, and gave them no more of her time.

"Kate suggested it was wet paint?" Max finally answered lamely. Victoria was half incredulous, half in shock.

"Paint doesn't smell like this. What the hell did you do?"

Victoria was really out of sorts. Max's psychotic look from back in Jefferson's class came flooding back into her mind, and now it had a context. The person she was sitting next to, all five foot five of her, had viciously assaulted someone. She'd taken what she needed from their immobilised and probably dying body, and then nonchalantly wiped any trace of her actions, sans the blood on her jersey, from existence. That differed from Chloe, who might severely beat or even shoot someone as a matter of self defence, but didn't care to instigate, and couldn't hide what she'd done. Beneath that shy hipster front Max put on was something powerful and dangerous. But also something that had
saved her life at least twice, and insisted on trying to save Chloe's before she'd even known it was her old friend. That had to suggest her motives were noble didn't it? Victoria felt conflicted and panicked, and it really annoyed her that Chloe only seemed to have a casual interest in this. Victoria felt she was the only one who understood what Max could potentially get away with, what she might already be doing.

A slight tremor ran through Victoria's hands as her reservoir of fear neared overflow. Max raised her own hands in a calming motion; at that moment she wanted nothing more than to reassure her terrified rival and new friend. This proved singularly unproductive: Victoria's eyes bulged as Max's arms extended, mistaking the calming motion for an attempt to rewind time.

"Don't you dare!"

Chloe decided she'd better pull the car to the side of the road. Something strange was going on, and she needed to be a part of it. The four cars behind them gratefully took advantage and passed.

"Tori, what the fuck is this about?"

"Max's shirt is soaked completely in someone's blood."

"No. 'This don't you dare' crap. That part actually sounded important."

Right. Of course Chloe Price wouldn't think a bloody shirt was the important part. Chloe Price probably dealt with blood-soaked shirts every time she did her laundry.

"Any time Max brings up her right hand, I worry about her using time powers to erase my memory or something. Maybe something worse, cover up something horrible she's done so she can do it over and over with no one the wiser. Honestly, I don't think you fully understand what she's capable of now. She could stab someone – like she's already done, then soak up most of their blood onto something in her possession, and walk off. After rewinding time, everyone would see her victim suddenly collapse, somehow exsanguinated without a scratch on her body."

Chloe looked down on Max with a rather perverse sense of pride. Nice work, you've legitimately terrified the school's queen bitch without even trying. Though, truth be told, she was also hella worried about the bloody clothes and the idea of Max stabbing people herself. She just couldn't show it in front of the 'casual crew'. The first mate and captain never argued in front of the crew. They always had each other's backs. She'd get an explanation out of Max later, after things had calmed down. Max noticed Chloe's gaze and smiled apologetically back. They always had a way of knowing what the other was thinking. Chloe returned her attention to Victoria. She couldn't stand to see a girl locked in actual terror, even one some might say was deserving of it. She'd have to do something to reassure her. Of course, one solution immediately sprung to Chloe's mind, and it involved temporarily rendering Max's right hand unusable. God, she was sorry for what she was about to put Max through.

Committing to her plan, the trim, blue haired Amazon leaned over Max until her head was inches from Victoria's. She placed her hand in intimate contact with Victoria's thigh, gently grazing the underside of the Blackwell Queen's stockings with her fingertips. The leer she gave made Victoria shudder. In Victoria's mind the dangers posed by Max and Chloe were almost opposites: the scalpel and the sledge hammer. Victoria imagined Max might manipulate a scenario, trick people or otherwise set off a series of events to get what she wanted, at the worst use it to get into position to launch a surprise attack and then get rid of the evidence, like what probably happened back in Jefferson's class. Chloe could just march in, wreck most people stupid enough to get in her way, and take what she wanted. And right now, based on her hand location, she seemed to want access to Victoria's rear end. Victoria's mind raced. She imagined countless lurid scenarios where this monster...
with the face of a goddess overpowered her, and gingerly gnawed her lip in nervous contemplation of what would come after. What utter debasement she might be forced to endure and even learn to enjoy as her mind broke under the relentless assault of-

"Excuse me a minute Tori, but this is for your own piece of mind."

And with that, Chloe casually lifted one side of Victoria by the thigh, placed Max's right hand beneath her nether cheek, then gently lowered Victoria back on top of Max's hand.

"She can't raise her hand if you're sitting on it."

Chloe tried to gauge Victoria and Max's reactions to her ingenious piece of lateral thinking. On Victoria's part, there was mostly stunned disbelief, a little outright scandalisation, and a hint of disappointment. Disappointment? What the hell was she hoping might happen? Max just blushed slightly, she clearly found the situation a little awkward. She almost felt Chloe might be living vicariously through her.

"Chloe can't she just hold my hand, or something?"

"Not while she's holding all the stuff from your bag Max. You can't safely hold that many things with one hand, and we can't risk someone damaging your camera, can we?"

Well there was a certain tenuous logic to that. And to Victoria's surprise, she did breathe easier with a constant reminder as to Max's hand location. At least until she realised that possibly the most powerful thing on the planet was, essentially, copping a feel of her fundament. That had her feeling breathless for slightly different reasons, and on seeing that Chloe was suddenly struck with a deeply philosophical question.

"Victoria, do you think there are many parallel universes out there running simultaneously with our own, where different past choices or random effects have led to a different present."

Victoria found it a little difficult to philosophise about the universe with so much of its power resting beneath her, but she didn't have that 3.9 (hopefully soon to be 4.0) GPA for nothing. In fact she was actually rather glad of the distraction from the all powerful fawn hoof in her hind quarters.

"I choose not to believe that. It would mean you might as well be as self centred as possible and maximise your own happiness with no regard to anyone else, knowing that in some other concurrent universe, there's a nice guy version of yourself doing the opposite. After all, when summed across all universes, your actions would have no bearing on anything. There'd always be a universe dealing with the consequences of you being happily selfish, and another with you being miserable and selfless, and the only choice you'd have (assuming you had any at all) was whether you wanted to be the happy one."

Chloe appreciated the well thought out answer, but really just wanted to know if there was a universe where either Max's powers were in her left hand or the US had the driver's seats on the right. It seemed that Max had only been half right, thinking that at that moment Chloe was living vicariously through her. Fundamental issues aside, Chloe and Max both found it a bit of a worry that Victoria considered herself to be unselfish. They dreaded to think what a completely selfish Victoria might act like, given the behaviour of the allegedly selfless model. In any case, with Victoria sedated by jab to the rear, Max continued her story.

"I told you my future self's been taking over my body. Shortly after she did for the first time, I had Kate point out that my arm was completely covered in something blood-like. It probably happened at the same time that sim card got into-"
"So you think it was your future self that murdered someone-"

"That's nowhere near enough blood to guarantee the person was killed."

Victoria found the casual confidence with which Chloe said that was more than slightly unnerving. She got the impression that, not only did Chloe Price deal with blood soaked clothes on a daily basis, she also knew exactly how much blood loss was necessary to prove dangerous. That was, of course, Chloe's intention. Treat the situation with a little casual contempt, and maybe Victoria would lay off her first mate. And of course Chloe knew how much blood could be safely removed from the body -- she'd donated blood a few times, and the amount that had soaked Max's shirt barely looked more than the amount taken during a donation.

"Did a potentially fatal injury to someone," Victoria corrected, "then used their incapacity to rob them and erased the entire event from time?"

"Yes."

Damn. That was some admission.

"Oh, so we don't need to worry about you going crazy, just your future self who occasionally possesses your body. That makes me feel so much better."

"I'm not sure my future self is that crazy. Just strongly driven."

Victoria audibly huffed.

"So there's something that would drive you to go around stabbing people? That's really reassuring!"

"Actually there's at least two things off the top of my head. If I knew, really knew someone was going to hurt Chloe, or maybe even you Victoria. I mean I'd like to say that I'm not sure what I'd be capable of then, but I think we've been shown-"

Chloe took full advantage of having pulled over the car, immediately hugging Max. Victoria found herself in another one of her Max induced states. Stupid heroic Max, call her out on a possible murder and she's all 'for you it would be justified homicide'. Victoria's mind seemed intent on curating the stuttering mess of Max's actual dialogue into something rather suave. No doubt her eventual recollection would have Max give them both roses, and introduce herself as 'Caulfield, Max Caulfield'.

"So how does the whole 'steal the sim card' work, if you reverse time after taking it?" Chloe asked. She hadn't seen as much of Max's powers as Victoria, so was still a little confused as to the specifics of what they allowed.

"Items already in my possession stay in my possession, So rewinding after mugging someone lets me keep anything I've taken from them.

Chloe's mind quickly began examining the logical extension to how Max stole the sim card without leaving evidence, and its capacity for possible monetary gain. She couldn't help it, she owed money to a dangerous person. It must have shown on Chloe's face, because Max immediately pre-empted her.

"No, we're not holding up a bank, then using my powers to eliminate the consequences."

"Ok, you can't have used your powers because Victoria's sitting on your hand, but how else could you know-"
"The true power of best friendship: I know how dumb you can sometimes be."

Victoria had also been thinking about the sim card theft, though her thoughts were the same that had occurred to Max earlier.

"Max, if you took the card from someone in that class, then that class contains one of these psychos."

Always one to court controversy, whether intentionally or unintentionally, Chloe immediately chimed in with what she considered to be obvious.

"Well it's going to be the class's teacher, right? The slick photo guy-" 

"Mr Jefferson?"

"I mean it's hardly going to be students running a conspiracy. They'd have to replace them each time they graduate, and some teens can be a little emotionally unstable." Chloe seemed to see no irony in her pointing that out. "Way more likely to be an adult."

Needless to say, both Max and Victoria experienced a certain degree of shock at that. It was a difficult feeling, being told your hero and role model was probably a criminal. For some reason Max never considered the teacher, instead worrying more about the students. Perhaps because she'd suffered a degree of harassment and bullying from students in the past, while her teachers (and Mr Jefferson in particular), always tried to encourage her. Victoria, of course, wanted to outright reject anything that besmirched her beloved 'Mark', having practically built him up as a cornerstone of her world. Of course today Max had shown up with a metaphoric bulldozer, sat Victoria on her lap in the driver's seat, and dauntlessly ploughed through a fair portion of her world (and her understanding of reality), and that made her a little more amiable to the suggestion. She still vehemently opposed the idea, just at a Canadian hockey fan level of aggression rather than a North Korean 'dear leader' devotee level of aggression. Which, admittedly, wasn't much of a de-escalation.

"Perhaps we'll find out soon." Victoria noted caustically, trying to remain completely confident it wasn't Mark Jefferson, in the face of an entirely reasonable argument that it was fairly likely to be. "There may be messages on that phone's number, waiting to be received. They might tip the identity of the sim owner or the contacts."

Shortly thereafter, Chloe found a disabled bay in the town's shopping centre to illegally park in. Max set off to buy a phone leaving Victoria and Chloe alone together, and Victoria's left buttock feeling surprisingly lonely.

Victoria and Chloe sat in the truck's cabin in silence. Both of them seemed to realise this was a rather volatile situation. Without Max there to act as a moderating force, who knew what could happen? Both made eye contact once, but quickly looked away. Victoria downward, and Chloe out the window. They had the same thing on their minds. Something they'd been desperately wanting to share with someone, anyone, since being pulled into the whole time business. And they were probably the only two people in the world who they could share it with, who'd understand. Mercifully, Chloe eventually just came out and said what she'd been thinking.

"So, have you done it with her too?"

Chloe's voice conveyed a certain nervous excitement. Victoria's eyebrows arched and her face became incandescent pink.

"I meant being taken back in time with her, dude."
"Oh." Victoria seemed rather grateful for the clarification. "Yes, twice."

"It was such an incredible experience, wasn't it? Gently linking hands and literally having yourself pulled into another world. Her world. Watching as she literally wipes your problems from existence. Then gently guides you back to reality."

Victoria was dumbfounded. She hardly expected such a flowery and romanticised description from Chloe Price of all people. It also seemed to be the polar opposite of her own experience in shared time travel with Max. Chloe quickly picked up on Victoria's scepticism.

"What was it like for you then?"

Victoria tried her best to explain what she'd experienced. Recalling the rather extreme nature, and background behind both of her rewinds took its toll though, and she ended up a little less articulate than her usual eloquent self.

"It was fast, and rough."

Chloe nodded enthusiastically. Hoping for something slightly less concise, she urged Victoria to continue.

"We literally had to cling together, and I felt completely out of control; it was like a rollercoaster and I was completely at the mercy of her power. At the end it was clumsy, and more than slightly awkward; we actually bumped our heads when we fell on top of each other. She was gagging me the first time-"

"Victoria, are you sure we're talking about the same thing?"

Chloe immediately regretted interrupting. It seemed she'd cut her off just as she got to some rather intriguing details. But what she was described seemed so removed from her own trip back through time.

"Well if your experience actually did go how you describe it, I can't help but feel slightly jealous." Victoria noted.

"For some reason I seem to feel the same way."

A second moment of silence pervaded the truck.

"Now, what were you saying about Max gagging you?"

"Alright, here it is."

Max jumped back in the car while proudly displaying a rather cheap looking phone. As she clambered into the vehicle, and over Victoria to reach the truck's middle seat, she became aware that a strange mood seemed to pervade the vehicle. Both Victoria and Chloe were slightly flustered, and wouldn't explain why. Whatever. They had more important things to attend to. Max quickly installed the stolen sim into her new 'burner' phone, and powered it up.

**Ten unread messages.**

**One missed call from contact "Three".**

Damn. Ten unread messages in the space between the card's theft and now? Whoever this psycho
was, they must have contacts that were almost as annoying as Warren. Max brought up the new messages. As the note had suggested, each contact was referred to by a single digit number rather than a name.

**Five:** Got the supplies you wanted. In storage for now, need to transport to dark room ASAP.

**Two:** I left a little surprise for your not so little problem, just as one requested. I can't guarantee it'll do the job though. If you and one want your problems solved reliably, you really need more hands-on solutions.

**Three:** RESPOND DAMN IT. YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO BE IN CHARGE WHILE ONE'S AWAY. SECURITY'S AFTER ME

**Seven:** Three's gone off the handle, is blowing up my inbox. Someone needs to help him, get him under control.

**Three:** FUCKING ANSWER.

**Five:** Saw three walking around campus, looked even more messed up than usual. Do we need to do something?

**Two:** I've been bombarded by messages from your obnoxious Scooby gang, all begging for help. Kindly remind them I don't answer to them, and only temporarily to you. Now, shall I find out who these witnesses are, and give them the same treatment I gave our last problem?

**Two:** And try to rein in that entitled fool or his old man won't be happy.

**Three:** FUCK YOU ALL THEN. I'll take care of those feminazi cunts myself.

**Seven:** Three's threatening to attack some girl. Don't know who, thinks they're a radical feminist lesbian or something. You don't think he's going after the school librarian?

"'Feminazi...?' That sounds an awful lot like someone-" 

"Yes, Max." Victoria sighed. "It's probably Nathan. So this is what you meant when you asked if he was part of something bigger?"

Max nodded.

"Does this mean Nathan's whole family's involved? You said that in Arcadia Bay, no one was bigger than the Prescotts, Tori."

"It's quite possible Max. Some of the other texts seem to mention his 'old man', Sean Prescott."

But the three of them really weren't immediately interested in Nathan's messages. He'd have been grabbed by security and sent to the police station by now, or maybe the nearest hospital? Chloe had really let him have it. Either way he wasn't much of a threat. Instead, contact 'two' seemed a far more immediate concern.

"The witnesses this 'two' guy is talking about. They're- they're us aren't they."

Max and Victoria both felt their faces pale, as the blood drained from them. Chloe wasn't quite so badly affected. She already had at least one person threatening to come after her, so this was almost
more of the same.

"There's a hit man thinking of coming after us?" Victoria moaned. "Their texting does seem a bit top-drawer, but still, an actual hit man coming after us?"

"Wowser."

"It doesn't sound like 'two' actually knows who we are though. If we take their words literally, they're still trying to find that out. And this 'seven' asshole thinks Max is the fucking librarian." Chloe noted, managing to maintain a modicum of calm, a calm that was tested when Victoria fatalistically identified the real problem.

"It's only a matter of time. They'll send some lawyer to talk to Nathan at the station, if they haven't already. He'll give them all the information."

"Do we message 'two' then?" Chloe asked, determined to find a thread of hope. She'd just gotten Max back in her life after so long. She wasn't about to let some asshole inflict tragedy on them straight after that had happened. "Seems he wants our man's input before he comes looking for us."

"I really don't see anything else we could do to stop him." Victoria agreed

"But the future note said not to message anyone else for now." Max couldn't believe her future self, probably privy to the consequences of any actions on their part, wouldn't have given them a specific instruction to message 'Two' if doing so was in their best interest, as they had done for three through seven. Damn, it was frustrating that 'Future Max' had decided to drip feed them information, instead of sharing the entire future with them.

"Guys, we should check the voice mail on the missed call before we decide anything."

Max called up the message library. A sweet female voice of badly pasted together words informed them that a single missed call had resulted in a message being left by contact three.

"Why don't you answer! I need help, I've fucked up. There are pictures of me holding a gun, and witnesses. Then there's this mousy little feminazi dyke. Hair even look a little like a Kraut helmet. She's indoctrinated my only friend to testify against me. What am I going to do? What the fuck am I going to do!?"

The shrill panicking voice was most definitely Nathan's. Chloe decided she'd been wrong. There was one person she wouldn't mind being left in a state of abject terror after all.

"So students are involved in Max's conspiracy. Then the bad guy Max took the phone from might be anyone in photography class, after all." Victoria immediately declared, desperate to exonerate her hero.

"The one Max stole the sim card off does seem to be calling a lot of the shots, lady V. My money's still on an adult. His kid's club are probably there to act as drug mules or something."

"We don't know what the hell the conspiracy is about. Until then, speculating why high school seniors might be involved is pointless."

"OK, let's at least send the message we were told to."

Zero: Plans have been put on hold. Do not attempt further contact directly or by phone until contacted again from this number. Do not visit dark room.
With a sense of trepidation, Max sent the fraudulent message.

"So, do we send that other message to 'two'. Try to get him not to come after us?"

Max thought. It seemed obvious at first glance – telling this idiot not to come after them would make them all a lot safer. But on further evaluation, she could see how doing so might go very wrong. She imagined 'two ' immediately demanding a verbal, or worse, a video conversation to discuss the matter more thoroughly. If they refused, the bastards would probably immediately assume the phone had been stolen. If they agreed, they'd be made instantly.

"Let's hold off on that for now. The future note did say not to send any messages to him for the moment."

"Alright, enough cloak and dagger, time to get moving. Next stop, Castle Price."

As Chloe keyed the ignition, she watched with interest as Victoria, seemingly acting on autopilot, began to gently take Max's hand and place it on her seat.

"Five more minutes Max. Just think of England."

Max quickly worked out what Victoria was talking about – she intended to keep Max's hand under control for the full twenty one minutes they had established Max could rewind for. That would stop her from erasing their conversation about Max's future self from existence, and ensure her and Chloe remembered all the details, the admission that her future self was a touch 'driven'. Max decided not to remind Victoria she could have rewound as soon as she'd gotten out of the car to get her phone. The illusion of control would keep her calm. Still, she couldn't help but feel the way Victoria was about to restrain her hand was gratuitous and no longer necessary. They'd long since put everything back in Max's bag, so Victoria could easily spare a hand to restrain Max's. There was no need for another area of her anatomy to be involved.

Victoria realised this moments later, and quickly pretended that simply holding her hand was always her intention. Though to be honest, holding hands seemed to fluster Victoria almost as much as the defacto butt grab she'd received earlier. It seemed she wasn't used to anything that could be construed as a public display of affection, on any level. From holding her hand, to holding her anywhere else. Chloe turned away grinning in amusement and began to drive.

After about a minute on the road, both Chloe and Victoria noticed Max glancing in the passenger Mirror, looking rather concerned. Well, deciding not to try and persuade the hit man was a big call, and it would be completely understandable if she was having second thoughts about it. They both prepared themselves to offer her further council, but the question asked wasn't quite what they'd expected.

"My hair doesn't really look like a Nazi helmet, does it?"

The Price household sat silhouetted against the low afternoon sun as Chloe's truck pulled into the driveway. Max smiled as she noted how little it had changed: only two things were different from how she remembered it five years ago. The addition of an American flag flying on a diagonal poll from the front (evidently someone living there was staunchly patriotic), and a three-quarter finished coat of blue paint on the front of the house (evidently someone living there was a little lazy). Victoria was more judgemental, sarcastically referring to it as "delightfully rustic and humble" in honeyed tones of superior arrogance. Then again, Victoria said almost everything in a honeyed tone of superior arrogance. It was one of the things you either loved or hated about her. Often both.
As they entered the ground floor hallway, Chloe had an urge to bring out her phone and review that picture she'd taken with Juliet. She was no expert, but felt it really was quite good. The actual artistic merit, not just the fact that she'd reduced Juliet to a near-whimpering mess within ten seconds. Chloe had found herself a little jealous on the last leg of their car trip: Max and Victoria had started talking about the more technical aspects of photography like a couple of geeks, and Chloe had practically nothing to contribute. She was sort of hoping the photo would shift some attention back her way, maybe Max could give her a professional critique, or perhaps even ask her to explain how she'd made Juliet adopt the face in the photo! There was only one way to find out.

Chloe rammed the phone into Max's hands as they reached the foot of the stairs. Max glanced down at the phone's screen, and a second later her jaw close to unhinged.

"I need your honest opinion on this."

Max's honest first opinion was dumbstruck silence. Her second honest opinion was that a deep void of emptiness had opened inside her, and was threatening to swallow her whole. Her third was to note that, as Victoria had gone to pains to point out, she could actually make Juliet dead any time she wanted, and no one would ever be able to prove who was responsible. She sighed. So this was how Chloe got those lipstick smears. Max knew she had to have gotten up to something a little bit amorous, but to be directly confronted by a photo rather graphically detailing the act? That was something she just wasn't ready for.

Max glared again at the image. Juliet was tall, curvaceous and confident. Everything that Max wasn't. Why the hell was Chloe even showing this to her? She sighed, an answer already in mind: because her best friend had taken what was by most reasonable considerations a very good shot, and really wanted to share it with her professional artist friend and get her considered opinion on it. It's just it was a very good shot of Chloe and someone else in a moment of intimacy. Wowser, this was going to be painful.

"It's… it's really good, artistically wise."

Brilliant start.

"I like how you used your tattoo sleeve to frame the bottom corner."

Ok good, discuss the part that's least painful to look at. Now be brave and say something about their, uh, 'interaction'.

"The fact that most of you is hidden, both outright or by shadow play focuses attention on the… other participant and makes you look almost predatory; this is reinforced by how the… the neck of the other participant is thrown back and exposed."

Max could barely stand to keep looking at the bloody thing. She was proud her eyes hadn't gotten watery. Still, Chloe wouldn't be expecting much more. Perhaps if she just try to end with something positive, maybe a commentary on how it's empowering and progressive.

"The gasp of…" She found herself having to pause to relieve a choking sensation from her throat "…gasp of pleasure on the other participant's… Juliet's… face effectively sells a sense of consent and pleasure in spite of the predatory framing, which is a welcome addition."

Max didn't even look at the photo when she said that last part. She was just pleased she hadn't started crying. She looked away from a beaming Chloe, who was acting just like she used to when she came home with A+ written all over her assignments. Max knew Chloe would read her silly emotional state almost instantly if she got a good look at her face, and didn't want to ruin what seemed to be a
rare moment of happiness for her with petty jealousy. It was at that moment Max caught sight of Victoria. The Blackwell Queen had lagged behind them a few paces, as her interest had been drawn by one of the Price family photos hanging on the wall. Max's photo critique seemed to have drawn her attention though, Victoria was always happy to stamp her own opinion on anything photography related. She glanced at Max, and for a second seemed to register her emotional distress, before turning back to the price photo like nothing had happened.

"Is this what Joyce Price from the two whales diner used to look like?" Victoria inquired. The photo in question showed a much younger Joyce and William Price together.

Max nodded in the affirmative, still bravely fighting back tears.

"She has an uncanny resemblance to Juliet Watson."

Now that Victoria had mentioned it, there did seem to be a certain distinct... similarity. Chloe suddenly froze when she heard that. Her face turned pale and for a moment she was convinced her stomach was about to retch its content back up. Max looked on, conflicted: while loathed to see Chloe in any state of discomfort, some small part of her couldn't help but think Chloe deserved this for her distinct lack of tact. Of course Victoria had a somewhat different reaction. She was immediately drawn in like a hyena to carrion. Victoria's eyes latched onto the image displayed on the phone's screen and she displayed a sadistic smirk.

"Oh, so you set a tongue record with someone who looks just like your Mom."

While Chloe debated whether an immediate application of mouthwash would make her feel better, Victoria quickly took possession of the phone from Max and turned her full attention toward it. It felt good to pay 'The Price' back a little for the crap she'd been given in the car. And more than that, Victoria felt strangely pleased that Chloe had been punished for upsetting Max. She couldn't understand why she felt like that though. It definitely wasn't like she'd brought up the Juliet-Joyce resemblance in response to seeing Max's sadness, or anything.

In spite of the success of her pseudo-incest observation, Victoria couldn't help but also offer her own 'proper' critique of the photo. Max had already given a proper opinion on it, so of course the class's best student had to do so too. She chewed over the image and quickly found herself chewing her small lower lip. It was a rather good image, both artistically and otherwise, but Max had already said as much. That meant she had to offer a slightly contrary opinion on principle.

"I can't help but feel a little disappointed." Victoria began. Max shot her an 'are you cereal' glance. Max felt it was a great shot, it was just that, for her, it was also an utterly heartbreaking one.

"Your face deserves far better than to be consigned to the background, especially when it's done so in favour of someone as plain as Juliet. Next time take your rightful place in the forefront and find someone more worthy of sharing the frame with. Aside from that, Max's commentary adequately covered the relevant technical accomplishments. It's a good photo."

If Chloe wasn't mistaken, she'd just been given a personal compliment, wrapped in a mixed critique, piggy-backing on a putdown aimed at her collaborator, and prefaced by an insult. It was difficult to know what to think, but from Victoria, it probably counted as a thumbs up.

"One day you'll have to tell me how many shots you took randomly to get this one good one."

And she also somehow knew that they'd done the photography equivalent of Shakespeare via monkeys on typewriters. How the fuck did she know that? Still, taking a lot of photos was a valid photographic technique wasn't it? 'Photographers' always seemed to take a bunch of shots without
even really looking through the viewfinder in the movies, didn't they? Like that Alyssa Milano one, 'Embrace of the Vampire'. And she'd shown her artistic chops by selecting the best photo out of the fuckton they'd taken.

Damn it, Chloe, why do you suddenly care about photography? Before she decided 'fuck school', Chloe had been a science nerd, not an art nerd. So why care? Because Max cared about photography, and Victoria was grabbing all her attention. Damn, it was frustrating not being as dumb as you acted. It meant you actually knew the answers to the stupid questions you kept asking yourself. Chloe decided she needed to just kick back and unwind. Use the last of her weed to purge the alleged similarity between Juliet and her Mom from her mind. She bounded up the stairs, two at a time, leaving Max and Victoria in her wake and struggling to catch up.

Max stepped into Chloe's room for the first time in five years, and it was like she'd been transported to another world. The sheer energy of the room: the graffiti, the warm sunlight filtering through a desecrated US flag hung in front of a window, the mix-CD of indie music Chloe had just started (loudly) playing, the fact that there were posters everywhere displaying what Max was sure were proud, confident, empowered women celebrating their bodies and femininity, and more than anything, that Chloe was in it. To Max, it was like that moment Dorothy stepped through her door into OZ and everything turned to technicolour. Though at the same time, it felt like she'd come home.

"It's… it's like having stepped over the rainbow." Max whispered to Victoria.

Victoria nodded in agreement.

"There's more gay concentrated in this one room than in the combined payroll of every home depot on the planet. I'm almost worried that my cardigan will spontaneously burst into flannel."

That really wasn't what Max had meant, and Max didn't much appreciate Victoria's crude stereotyping either.

"People's clothing doesn't just become flannel, Tori." Max noted acidly. "The only way you could think that is if you were always wearing flannel, and just didn't notice."

Well, this was turning into a real afterschool special.

Victoria rolled her eyes. "As if anyone could go around without noticing they took fashion tips from Richard Karn, Max."

Chloe jumped on her bed and laid back, not bothering to take her boots off first. Victoria sneered at the uncouth display, and decided that she'd never let Chloe display such slovenliness when she was in Victoria's room. At least Max knew better than to do that. She was nice and domesticated and well groomed and why was she even thinking about bringing Chloe and Max back to her room? Chloe withdrew a joint she'd hidden in her pillowcase, and proceeded to light up. A few puffs later, she caught Victoria watching intently.

"Don't judge me Tori, I've had a hella tough day with nearly being killed, finding out a hit man is considering targeting us, and having locked lips with someone who apparently looks just like my mom used to, and I just need—"

"I was wondering if I could bum a drag? That sounds a lot like my day. Except for kissing your mother's lookalike, of course."

Chloe silently shuffled over to the centre of the bed, then patted the spot next to her. Victoria cautiously sat on the edge, removing her boots. Nice to see she took the 'be the change you wish to
see' quote she displayed outside her dorm room seriously. Chloe exhaled a cloud of smoke into the air before passing the joint to Victoria. Victoria took it in hand and inhaled gently. Everything about her had to be refined and elegant, even her illicit drug use.

"Maximus, you want some?"

"Only some of the bedspace," Max answered, sitting down on the opposite side of the bed to Victoria. There really weren't that many other comfortable places in Chloe's room to rest. "Hanging around you two has been enough of a trip today."

Before lying down, Max elected not to follow Victoria's prim and proper example and remove her converse sneakers. Chloe was clearly a 'good bad' influence on her.

"I'd never turn down a lady wanting to get in bed with me."

Max gently elbowed Chloe in the ribs.

"Dork."

The three of them lay in the bed, staring at the ceiling. Fortunately Chloe had written graffiti all over it, and the walls, so they actually had things to look at. Still, 'hole to another universe' and 'just gotta let go' weren't the most riveting of prose. Max wondered if the joint Chloe and Victoria were periodically passing to one another let them find some hidden meaning behind it all. With boredom setting in, Max must have been feeling a tad masochistic and destructive. Probably some lingering effect of that fucking photo Chloe had shown her. She asked something certain to solicit divisive opinions.

"Hey, what was Rachel like?"

Victoria and Chloe looked at each other. Max could almost feel lightning crackle between them for an instant. Clearly the correct answer was 'polarising'. Perhaps it was a good thing that they'd started to self-medicate before she'd posed that question. Then a smile took hold of Chloe, as a wave of nostalgia overcame any care on her part about Victoria's alternate opinions.

"Rachel was magnificent, almost perfect really. She was smart, good at pretty much everything she tried. And she had this glorious petite body that was-"

"-a lot like Max's." Victoria noted incisively. Max flinched. She knew this was a risk when she first asked the question. She was going to be compared with Rachel.

"Well yeah, I guess. They probably fit the same clothes. Most of them anyway."

Most of them. Max had heard this all from Stella, along with that creepy rant about Mr Jefferson. She imagined Rachel as a lot like her, just better, prettier where it counted.

"Rachel did kind of have a big ass, so her jeans might be a little loose."

Yep she knew it. Wait. A big ass? Somehow that made Max feel a little better. Or did it? Max had never really figured out what the socially desirable form of that part of the body was. It seemed it was a no-win area of the anatomy.

"She'd be fine," Victoria counselled. "Rachel was always wearing jeans at least one size too tight. It was hilarious watching her try to get into them after PE."

"I appreciated the end result of the effort." Chloe noted.
"And I appreciated the entertainment value of the effort itself." Victoria shot back. "Chloe, I know you have a rose-tinted memory of Rachel, but she really wasn't the perfect little angel everyone thought she was."

"I don't think I ever thought she was an angel – not in that sense anyway. More like your own sexy mini-devil."

"Good, because she often behaved like a Cerberus."

There was a brief pause, and Victoria cradled her head in frustration.

"That's a hell-spawned, multi-faced bitch, in case you didn't know."

"Oh? Like you in other words?"

"Yes. She was like me. Only better at it and more cruel."

A more cruel version of Victoria. Jesus, what did Rachel do, skin living puppies in front of the kids at a preschool?

"Rachel had a way of using people and then discarding them when she was done. I saw her pull it on Nathan. She even tried it out on… some other people I know. She won their trust, and sometimes more, then took things from them. This one girl I knew, she took their money and more under false pretences and didn't look back."

Chloe desperately wanted to counter that, defend her Rachel, but something stopped her. It was probably the realisation that what Victoria had described was rather familiar. If fact, it sounded an awful lot like her and Rachel's plan with Frank. Well, except that Rachel had convinced Chloe to borrow his money instead of doing it herself. An awkward silence ensued, eventually broken by Victoria standing up and walking to Chloe's desk. The golden hour was setting in, and Victoria suddenly felt a desire to stare whimsically at the sun set through the nearby window. She winced as soon as she sat at Chloe's desk. Her chair was awful. Hard and cheap. It had even been more comfortable sitting on Max's hand than this monstrosity.

"You know Chloe, for such a poor person who's attracted to people that look like her mother, has such a rubbish desk chair, and is constantly throwing people through windows in asinine fights, you're actually rather cool."

Chloe actually thought most people found her cool because she threw people though windows.

"My fights are never asinine Tori. Chloe Price fights for justice."

"You managed to fuck up my party in a fairly unjust manner."

"God. I only did that because someone on your VIP guest list tried to spike some girl's drink."

Well, that put Chloe wrecking Victoria's party in a slightly different light. Still, Victoria was sceptical. She needed details to believe.

"Really, which girl?"

"I never got her name."

"Then what did she look like?"

"…I never really looked at her face either."
"So glad you're living up to your graffiti." Victoria noted, while gesturing to a section of the wall where 'Think like a man' had been scrawled.

"It's not really my fault. Look, she had the most incredible legs you've ever seen, in these hella tight cut-off jean shorts! No one could resist."

"Oh. Taylor Christensen then." Max said absentmindedly.

Victoria nodded in sage agreement. Chloe couldn't help but feel slightly aggrieved. Both Max and Victoria had identified the girl in question off little more information than "has great legs", yet apparently she was the perv.

"I've been told that almost every girl in Blackwell's been distracted by those, as well as the boys." Victoria clarified. "The way the lovable slut prances around. It's really no big deal."

For the first time ever, Chloe genuinely felt bad about getting herself expelled.

"So as I was saying, I noticed that this Taylor and her legs were both distracted by what I'm sure was a riveting conversation with you, 'Tori', when this prick walked past and tried to pour something in her Champaign glass. The EMTs later found the container and passed in onto the police. It had GHB residue, which is why I was never prosecuted for, um, the well documented result that had the ambulance called out in the first place. Police hushed everything up for the since his family was rich, and friends with the even richer."

"Well documented result?" Max asked.

"She did what she always does Max." Victoria literally tossed her top-of-the-line smartphone across the room toward the Max and Chloe. Max really didn't understand how someone could just casually toss over a grand worth of electronics around like that and risk damaging it, but apparently Victoria could literally toss money around like it was nothing. Fortunately, Chloe safely hauled it in without blinking, before handing it off to Max. A youtube video entitled "Arcadia Asshole pays 'The Price'" sat on its screen waiting to be played.

"I've actually only done that twice, well three times, once you count Nathan." Chloe said defensively, cringing slightly at the sound of shattering glass and sound of her victim screaming played through the phone's speaker. "And he was fine. The-"

"Yes, yes. The rose bush broke his fall. Chloe, do either of your parents drive a crappy people mover, marginally better condition than Warren's?"

Marginally better? Victoria was awfully judgmental. Joyce's car had all its windows too.

"That's Joyce's, but the step-tator's borrowing it while he's fixing his surrogate peni-, er, muscle car. He's in the driveway isn't he. Fuck. Get in the closet."

Confusion spread across Max and Victoria's faces.

"Look, every time he catches someone new in here and smells bud, he goes mental. Accuses them of being a dealer."

Without another word Victoria found herself unceremoniously bundled into the closet. Max joined her shortly thereafter, though Victoria was convinced Chloe had handled the smaller girl with far greater care. Victoria was pushed hard against the back wall, Max ended up pushed hard against her, and the door slid shut in front of them. The change in light levels made it difficult to see, and Victoria tried shuffling to her left a little in an attempt to find more space. She recoiled slightly and shuddered
in surprise as something brushed her nose, and the look that momentarily adorned her face wouldn't have been out of place in a horror film. Their eyes finally adjusted enough to the lighting so they could discern what had startled Victoria. It was a plaid shirt, hanging inches from her.

"It's OK Victoria, you aren't wearing it."

Victoria ground her teeth in annoyance.

The door to Chloe's room suddenly burst open, and the large muscular frame of David Madsen charged in, already aggrieved and complaining.

"I thought we had talked about blasting that punk shit."

"Dude, its indie rock."

"Whatever, I don't really give a damn. Chloe, one of my guns is missing. You don't happen to know anything about that, do you?"

Madsen didn't let Chloe answer. He suddenly registered a pungent scent in the air, and his eyes quickly located the dregs of Chloe's joint, still smouldering in her ash tray.

"And you're smoking grass in here again? Jesus, Chloe I'm the head of security at Blackwell. If people find out I've got any drugs in my home whatsoever, I could lose my job. Then we might lose the house. What the hell else am I going to do to support us, drive a bus?"

"It's not like you aren't on stronger stuff for your war rage." Chloe shot back. "And the rich priss parents at Blackwell would probably have a fit and demand your sacking if they found out the head of Blackwell security, the only man entrusted to carry a gun on campus, was up to his eyeballs in psychiatric medications to stave off memories of Afgan kids being blown up and some crazy ass dream about the end of the world. How's the bunker going by the way? Reinforced the garage enough to survive an artillery strike or an EF-5 yet?"

Max couldn't take it. There wasn't really a sense that Chloe or her Stepfather would come to blows, rather that someone had taken something fragile and thrown a glass of strong acid on it. A terse understanding, accommodation, and maybe even respect they'd miraculously achieved was being corroded away in front of her. She had to do something to take at least a part of the blame away from Chloe. She slid back the closet door and revealed herself.

"Sorry, but the joint is-"

"-Mine." Victoria finished, stepping out alongside Max.

Max shot her a surprised look. Victoria was taking the blame for Chloe? Of course Victoria had her own calculated reasons for her actions. No one of any intelligence would buy that Max was a regular pot user, while Madsen had already voiced accusations of drug use against Victoria earlier that day. And having rich parents was pretty much get out of jail free card at Blackwell, at least until someone photographed you with a gun on campus, so she wasn't actually taking much of a risk. Max, on the other hand, was entirely beholden to Blackwell for her photography scholarship, which could be revoked at any time. In her mind, there was no reason not to indebted her new acquaintances to her, especially since at least one of them had superpowers. And, truth be told, she was getting used to the way they completely infuriated her. It wasn't like the way everyone else infuriated her either, the way they did it was almost enjoyable.

"You two." Madsen's eyes narrowed. "I don't like strangers bringing drugs into my house."
"They're not strangers, man, they're my friends." Chloe shot back defensively.

"That's almost worse, given your past record with friends Chloe. And you know this doesn't do the whole case against Nathan much good, if the two witnesses are exposed as a couple of drug dealers."

"Then we'll just have to make sure nobody finds out about this." Victoria smiled. "Besides, I don't think a single smoked joint really puts you in the dealer category, in fact I think Principal Wells would tell you this is all a misunderstanding and not to investigate further."

Madsen's eyes narrowed in anger. He'd had that little dance with Victoria before and knew she was right. Still, there was something far more serious going on with these three. He knew it. He'd actually seen proof of it. And it was time someone politely pointed out to them the dangers in lying to authority figures.

"You know, since this afternoon, I've come to the impression you weren't entirely honest about what you saw in that bathroom. I get the idea someone else was in attendance. You aren't covering for someone are you? A friend perhaps?"

He glared at Chloe knowingly. She flipped him off, but the usual bravado on her face was weakening. He knew somehow. Victoria managed to keep her poker face, but nervousness shot across Max's. Had he seen the unedited video Nathan had? And why would he even have access to a video commissioned by Courtney Wagner to raise her position in the vortex club?

"I'm confident that everything we reported, happened." Victoria somehow managed to confidently announce. That was largely true. Of course they'd omitted a few minor details. Like everything regarding Chloe's involvement.

"Really, because I see a lot of what happens at Blackwell, and if I've seen something that casts doubt on your statements, then we're going to have an issue." Madsen paced a few steps parallel to them, his demeanour that of a drill sergeant chewing out the new recruits. His theatrics were slightly curtailed by the small size of the room, but he still managed to instil a sense of ill ease fairly effectively.

"I did some checking on both of you. You both were in Seattle, prior to moving to Arcadia, weren't you?"

Max raised an eyebrow, "you too?"

"My parents owned the Chase Space art gallery, amongst other things." Victoria explained.

Well that was something of a let down as far as shock revelations went. Did he honestly think knowing something that was obviously on their school files would impress them?

"So if there's anything else either of you think you should tell me, I suggest you do it soon."

David Madsen took another, closer look at Victoria. She glared back at him with mutinous disregard.

"What in blazes? Is that blood on her sweater?"

Right. She still had the blood stains on her cardigan from back in Jefferson's class. But since the school Gestapo apparently hadn't noticed it until now, Victoria tried to milk it to strengthen her position.

"I guess I could have gotten scraped or cut when school security failed to stop Nathan attacking me. God the Blackwell guards were pathetic. How long were they looking for him? And they still failed
to stop an attack on the students in their care. I was just lucky someone actually competent was there to rescue me."

"Yeah, alright, I get it. Chloe's your hero, and one day you hope to find a man almost half as strong as her. Look, since your both being so damn stubborn, I won't force this. Right now I just need to know where that damn gun is. If someone gets hurt with one of my guns."

But at that instant, a streak of mad defiance shot across Chloe's face. David knew that look. Normally he'd give her space when he saw it, but he couldn't stand to see another kid blown away as a result of his actions or inactions, like he'd seen in Afghanistan. He had to get that gun back, and he was completely confident that nothing these little hellions could do would make him leave the room before the gun was back in his possession.

"I don't have the fucking gun on me." Chloe announced, her voice suddenly cranked to eleven. "Jesus, you want to search me or something? Fine!"

In a single fluid movement, Chloe grabbed her singlet, hoisted it over her shoulders, and threw it on the bed. David immediately found another direction to look, Max rather surprised herself in that she just stood there drinking in the view unashamedly, and Victoria practically had to fight off a seizure at the sight before her: Chloe had better abs than most of the athletes at Blackwell, football team and swim team combined, and the rest of her on display was a similar picture of toned yet somehow still feminine perfection.

"Damn it Chloe, what the hell?!"

"You want proof I don't have the gun on me. That's fine. Here, you can search me right now!"

She quickly reached for her trousers' belt, and David even more quickly left the room, cursing. Well she'd sure shown him. Figuratively and literally.

"Crazy ass exhibitionist punk kid! Jesus Christ!"

"Damn, did you see that Max! Defended my second amendment rights and banished the Step-Führer. What an epic win! Uh, Max?"

It suddenly dawned on Chloe that Max was still staring rather intently at her newly exposed areas. Her face reddened and she found herself struck by a wave of self-consciousness. What the hell? Since when was she self-conscious of anything? She'd sucked face with Juliet for the express purpose of taking photos to show other people, and felt almost nothing. Well nothing bad anyway, Juliet was hot and it had been on the whole rather enjoyable. OK, maybe she had felt a little bit empty afterwards, but she'd been feeling that way beforehand as well. The only thing that had really upset her was when fucking Victoria had pointed out a certain similarity between Juliet and a Joyce Price from the distant past. Now Max had taken a mild interest in what was visually on offer and she'd suddenly gone all shrinking violet?

"Max, what, are you just going to stand there and stare without comment? What about you Victoria, you're rich so you must be pro-second amendment. The rich people's party is always pro-second amendment"

"Oh sorry." Max managed, and successfully redirected her eyes elsewhere after several attempts.

Chloe quickly grabbed her singlet and put it back on before Max's eyes reacquired her midriff. Damn, Max may have been the one wearing the deer shirt, yet it was Chloe who'd felt paralysed in the headlights when Max started taking a peek. Meanwhile Victoria had recovered enough from her
own bout of virtual epilepsy to respond with her usual degree of sardonicism.

"I'm sure the NRA are ecstatic, and at this very minute planning on a nationwide indecent exposure campaign to stem gun control."

Chloe mused that it probably would increase their membership, when she caught an earful from downstairs, where the resident lifetime member had retreated to.

"And Chloe," David's bellowing voice echoed through the house, "Victoria can't walk around all bloody like that. If you're going to be so obstinate, I at least insist you let her borrow some of your damn clothes, especially since you clearly feel you have so little need for them!"

Victoria stared in horror as Chloe opened her dresser, smiling manically. She withdrew a black shirt with the red anarchist 'A' prominently displayed on it, and paired it with a green jacket. A green flannel jacket. It seemed Victoria had been right to worry, people who stayed in Chloe's room for too long did end up in flannel.

Chapter End Notes

It might help everyone to know that there was a picture of a young William and Joyce Price in the Canon game, who look exactly the same as Zachery and Juliet (it was clearly made by a paint-over of the Juliet and Zachery models). Poor Chloe.

I should also say I was a bit worried in how David's portrayal in this fic, given that in the canon game he slaps Chloe. It felt a bit cheap to outright ignore that abuse by erasing it and making him more likable. On the other hand, time powers could literally do that: edit a person's past and make them 'better'. Given how I'd developed Chloe, I just couldn't see the slap happening in this timeline, and I based the scene on the scenario where Max comes out of the closet to protect Chloe, so the slap doesn't happen anyway. I don't know, I couldn't see a completely sensitive way of handling David's redemption via time rewrite.

Finally, a few people might pick up on an oh-so-subtle reference to a joke mini-fic I once posted anonymously in a 'dark corner' of the internet. If not, don't worry, you aren't missing much.

So join in next time for the adventures of Victoria's in an anarchist shirt and Al Borland special. Perhaps if they put her fingers in a really hot cup of tea, that'll create enough improbability to teleport the tornado away by itself. It'll probably be the last chapter of day one.
Be advised that there's a couple of slightly creepy short scenes in this involving Jefferson, and what Kate remembers. I don't think they go near warranting a raised age warning, but it's not all unicorns and lilies either, and it's written in a slightly unhinged way.

The slowly setting sun had brought with it a slowly encroaching darkness, which torpidly began to intrude into Chloe Price's bedroom. Within the room, Victoria Chase felt a chill run down her spine. Not so much because of gradually dropping light levels and temperature, though; more because Chloe Price was advancing on her, proffering a budget brand anarchist shirt and torn flannel jacket. She took a small step backward and tried to summon her resolve. The queen of Blackwell academy would not be reduced to wearing a tacky, inexpensive print; certainly not one encouraging the dismemberment of the system she perched atop. Nor would she wear a deliberately distressed jacket that could just about function as a checkers board!

"Alright. Time to play dress up with Tori. Then we book and go somewhere far away from Sergeant Pepper."

"Maybe the lighthouse?" Max suggested.

"Works for me. Tori?"

"Isolated, with a low chance of me being seen wearing those abominations." Victoria noted. "Good enough."

"Oh, and Chloe," Max added, "do you think I could borrow something as well? Time travel's been murder on my hoodie."

An "oh no you didn’t" grin spread across Chloe's face, while Victoria managed a half hearted smile while nervously stepping backward, just another inch or two.

"She's a killer," Chloe whistled, referencing the old noir comic strip she and Max had drawn years earlier. "I think I can find you a substitute jacket. Rachel left a bunch of clothes here. She's-"

"-mostly my size." Max concluded. She was still strangely happy to have learned that Rachel had a 'big ass'.

Chloe found one of Rachel's old Denim jackets, while Victoria continued to look on in contempt at the clothes laid out for her. Why did she have to wear the flannel when Max got the Denim? Oh right, the jacket was sized for Rachel's petite top half. There's no way it would fit anyone other than Max.

"What are your plans for the vampire hoodie?" Chloe asked, extricating the bloody thing from Max's bag.

"I don't know, I was going to try washing it, but it looks too badly stained."
"I might be able to salvage it somehow, if you don't mind a little lateral thinking."

Max agreed, with a little trepidation. The last piece of lateral thinking Chloe had was fairly successful. It had also involved Max’s hand and Victoria's rear end. Victoria, meanwhile, was still trying to find words adequate for the disgust she felt toward Chloe's clothing selection.

"Come on Victoria, the Step-Sarge is right; you can't go around wearing bloody cashmere."

Victoria decided she was doomed either way: she'd either have her look ruined by wearing Chloe's surplus rags, or continue to have her look ruined by blood covered clothing. She made her decision: being covered in blood would guarantee her being branded unhygienic as well as unkempt, wearing Chloe's clothes… Well, questionable hygiene was better than no hygiene right? She was being unfair, Chloe's hygiene wasn't bad, and those clothes would be perfectly clean. Probably. That bag of clothes waiting to be washed in the corner of her wardrobe was a bit rank. But Chloe certainly hadn't smelt that bad when she rescued her from Nathan, although Victoria kind of wished her mind would stop flicking back to that event over and over. Being carried off by her knight in shining armour, or perhaps more accurately, her knight in recently laundered singlet.

"Fine."

Victoria hefted her cashmere sweater over her head, then began unbuttoning her silk blouse.

Chloe audibly took a shallow breath. Beneath that protective layer of Cashmere and silk, and clad in the most exquisite black lace demi-bra, was a chest that rivalled Dana's. "Damn it Chloe", Max thought, while struggling to keep her own eyes in check.

Of course, Max was at some advantage over Chloe in that regard. Max already knew what Victoria looked like under her 'armour', from the blown up poster Victoria kept of herself on her wall, and took great pride in displaying; the one of her generously filling a bikini. It was a strange duality, that Victoria displayed the poster so openly, then not only wore relatively conservative clothes in public, but also mocked the more liberally attired as being 'sluts', 'whores', and 'exhibitionists'. Perhaps it was her way of having her cake and eating it: she reminded everyone that she had an enviable figure, and simultaneously maintained an air of superiority over the few similarly endowed who flaunted their charms in a more conventional manner.

Acutely aware of how she'd unashamedly leered when Chloe went sans singlet, Max made a greater effort to move her eyes somewhere else, completely turning away from Victoria. She really wasn't sure what was going on with herself today. She always noticed her classmates beauty, as she was forever unfavourably comparing herself to them. Somehow today, her standard routine had gotten mixed up: as the day went on she'd become less concerned with how she compared with them, yet was still keenly observing their beauty. Perhaps she was just on autopilot and it would all equalise in time.

"It's too tight across the chest! I'm going to look like a cheap whore!"

Alright, no one could resist looking when they heard that line, Max included. It seemed to have attracted Chloe's full attention as well. The shirt Chloe had donated was fitted, sized to complement her lanky-yet-lean muscled frame. On Victoria, it wrapped especially snugly around what lay beneath, prominently displaying the silhouette of her bust.

"No one would ever call you cheap, sistah."

Chloe's comment might have been intended as a reassurance, but it had Victoria fuming like a volcano. Still, it could have been worse. She'd probably have erupted if the line had been "No one
would ever call you a whore" instead. Victoria had priorities.

"I need to see the damage, is there a decent mirror anywhere around here."

"Bathroom's just down the hall." Chloe advised, as Victoria quickly disappeared.

"It's hard to imagine how my life could get any worse at this point" Victoria said glumly, more to her own reflection in the bathroom mirror than to the two nosy companions who'd tagged along with her.

"We could always swap out your stockings for ripped fishnets, you know." Chloe noted.

Victoria stared harshly at her own reflection, savagely critiquing the familiar stranger that stared back with equal ferocity. She had to admit that she looked rather good as a 'degenerate whore'. Then again, she liked to think she looked good as anything. Still, there was an unsatisfactory disconnect between her 'ready to thrash' top, and her 'ready to prep' bottom. There was no choice, she'd have to take further extreme measures.

"...Okay. And this mini skirt is too sophisticated. Find me torn Denim, preferably with holes shot through it. And short, just like that glorious slut Taylor's!"

"W-what?"

"Victoria Chase doesn't half commit to a fashion statement. She owns it utterly. If I'm going to look like a whore, I'll be Julia fucking Roberts! Fishnets! Denim! Now!"

Chloe almost fell in love at hearing that. Just a little. Seeing her carefully peel off her stockings in preparation for the torn ones wasn't helping matters.

Moments later Victoria was pulling up a pair of cut-off denim jean shorts, her skirt cast aside with casual disregard. After some trepidation, she also accepted the offer of a studded belt. After all, the jean shorts had been Rachel's.

"Hold on Vicky, let's get a picture of you. You too Chloe, let's make it a group shot."

"Oh, I was wondering how long it would take for me to be dragged into one of Max Caulfield's famous selfies." Victoria groaned, realising that she was about to be immortalised as an 'anarchist punk whore Al Borland'.

Chloe stuck one of her strong wings out and pulled Victoria in close, forming the back row. Max stood intermediate between them in front, her knees slightly bent, and triggered her camera's shutter.

"It's infuriating that you can take such well-framed images without even looking through the viewfinder." Victoria noted, studying the resulting photo.

"It's a learned... skill..."

Max's pupils shot in and out of focus for an instant, and looked around as if slightly disoriented. For a second or two, she began a desperate search of her camera bag for pens and paper. Sudden realisation struck her, and she turned to face Victoria and Chloe.

"Oh, I guess I can just tell the two of you this time, instead of having to write a letter."

Chloe and Victoria could tell some radical change had befallen Max. Her eyes had a cold, hard sadness in them. Chloe had actually seen the expression in her step-dork. It was the face of someone who'd been through a war, seen and perhaps even done things most people couldn't comprehend.
She wondered if her own eyes were in any way like that now, still having the memories of seeing Victoria murdered and shooting Nathan in the head, from a timeline Max had expunged. She was relieved to see Max's expression soften, ever so slightly, after dwelling on the two of them.

"You look like you've seen some shit, 'Future Max'."

"I've seen the septic tank expo, Chloe."

Further conversation was temporarily suspended, as Max advanced on the two taller girls, and pulled them into a group hug with surprising strength. There was a certain desperation in the way she pulled them in, a possessive need, like she was afraid they'd both be taken away from her. When they broke apart, Max's eyes were a little watery. It was almost as though she hadn't seen either of them in some time. Chloe was about to enquire when Max did something rather strange. She suddenly wrapped her hand around Chloe's upper arm, and squeezed, noticing with pleasure how thick and muscular it was. For some reason Max's mouth took on a decidedly self-congratulatory smirk. Chloe really wasn't sure how to respond, so she shrugged and brought out her 'still got it' grin again. Victoria decided that if Future Max had time to admire Chloe's (admittedly impressive) biceps, she had time to answer a few pointed questions about the future.

"So, are you going to tell us who these conspirators are?"

"I honestly don't know yet. Not the identity of all of them any way."

"But you're from the future!"

"And in all the future timelines I've been in, they were never fully identified. Except for Nathan, and a couple of others."

"You mean Mark Jefferson and Nathan's father." Victoria said flatly, intently studying Max's face as she did so.

A smile crossed Chloe's face as 'Future Max' switched to displaying anguish and then anger, as she realised they were reading her. Victoria's face only displayed a pained expression. She'd normally feel smug, having gotten information out of someone unwillingly, but in this case she'd just had her worst fears confirmed. Her idol, Mark Jefferson, was a criminal.

"Damn! No matter how badass stone-cold motherfucker your future self becomes, your poker face still sucks gluteus, Maximus."

Max looked like she was going to play her ultimate trump card in response, and just erase the last few seconds from time. She decided not to bother, her present counterparts seemed already fairly certain Jefferson was involved, probably an inevitable consequence of tracing the sim card's origin back to his class. Besides, they'd probably just ask her all over again, and she really had a bad poker face. She consoled herself by lecturing them instead.

"It's dangerous for you to know that information now. If you let slip to one of these bastards that you're already on to them..."

"Is that what you tell your past self? That it's too dangerous to know the truth."

"As a matter of fact."

"It's a very convenient line isn't it. It's too dangerous for you to know. Just follow the exact instructions I give you, without thinking."
"There are sometimes very good reasons for doing what someone with future knowledge tells you to without question, Victoria. Sometimes doing what seems like the right thing can get people you care about abducted and butchered in front of you."

Victoria suddenly felt slightly queasy, as if a decidedly anorexic chap with an archaic farm implement had walked passed, tapped her on the shoulder for a second, and then thought better of it and continued on his merry way.

"You really want to know more about this? I think you should ask Chloe what led to her extorting Nathan in the bathroom."

Chloe pulled her neck in defensively, pained anguish spreading across her face. Victoria carried on as if Future Max had said nothing of consequence.

"Don't try to deflect, just answer the question asked of you."

"Fine. Go to the lighthouse-" Max began.

"We were going to anyway. Chloe's step-father is worked up enough to fight an opposed landing over a 'missing gun', so we were going to get some fresh air."

"-and stay there till after sunset." Max continued, as if she was never interrupted. "Hide a phone directly under the sightseeing map up there, call it and use it as a listening device. You'll find the conversation illuminating. Download an app that lets you record phone conversations too, that'll be very useful. Don't try to approach them, or go anywhere near them. And don't try to retrieve the phone until they've gotten back in their car and left. As far as danger goes, they make Nathan Prescott seem like a joke."

"Wait! Who are these people we're supposed to spy on?"

But Max just stumbled backward slightly, grasping her head in disorientation. Chloe got to her just in time, grabbing her moments before she fell. She quickly came around, secure in Chloe's arms looking confused but remarkably comfortable. Future Max had departed for tomorrow.

"Max, no offense but the way your future self withholds key details is hella obnoxious."

"It probably makes things easier for her though," Victoria explained. "If she told us the details of everything, we might come up with our own plan instead of just following her's. And the annoying thing is, she might be right to do so. We've seen that plans sometimes sound good in theory but don't quite pan out when tested. You know, like trying to stop a certain blue haired punk from even entering a certain bathroom."

"Still at least Tori punked future you, and got some information out of her."

Max raised her eyebrow, intently interested. Victoria wasn't sure what to do with herself. On one side she thrived on people acknowledging her accomplishments, on the other she really didn't like the information she'd extracted. Her Idol was some sort of serious criminal. Seeing Victoria's hesitation, Chloe decided to spill the beans herself.

"Sean Prescott and Jefferson are totally involved – in whatever the hell this is."

"Mr Jefferson. God. What, what are we supposed to do when we see him in class? And what about that extra assignment he gave us? Having to hand in some extra credit work that says 'here's a part of me no one's seen before' suddenly seems so much more creepy."
"Um, a teacher really asked for that? No offense Max, Victoria, but asking to see a part of his students no one's ever seen before sounds pretty creepy anyway." Chloe observed.

"He didn't use those exact words, Chloe. I'm embellishing for effect."

"Speaking of things Max's future self told us, and how obnoxious it is to withhold details…” Victoria began.

Chloe suddenly became extremely uncomfortable.

"I wasn't going to let her get away with an obvious attempt at redirection, but I think we'd be better off if you explain something to us Chloe. What did Max's future self mean about a history between you and Nathan."

"She meant I went way too easy on him today." Chloe quickly responded, her voice suddenly tarred in bitterness.

"Chloe, you knocked him out twice, and broke his eardrum!" Max noted.

"And robbed him, and put him through a car window." Victoria chimed in flatly.

"He deserved worse. Should have popped the fucker's eyeball out and crushed it in my hand, or some other ninja shit."

Jesus. Max was fairly sure Chloe couldn't actually do that. Could she? Probably, no almost definitely not. But having seen what happened when Chloe got angry, there was the tiniest part of Max's mind that could imagine it. Plucking an eyeball out like in Quentin Tarrintino's Kill Bill. Max didn't care to dwell on that though. Not when she could imagine how great Chloe might look in a yellow motorcycle outfit.

"I didn't tell you, did I?" Chloe asked. "I'd come up with a plan to get some urgently needed money from rich entitled bar-frequenters. Nathan fit the bill to a T. I was working him over when I realised my drink had an ever-so-slightly strange taste. The last thing I remember was that it seemed to be having a hella strong effect for tap beer."

Max hated this. Chloe's hand had started shaking again, the first time that had happened since Max had helped her banish her demons, along with half of Nathan's hearing. She really wasn't sure what her future self had intended, making Chloe relive one of her worst experiences since William Price had his car accident. Max reached out and took Chloe's hand, steadying it. There was no time magic involved this time, but the simple warmth of contact seemed to convey a magic of its own. Victoria surprised herself moments later, realising she'd taken Chloe's other hand without thinking. Emboldened by the reassurance, Chloe found the strength to continue her story.

"I woke up in his room. Nathan was standing over me. And taking photos with his camera."

An utter silence pervaded the room, punctuated only by Chloe's pause to take a sharp breath. Max gave Chloe's hand an extra squeeze.

"I was still half out of it, barely able to walk, and in no condition to deal with him like I did today. I managed to somehow fend him off anyway, bum-rush the door and stagger the fuck out of there. I don't think he had a chance to do anything to me. None of my clothes were disturbed anyway."

Max was livid. She'd already rationalised "future Max's" behaviour, suggesting that if one of her friend's lives was truly at risk, she might find herself capable of horrific acts to protect them. Now she knew that statement was accurate, though not entirely complete. As rage began to boil over within
her, she suddenly felt completely capable of doing horrible things to Nathan. At that moment, it
didn't much matter to her that Chloe had already rendered him a non-threat in spectacular fashion. In
that instant, if Chloe wanted to rip out Nathan's eyeballs, Max would have gladly helped hold him
down while she did so. She'd have even offered to take Chloe back in time, so she could do it over
and over, until she was satisfied.

Victoria really didn't know what to think. Her mind was drawn back to the parking lot, to Nathan, on
the verge of a breakdown. In spite of how he'd confronted her, she'd reached out to him, tried to help
him. For an instant it seemed to have worked. Then, the moment she turned her back on him and
shown vulnerability, he'd viciously gone for her head. She'd come-to panic-stricken, expecting
another attack. That hadn't happened, but only because Chloe and Max had intervened on her behalf,
rescued her. Chloe hadn't had any rescuer from Nathan's room. She'd had to rescue herself while in a
drugged stupor. Victoria could scarcely imagine how that must have felt. Then there was the even
more distasteful matter, speculating on the motive. What was the usual reason for doping someone in
a bar and taking them back to your room? Max's thoughts had gone there too, she could tell. Just for
a fleeting instant, Victoria was sure she'd seen a familiar look cross Max's face. The same seething
rage she had seen when Max's future self had taken over back in Jefferson's class. The look of
someone fully capable of murder. Though this wasn't 'Future Max', it was her present self. Just how
close was Max to turning into her remorseless future incarnation? And with everything from
drugging and abductions, through to a criminal conspiracy out to get them, just how far behind Max
were Chloe and herself?

Victoria felt she should offer some words of sympathy. The only problem was she didn't have much
experience in that field. In the past, she'd been the one people needed sympathy as a result of.
Explaining to people just how badly she'd ruined their day. She tried to modify that technique to do
some good. After all, in the end it was Nathan who'd had his life wrecked, and it looked like she had
an audience that wouldn't mind hearing just how badly he'd been fucked up.

"I think it's important to remind yourself how everything did play out in the end. You got away from
Nathan, then beat the shit out of him twice, the second time badly enough to send him to hospital and
blow out one of his ear drums. You stole all the cash he had on him, and his gun. You reunited with
your best friend and stole his away from him. He's going to be expelled from school, and after his
assaults and being caught under the influence of drugs, he may face jail time. I imagine his family
can't be too happy with what he's done to the Prescott name either. You've basically destroyed every
aspect of his life in retribution. And if you do ever see him again, you could probably reduce him to a
crying mess just by quoting a certain Zen koan at him."

"Thanks Victoria", Chloe said, managing a smile. Max concurred.

"That's the nicest description of bringing ruination to someone's life that I've ever heard. Now, don't
the three of us have a date at the lighthouse?"

As the trio stormed down the stairs to the pickup truck, Chloe found her eyes lingering on the door to
the garage. It was open, the lights were on inside, and there was the faint sound of bolts being
manually tightened. She completely stopped on the second to last step, regarding the door with
trepidation, while Max and Victoria paused midway down the corridor, wondering what the delay
was. Fucking hell, she was a gluten for punishment today.

"Why don't you go on ahead. I'll just be a couple of minutes."

Max looked doubtful, but Victoria hurried her on. Clearly, Chloe wanted whatever was about to go
down between her and David to happen privately.
David Madsen had retreated into his self proclaimed "man-space", the garage. Over the past few years, what Chloe referred to as "hella cash" had been sunk into modifying the room, greatly reinforcing the framework with steel beams and adding stronger structural materials. Shelves lay stacked with emergency supplies. The most recent addition was a trapdoor, which extended into a small space he'd been trying to excavate underground. Allegedly, it was for wine storage, though Chloe doubted the redneck was much of a wine drinker. Chloe knew it was something to do with the weird-ass dreams he'd been having. The ones he talked to Joyce about when he thought they were in private, the ones the shrink had been steadily increasing his medication to try to compensate for.

At that moment though, David Madsen was using his make-shift bunker for its original purpose. He lay under the frame of his muscle car, reinstalling the engine, which was presently suspended from the roof by a couple of large chains. One benefit of wasting all that cash on steel reinforcing beams – they were fairly good at supporting big-ass car engines.

He heard the creek of the door, followed by the tap of steel-capped boots on concrete, slightly lighter than the average man's, yet somehow twice as foreboding.

"If you've come to finish me off, Chloe, then releasing the chain the engine's supported by would be a good bet. It's tied off to the right of the room. Just untie it, and I'll probably end up crushed."

Chloe stayed silent. There'd been a betrayal of trust on her part, so she deserved to eat some shit. Her eyes did follow the chains past the roof pulley system to the point they'd been tied off. She lingered on them, just for a second. 'Bad Chloe'. She chided herself for even entertaining the thought.

"I taught you a bunch of things most civilians really ought not to know about fighting. Some real effective low blows. Then you somehow figured out the even nastier, cheaper ones I'd been holding back. I guess bringing up my war service was an obvious extension to that."

Madsen twisted a bolt with his wrench as he twisted the metaphoric knife in her gut.

"I let you practice with my guns, showed you how to use them properly, though beyond basic safety you mostly just ignored that and went about scoring bull's-eyes, firing with an unsupported single hand grip, often without even using the sights. I think you just decided you'd be a natural to piss me off."

There was a certain hardnosed pride in how he said that. It just made the betrayal feel worse. He was really guilt-tripping her this time, rather than letting things degenerate into the usual shouting match. All things considered, Chloe thought she preferred the shouting. That at least afforded her the chance to cover any guilt with anger.

"Except-"

"Except the .500 Smith and Weston. Asshole."

Chloe almost managed a smirk. One of the few times he'd really managed to get one up on her was letting her shoot what he'd called his "emergency bear repellent". Chloe really should have known something was up by the look of the thing: the revolver was built a hell of a lot thicker than the .38 she normally fired, and it only held five rounds because they were so fucking big. Still, it was a short-barrelled version, and she'd been feeling cocky, having just shot the eyes and smile out of a blown up emoji target. She'd fired it the same way she handled the .38 and ended up hella shocked, and with a hella sore wrist, hand pointing skyward. Fucking thing made Dirty Harry's Magnum look like a pea-shooter. Of course, she'd demanded to fire it a lot more soon after that.

"Do you really need the gun?"
"I didn't steal it, man. Calm down."

Madsen could tell a transparent lie when he heard one.

"That's not what I asked Chloe. Do you honestly need the damn gun?"

A deafening silence filled the room. Chloe nodded, ever so slightly.

"Do one thing for me then, and we're square. Get me a sample of your two friends' handwriting."

What the hell? Was this just part of his 'normal' paranoid investigative obsession, or was he intending to forge something?

"You're a staff member at their school, dude. Can't you-"

"I'm the 'rent-a-cop', remember. Not a teacher. And Wells has taken personal custody of their signed statements. I'll report the .38 revolver missing tomorrow at the station. Claim the door was forced or something." He glanced at the garage door. It had been reinforced to the point that you'd probably need a tank gun to force it. "Maybe not that door. Look, I know you won't accidentally shoot yourself, so promise me you won't make your mother cry or get your dumb ass thrown in prison and I won't ask again."

Chloe belatedly nodded, and left the man to his car. Great. Now, not only did she owe Frank, but she was indulging her step father's paranoia. As she briskly walked out to catch up with Max and Victoria, Chloe wondered why life just couldn't be simple.

The horizon glowed a brilliant red as the sun finally slipped beneath it. Max and Chloe waited in the periphery of the forest Nature reserve, which lay between the Arcadia Bay township and the lighthouse. On Victoria's insistence, they'd parked 'rolling tetanus' a good distance away in a side street, rather than the reserve's car park, and as a result walked twice as far as they'd normally have to. But given future Max's warnings, they really wanted to make sure they weren't noticed by whoever they'd been sent to spy on, either directly or through the presence of their vehicle.

The trio had found themselves a spot with rather dense undergrowth behind a few rows of trees, perfect for concealment while still affording an only mildly obstructed view of both the outlook and the path leading to it. Naturally, Chloe had been unsatisfied with her view being 'mildly obstructed' and immediately climbed one of the trees; she lay prone on a long branch, watching as Victoria attached her phone to the back of the outlook's sightseeing map with a strip of duct tape. Max leaned against a tree trunk, and slapped her cheek after feeling a light sting there. A direct hit, the offending mosquito was crushed with a disturbingly satisfying moist squish. It occurred to her that staking out an area of bush at night and near the sea had some elements to it that really sucked.

Victoria finally gave the thumbs up, and Max dialled her phone.

"Can you hear me, Max?" An alluring voice came through Max's phone speaker, soft yet clear.

"Ask her what she's wearing." Chloe suggested. In a moment of boldness Max did so, but got no response. She assumed that meant Victoria had remembered to mute her speaker, and wasn't just too infuriated to answer.

"I'm just over a yard from the sign the phone's hidden under, going to increase to two yards now."

The voice became fainter, yet still discernible.
"Alright, now going to five yards."

Victoria's voice was now scarcely audible. Were they indoors, it'd probably have picked up something a bit further out, but out at the lookout it was competing against nature's ambience: the gentle hiss of the evening sea breeze and lapping of waves far below them at the bottom of the cliff. The phone having to be hidden on the back of the map didn't help audio pickup either.

A minute later Victoria returned to them. "Well?" She enquired impatiently.

"I could sort of hear you at five yards. It's easier to hear up close – two yards or less."

Max played back the recording she'd made of the test call, partially for Victoria's benefit and partially just to make sure it had worked.

"Next time we play a life and death game of spies, we'll have to buy some real equipment. Is this really going to work Max? Whoever these guys we've been sent to spy on are, they'll have to be practically on top of the lookout map for us to hear anything."

"Don't ask her. It's her future self's plan. She hasn't even thought of it yet." Chloe remarked unhelpfully. She swung down from the tree branch, and landed with remarkably little noise. "Two guys coming up the track now, walking like they own the place. I guess this is it."

Two figures walked to the cliff-edge lookout point, their hair billowing slightly in the evening sea breeze. The larger of the two was a wide faced man who appeared slightly out of shape. He wore a British-cut suit informally: jacket front unbuttoned and shirt tie-less, its collar button unfastened. Rat-like eyes sat beneath light-brown hair, peering out at the Arcadia Bay waterfront with a look of utter contempt, shielded from the light breeze by prescription eyewear. The second figure, a lean yet broad shouldered woman, wore all the trappings of a classic chauffeur: black suit, white gloves and black military-style driving cap, all impeccably turned out. Auburn hair was pulled tightly into a bun, sitting low on the back of her head. Her expression was one of trance-like indifference. Max and Chloe quickly came to the impression that she wasn't a typical chauffeur; there was an enigmatic air of danger about her, that neither of them could place. Victoria seemed to know a little more, and wasn't exactly calmed by that knowledge.

"Sean Prescott and his creepy Chauffeur," she shared in a whisper.

"Nathan's father? Damn, I should have recognised the family resemblance. They're all rat eyed bastards. So this conspiracy is based around the Prescott family?"

"If we actually listen instead of talking incessantly, maybe we'll find that out."

The trio huddled around Max's phone, listening as best as they could to the conversation between Sean and his employee.

"You know, I've always wondered what that skull and crossbones indicates." Sean said, stopping right next to the sightseeing map and gesturing toward a small piece of graffiti with his hand, a smile piercing his scowl for almost a second. Grey chose not to respond.

Chloe and Max grinned at each other knowingly. He was almost right on top of their ad-hock listening device, and in an incredible coincidence it was apparently all thanks to a long-time fascination with a scribble Chloe had drawn at Max's prompting in their childhood, that marked their old tree fort. At least they assumed it was a coincidence. Surely Max's future self hadn't gone that far back in time and made sure they'd left some graffiti there as children, just to entrance Nathan's Father and catch him out ten years later? Whatever the true reason for the graffiti, Sean's moment of levy
pondering it was short-lived, and his grim expression quickly returned in full force.

"You failed to eliminate the last problem, Ms Grey. I am beginning to wonder if you are fully worth your extravagant salary."

While Sean's voice was perfectly clear, his Chauffeur's was more muted, closer to the limit of what Victoria's phone mic could pick up. Grey stayed two to three steps from Sean Prescott, constantly scanning the trees around the forest path for any new arrivals.

"I am supremely confident a warning was issued about the roundabout measures you demanded, Mr Prescott…"

"Wow. Check out the sexy English voice."

"Really, Chloe?"

"Don't worry Victoria, your American honey-venom number is just as hot."

The level of appreciation Victoria felt hearing that left her deeply concerned. Between future Max's warning about how dangerous these two were, her own memories of that creepy lady watching her, and the casual conversation about 'eliminating problems', Victoria felt her mind had its priorities slightly jumbled.

"…The said means were wholly inadequate to guarantee a desirable resolution. Now if you'd let me handle the problem directly-"

"Yes, yes. You've made your point. I placed obtaining a low risk of future legal repercussions ahead of obtaining a high chance of success. In this case, time has proven that decision unwise. And speaking of unwise decisions, it seems our special tutor has been grossly negligent in the responsibility entrusted to him."

"I understand a few of his 'helpers' repeatedly tried to contact him, and received no answer. They subsequently became rather desperate, enough to try contacting me. Of course, having just completed another errand, I was in no position to interfere inside Blackwell academy."

Sean Prescott frowned, forming a series of evenly spaced wrinkles on his brow.

"I practically made that man's career. More recently, he's been the benefactor of enormous resources, discretion, and trust on my part. In return for my most recent investment, I expected only one thing, that he help my boy achieve his destiny as a Prescott. Instead the first piece of news I receive after returning in my private jet, is that my son's been locked up under the man's watch!"

"We were fortunate one of our contacts had the foresight to quickly take possession of Nathan's burner phone before Blackwell security could secure it. At the moment, the only criminal liability is assault on other students, and a firearms violation from earlier in the day."

Ms Grey paused for a moment, and slowly retracted the fingers on her left hand into a fist, the only sign of emotion she'd made so far.

"Does an example need to be made?"

"Not presently. My contribution to the Prescott destiny is days from fruition. We cannot endanger that now by becoming needlessly engaged in the criminal justice system."

"And these other 'witnesses', the ones to your son's episode in the school facilities?"
"There is no great need to prioritise their removal. They've already caused most of the damage they were likely to, by delivering signed statements and photo documentation of the incident. Still, if the opportunity should present itself to indirectly handle them with no chance of traceable repercussions…"

A hint of a scowl crossed Grey's face when Sean Prescott mentioned 'indirect' methodology. It was the first time anything had shown on her face. A lot more was showing on Victoria's face though. Her hand shot out and grabbed Max's shoulder.

"We just had a hit put out on us." She whispered.

"And the original, larger problem you had?"

"Yes, what that one may have witnessed is far more dangerous." He closed his eyes as if in deep thought. "Very well, the risk level is sufficient that you may 'indulge yourself' on that one. As long as the result of any indulgence remains undiscovered until the end of the week."

The slightest hint of a smile worked its way across Grey's long narrow lips.

"I assure you, Mr Prescott. Nothing will be found."

Sean Prescott turned his full attention back toward the view of the harbour side. His gaze lingered, not even blinking, and nothing was said for several minutes. Suddenly, he jerked back a step, and seemed to be having a little problem keeping his balance. Grey quickly moved to support him, her face impassive. It seemed this was not the first time she had witnessed whatever it was the Prescott Patriarch was up to.

"Well, perhaps it was just as well my boy's tutor proved such a disappointment." Sean suddenly announced, snapping out of his daze. "It seems we may be repurposing the piece of real-estate I let to him; if things continue, it will be needed for its original intent far sooner than expected."

With that, Sean Prescott and his Assistant turned on the spot and walked off, without saying another word. The trio remained in hiding until they heard the faint noise of the limousine parked back on the road drive off.

"You think it's safe to leave?" Victoria asked. "I'd rather not die more than once today."

"Future Max said everything was fine once they drove off. After you."

"That woman was creepy as hell." Max noted. She decided to recover Victoria's phone herself, since Victoria and Chloe were each intent on making the other step out first, like a waddle of penguins in the Antarctic hoping someone else would be the first to dive into the sea. To be fair, they'd both be dead today but for Max's control of time, so some trepidation was understandable.

"You don't know the half of it." Victoria replied, quick to chase after Max once she'd stepped out. "She was always giving me these weird, unsettling glances, ever since I first met Nathan."

"She's been his personal chauffeur for that long? Is that normal?"

"She's clearly a bit more than a chauffeur." Chloe chimed in, effortlessly catching up and keeping pace. "It sounds like she's his personal bodyguard and enforcer."

The moment Max reached the lighthouse lookout point, everything went to hell. White light flashed and thunder roared, and Max grasped the sight-seeing map in shock. She looked up from the map
and noticed everything had changed. Dark clouds, shaped like huge towering anvils, dominated the sky. They were illuminated periodically by awesome lances of white, as lightning slashed its way through darkness. The wind speed was incredible, well into gale-force levels. Max found herself glad she'd grasped onto the map, otherwise she'd have risked being blown over at every gust. She looked down at the town, which had been a picture of tranquility seconds before. The waterfront was really taking a buffeting, with the odd piece of roofing detached and taking flight. Further out to sea, the real danger lurked: the enormous tornado Max had seen in her dream during Jefferson's class sat ominously, as if waiting for something.

"Chloe? Victoria?"

Max looked around for her companions. She didn't see them until she looked directly at her feet. Their faces were pale, and there were small bloody splotches on their clothing. Briefly touching one sent her recoiling in shock; her finger depressed into a small rent in the body, and additional crimson oozed. They were bullet wounds. Chloe and Victoria weren't alone, bodies of people Max knew, students from Blackwell and townspeople alike, were strewn around the cliff, all equally bloody and lifeless. It was then that Max saw the deer. It was semi-transparent, in exactly the same way Max got during time rewind, and stood on the very edge of the cliff near the lighthouse. Its front right hoof tapped impatiently, as if waiting for Max. She carefully released her grip on the sightseeing map and staggered toward it, barely able to stand upright under the wind. As she approached the deer, a boat, thrown airborne by the tornado, flew at speed into the lighthouse. Masonry crumbled under the crushing impact, and the entire top third of the lighthouse began to topple, growing larger and larger in her sight as it came down directly on top of her. Her right hand was just fast enough, reversing time an instant before she was crushed. Max looked back at the deer, only to find it gone. It was almost as though it had tried to kill her, lure her directly to the rubble's point of impact.

A newspaper clipping fluttered at the cliff's precipice, caught on a small rock. Max took the paper and was immediately drawn to the date at the top. Friday, October 11. That made this four days into the future. A hand grasped Max's shoulder, and she spun around just in time to see a rather boxy looking machine pistol levelled directly in her face. Everything went red, then black.

"Alright, this is starting to worry me. Max?"

The two taller girls stood in the lookout clearing, watching as Max left her position at the map and walked around silently, offering no response to their communication attempts. She was getting precariously close to the cliff-face.

"Max what the hell are you-"

Chloe and Victoria watched in horror as Max shook violently, and then began to collapse toward the edge. Chloe acted instantly, lunging forward to grab her. In so doing, she nearly went over the cliff edge alongside Max. Fortunately, Victoria managed to grasp one of her belt loops, and unceremoniously pulled on it, hard enough to set her two falling companions down on the edge of the cliff instead of over it. Chloe quickly recovered, taking the still unconscious Max into her arms. Her eye shot wide like saucers as she looked back toward the forest.

"Tori, do you see that?!"

As Victoria spun in the direction Chloe indicated, she briefly reflected that the 'Tori' nickname didn't really bother her that much anymore. She was actually becoming quite comfortable with it, not unlike the horrific jacket she'd been given.

Her newfound sense of comfort did not, however, extend to the apparition Chloe had indicated: a ghostly deer, standing at the edge of the forest path that led to the lookout. Its gaze was predatory, far
more suited to a tiger, and never leaving the unconscious Max. A cruel chill began to encroach on them, numbing their extremities. It was like the cold was infecting them, slowly burrowing, chewing its way into their cores. Victoria quickly seized a small stone and hurled it toward the spectre. It passed straight through the ghost's leg and landed close by. The sound of the landing seemed to startle it though, and it spun around and galloped back into the forest.

"I didn't like the way it was staring at Max."

Chloe felt that a little hypocritical, given how she and Max had stared at her during operation "remove clothes to remove step-dork". Then again, Chloe had given the odd suggestive leer herself, so didn't have that much room to complain. The sense of painful burrowing chill ceased, though the temperature didn't seem to go up much. Malevolent spectre or not, it really was getting cold.

Chloe continued to cradle the unconscious Max in her arms, while Victoria checked for injury. A slight touch to the side of her neck brought them both incredible relief. She still had a regular, if elevated pulse. Joy was compounded as a soft groan emanated from her lips, and she began to stir.

"Tori, Chloe… Oh my lord that was fucked up."

She looked up at them, head still gently supported by Chloe's hands.

"There was an enormous tornado." She whispered, as if still half in a dream. "And you were there, and you were there…"

"Alright Dorothy, let's see if you can walk." Chloe replied, gently helping her to her feet. "The temperature's suddenly dropped, these clouds look angry as fuck, and I think we just saw an actual ghost. You can tell us on the way back to the truck."

"So in short, you had what you're fairly sure was a prophetic dream about the town being ripped apart by a giant tornado, and us being murdered."

Victoria really tried to reel in her cynicism, but the scenario didn't do her any favours, and she could only claim to be partially successful in the end.

"It's the second time I've seen that tornado. I dreamt about it before waking up in Jefferson's class too." Max explained faintly, as Chloe lowered her into the truck seat. It had turned out that, no, Max couldn't quite manage walking back to the truck straight away. Fortunately, Chloe's mighty arms seemed once again up to the task, carrying her swiftly and with little noticeable strain. Then again, she'd picked up Victoria in exactly the same way, and although it might be unwise to state as much, it was patently obvious which of the two weighed more.

"You slept through class? Damn Max, it's like you read my old playbook. Victoria, you're going to have to go centre seat, unless you want to sit in Max's lap."

Victoria briefly imagined how ridiculous that would look: her sitting there like a child in their parent's lap, while at the same time utterly dwarfing the diminutive Max. Chloe finished fastening Max's seatbelt, checking that it had been secured with a couple of firm tugs.

"That's the only time I've ever actually slept through class though. I don't really understand it, I wasn't even that tired today."

"Let's return to the relevant points, shall we?" Victoria said, calling them to order in a manner practiced from her chairing of the Vortex Club. "Max's dream gave the exact date a tornado that will devastate the whole town is supposed to happen, and Sean Prescott's family is running some sort of
criminal organisation."

"Sean Prescott spent a long time staring out in the same way Max did when she had her vision. Do you think- no never mind it sounds retarded."

"Yes it does, Chloe. Say it anyway."

"Do you think he was having the same vision Max did?"

"Shared apocalyptic visions of the future?" Max's face sank into her hands, as she dealt with the idea. "We're talking twilight zone weirdness, aren't we?"

"You're already rushing around messing with the flow of time Max. We're well beyond noticing something on the wing. And frankly, if it weren't for the fact that he just ordered his creepy driver to try and off us, and we were in fact gunned down in your future dream, I'd say ignore the whole criminal element and focus on the tornado."

"Well yeah," Chloe concurred. "When you put it like that, the destruction of an entire town is a fuck-load more important than the average criminal conspiracy. Though since they are trying to eighty-six us, we'll just have to deal with both problems. Somehow."

"Do you think it might all be related somehow?" Max asked suddenly. "And if we stop the conspiracy it'll prevent this twister?"

Victoria felt a rage build within her. Not anything compared to Future Max's righteous fury. This was more like distilled annoyance. It was something she encountered all through her life, an impatience at her peers that made her occasionally want to scream "I'm surrounded by fucking idiots" at the top of her lungs. She fought it back. She'd made so much progress on her new "almost-friendship" with Chloe and Max, and really didn't want to throw a spanner in the works with a frank opinion of Max's skills of logic and deduction. She fought the rage down and did her utmost best to politely explain her objections.

"That's an extremely long bow to draw." She began, not quite managing to keep the harassed tone from her voice. "It's not clear if the Prescotts are the cause, or haven't already set things in motion somehow, in which case stopping them would have little effect. It could also be that they are just informed of the event by vision, like you were. It's not even clear Sean Prescott saw the same thing you did, or whether he was just having a 'senior moment'."

"So how else do we stop a tornado? We've got nothing else to go on and-"

"We don't." Victoria said sharply.

To Max, that sounded rather defeatist and fatalistic; to Victoria, it was stating the obvious.

"Look, you generally don't stop tornados. You get the people in front of the tornado out of the way and some place safe. Obviously. And thanks to the dream, we know exactly where the safe place is. Near, but not too near, the lighthouse."

Well, when put like that, Max felt a little stupid. After helping Chloe put Victoria in her place earlier that day, Max wondered if it wasn't fair that Victoria put them in their places too. As long as she had a good reason for doing so.

"So basically, we need a way to convince the entire town to evacuate to Arcadia Heights on Friday, or they'll all die."
Victoria looked like she wanted to offer further opinion, probably on the probability of a single tornado actually killing every single man, woman, and child in a town, but decided against it for expediency's sake. She was also a little distracted by the white flakes she'd noticed starting to hit the windscreen.

"What the fuck, is that snow?"

Delicate white speckles did seem to be descending.

"Snow in October, that's out of season, isn't it?"

Not to mention there was no forecast for any rain or snow this afternoon. Weather may be a chaotic system, but (in spite of what many believed) it could be predicted rather well within three days or so. And if the forecasts for the next day said zero chance of precipitation, you didn't suddenly get a snow flurry.

"Either the environment's more fucked up than we thought, or there's something else at work here. Strange, and beyond current science."

Well time travel, visions, and vengeful spirit deer, were already fairly clear evidence of that. Still, now they had evidence that, whatever was going on, it could drastically affect the weather with little to no warning, making the tornado vision all the more plausible.

Chloe slammed her truck into gear and began to slowly drive them back to Blackwell. She was a cautious driver, and it was snowing. Max was more than a little nervous: people out to kill them, a giant tornado, and on top of all that, she'd suddenly realised they had stayed out past the dorm hall's curfew. Victoria seemed mostly frustrated with the slow progress of the vehicle, or perhaps she was channelling that frustration to ignore the deeper threat to their lives. Max got the idea Victoria probably drove her sporty Mercedes to its best advantage, and not necessarily the legally mandated speed limit, at every opportunity. She imagined the three of them cruising down the highway in that, the soft roof retracted and wind blasting them in the face. Still, Victoria seemed to find some means of entertaining herself in spite of facing the twin spectres of murder and Sunday driving, stealing glances at Chloe's strong arms as they occasionally spun the car's wheel.

"You can try squeezing one at the next set of lights, I'll even flex them for you." Chloe offered.

Max could tell Victoria was determined to remain silent, and not even dignify that with a response. Why else would she be biting her lower lip?

There was a faint screech as 'Rolling Tetanus' came to a stop outside Blackwell Academy's main entrance. Maybe it was just the thin layer of snow on the road, but Chloe made a mental note to check her tyres anyway. Max looked at the time anxiously. 10 pm, well after curfew. Her consternation must have shown on her face, since she suddenly realised she'd attracted both Victoria and Chloe's attention.

"Maximus, is this your first time breaking school curfew? I'm so proud of my first mate right now!"

"Honestly Max, people do this all the time. Compared with having a hit man and a giant tornado after us, it's utterly laughable to worry about. Besides, even if they've actually bothered to post a guard tonight, we've got the backup entrance."

Chloe looked across at Victoria. She'd detected a subtle nervousness to her voice, in spite of the brave face she was showing. Not because they had to sneak back into the dorm room though, she was right, that was laughable. But Sean Prescott's psychotic driver-cum-assassin and the Tornado
really had her worried. It seemed that Victoria was cursed with the intelligence, imagination and caution to understand these dangers just a little better than either Chloe or Max. At the same time, she lacked the superpowers Max could rely on, and, well, whatever it was Chloe had. Insanity most likely, and a stupid dream of becoming Max's bodyguard, that she'd been nonsensically indulging in. Then again, the few letters Max had sent her over the five year gap had done little to dissuade Chloe's windmill chasing. They'd always seemed so eager for the two of them to finally meet up, rush off on an adventure together, show Max how many chin-ups she could do while weighted down, then demonstrate all her mad bodyguard skills in a bar fight.

She shook her head at the stupidity of that fantasy. What the hell kind of photographer needs a bodyguard? Then she remembered the events of the day. The kind Max and Victoria were, evidently. Come to think of it, that meant Chloe had actually achieved her life-long dream before the age of 20. Well, almost. She still wasn't being paid for it. Still, poor Tori; she'd have to do something to help her, and maybe arrange a little extra protection for her and Max while she was at it.

"Max, why don't you go ahead and check if they've actually got a guard on patrol tonight."

Max looked across at Chloe, incredulous.

"If a guard spots you, it'll be easier to rewind by yourself", she pointed out.

"Oh sure. Tell me how easy it'll be, then send me out alone in the snow while you drive home in comfort and Tori cowers at the front gate. It's not like either of you got mind-fucked by the full force of the aggro spirit deer either."

"Oh, it won't be like that, Maximus."

A sense of relief overcame Max. She shouldn't have judged old Captain Chloe so hastily. Maybe she was going to run interference, act as a diversion to draw off any security guard or-

"I'll cower here with Tori until you get back!"

Max ended up walking off toward the dorm, mostly thinking words spelled with under five letters.

That left Chloe and Victoria alone together by Blackwell's front gate. They stood in silence, leaning against the front wall of the entrance, the freak weather lightly dusting their clothes in ivory. Victoria withdrew a couple of cigarettes, lit them, then placed one in the strong hand of her companion. They exhaled in unison, and watched the thin sheet of smoke hang in the now freezing air.

"Victoria. You know I honestly do think you were pretty badass, slashing your hand open on glass to rescue me. You and Max hella saved my life. Then you saved me from taking the heat for that weed, and pulled me back onto the cliff, though you gave me a hella bad wedgie in the process. And you scared off the spirit deer, and you-"

Victoria held her hands up to calm Chloe's increasingly verbose recollection of events. She was quickly becoming overwhelmed. Victoria's greatest weakness was probably being complimented. Being complimented for actual heroics had her coming undone, and she had to stop Chloe before she turned to mush.

"I saw a person in trouble!" She snapped back quickly, head spinning. "Of course I did what I could to save them. It…"

Victoria held her hands up to calm Chloe's increasingly verbose recollection of events. She was quickly becoming overwhelmed. Victoria's greatest weakness was probably being complimented. Being complimented for actual heroics had her coming undone, and she had to stop Chloe before she turned to mush.

"I saw a person in trouble!" She snapped back quickly, head spinning. "Of course I did what I could to save them. It…"

She looked down, fidgeting for a second, trying to compose herself. She normally wasn't this lost for words, but then again she normally didn't have people praising her. At least not sincerely, anyway, the Vortex serfs had all done it because it was expected of them. The pause was becoming awkward.
God, just say anything. You've got perfect English marks, even better than for photography, trust your innate ability for self expression.

"I-It's not like I did it especially for you, or anything!"

There was a moment of deathly silence, and the look that then shot across Chloe's face was something to behold: The broad smile that heralded certain doom, and the smoke that rolled out of her nostrils as she failed to repress a snort. It all engendered a sense of dread quite unlike anything Victoria had known before. A sense that she'd just fucked up, monumentally, and was never going to live the aftermath down. She really shouldn't have marathoned that "Generic Animu Agent Blueberry" series in the weekend.

"I-It's not like I did it especially for you or anything." Chloe parroted, with only the most gentle touch of sarcasm.

FUCK.

"I appreciate that you did it anyway." Chloe suddenly said with all the sincerity she could muster, then in a moment of boldness, leaned over and gently kissed her cheek. Victoria's mind blanked. How the fuck did this punk suddenly become so damn suave, while still wearing a singlet and combat boots? And what would she be like if she actually cleaned herself up, and wore something respectable? An image of Chloe suddenly popped into Victoria's head, fully regaled in a tuxedo, hair combed and pulled back elegantly, and still throwing around that devil-may-care smile. Victoria fought desperately not to swoon as her mind fully digested it. She'd definitely have to photograph Chloe now, just as excuse to dress her in a suit. She quivered with anticipation, realising Chloe had moved even closer, and brought her lips to Victoria's ear. A whisper echoed in the night.

"Thank you, Tsun-toria."

Victoria flushed in frustration. Fucking blue haired beast. Hypnotising her with those strong arms and well chosen words of appreciation, only to bring her crashing back to reality with yet another obnoxious new nickname. And if that wasn't enough, Max had just returned and was watching them, an uncharacteristic glare on her face. It was just possible that she'd misread what was happening. Though Victoria wasn't exactly clear what was happening either when it came to Chloe. Her decision making process seemed to swing wildly between well thought out plans and raw impulsiveness, and sometimes both at the same time.

"And since you are such a badass, and there seem to be people out to murder us…"

Victoria's indignation was hushed as Chloe presented a brown paper bag, the kind bums tended to use to conceal a bottle of cheap spirits. Victoria took a peek inside and her eyes widened. The contents may not have been spirits, but they definitely packed a whallop. Her eyes utterly bulged as Chloe moved her hand to Victoria's cut-off jeans, reached inside, and stuffed the bag down the side of them. Well it's not like there wasn't a little extra space in there, them being Rachel's.

"Now you do know the basic rules of-" 

"I'm not an idiot! But don't you need this-"

"I've got a spare now, thanks to Nathan. I'm counting on you to keep Max safe till tomorrow, badass."

Night had well and truly fallen by the time Victoria and Max reached their dormitory building. Seemingly benign objects cast long, ominous shadows, dark gashes against the faint illumination
provided by the school's lights. Above all was the Prescott Dormitory, its roof blocked the
moonlight, casting a jagged, pale, yet near omnipresent gloom over much of the courtyard. The two
students slipped from shadow to shadow, trying to avoid leaving obvious tracks in the freshly fallen
snow. They gave the main entrance a wide berth, wary of the guard on station, who'd parked himself
on a bench and industriously busied himself with a newspaper crossword and a thermo of coffee.

"You're suddenly getting on surprisingly well with Chloe." Max spontaneously noted. Victoria
sighed. It was true, and while she could tell herself it was rather logical to befriend the local badass
when people were out to get you, she had to admit that there seemed to be something a little more
genuine than that going on. Though she'd also been getting on rather better than she imagined she
would with Max, her equally shy and terrifying little time-lord.

"I guess you help save each other's lives, spy on some criminal conspiracy, and get set on by a ghost,
and you can't help but change your opinion a bit. Though it's obvious you get along with her better."

Victoria was hoping that last part would pre-empt any drama on Max's part. Seeing Max's doubtful
expression utterly floored her. She locked gazes with the shorter girl, and found herself grabbing
Max's shoulders, forgetting her own usual distain for contact amidst a storm of indignation.

"Max, that girl's got a rather deserved rep as a savage bulldog, but she practically turns into a puppy
when you're around! It's obvious you mean the world to her."

Seconds ticked away before Victoria realised she was still holding Max in place. She quickly
retracted her arms, and tried to busy herself doing anything else.

"Tori, do you mind if I ask a stupid question you'll probably consider me juvenile for even posing."

"You've never worried about that before, so why start-"

"What's it like getting kissed?"

Part of Victoria was honestly impressed with that question. Completely owning your inexperience
and making the other party feel awkward instead. Of course another part of her was acutely aware
she was the other party.

"You mean on the cheek the way Chloe just did? And literally everyone else with a faux-French
gimmick does? If so the answer is overrated."

Well, in Chloe's case it hadn't exactly been, but that was more due to the shock of not expecting it.
And the whole "suddenly suave-as-fuck rescuer encroaches on her personal space" thing. Still, better
to play it down to avoid hurting Max's feelings. Besides, Chloe probably did it as a means to covertly
pass off her little gift, having noticed Max's quick return. That girl was smarter than she acted. Then
again, given how she often acted, that wasn't especially difficult.

"Yeah the cheek… Or elsewhere." Max replied and Victoria's eyes widened. "The lips, on the face." She quickly clarified.

Thank fuck for that clarification. For a second there that was sounding like a rather broad topic, and
quite possibly better covered in the school's health class.

"Max is this about that idiotic photo with Juliet?"

"Partially I guess."

Max wasn't completely sure what she was feeling. It seemed like the pain of being left out, excluded,
but raised by an order of magnitude and given a very personal dimension. The only thing Max had
gotten today, even on her cheek, was that damn Mosquito.

Victoria stopped for a second. They were half way around the Prescott Dormitory now, and had just
come across a particularly suspect looking scrub. It was easily large enough to conceal a person, and
the noise of breaking twigs could be heard from within. She carefully stepped around it at what she
hoped was a safe distance, half expecting someone to jump out and attack them that instant. Her
hand reached into her pants, ready to bring out Chloe's gift if needs must. Suddenly, something
rushed straight at her, moving like lightning. It was a tiny squirrel, which sprinted past her leg and
into some undergrowth. Fuck, she was on edge. And on top of that, Max was asking questions that
she was, in Victoria's estimation, easily pretty enough to have had the answers for years earlier!

"Look, in very general terms, if it's with someone you like, you can lose track of time. Excuse the
irony. You'll just indulge yourself, and suddenly realise you're running late. And if it's with someone
you really like, you'll probably decide you don't care about running late and carry on... indulging
yourself. Otherwise, you'll probably find yourself feeling like I do at the end of most Friday nights:
acutely aware of the time, and trying to think of an excuse to leave and go do something else with it."

Max felt there really must be more to it than that, even for a peck on the cheek, and that Tori was
grossly exaggerating how bad whatever (or perhaps whomever) she ended up doing 'most Friday
nights' was. After all, they'd both almost lost track of time when she accidentally pinned Victoria
against the wall, their eyes met, and they just sort of stared awkwardly at each other back in the girl's
bathroom, and they definitely weren't anywhere near locking lips then. She wondered what a similar
experience would be like with Chloe, then remembered. They'd linked hands, looked deeply into
each other's eyes, but rather than losing track of time, Max had actually reversed it, made time for her
in the most literal sense. She wasn't sure, but somehow that seemed even better. She turned back to
Victoria, whose attention was directed at the shadows ahead of them, and felt a sudden impulse born
of curiosity.

Victoria, meanwhile, was still looking around nervously, carefully scrutinising each dark corner and
shadow. Because of that, she didn't really notice Max leaning over toward her. She froze in shock, at
the instantaneous awareness of a sudden heat, a warm familiar presence pressed against her, and the
contact of soft full lips as they gently grazed the side of her cheek. She leapt back a foot, her heart
racing. The appearance of that doe-face had been as sudden as a static discharge, and just as
shocking.

"Tori, I think you were wrong. I mean you occasionally throw out a lame faux-French gimmick
yourself, yet I found that strangely satisfying. Definitely not overrated."

Victoria said the first thing that came into her head.

"…Merde."

It was clear Max had nothing to worry about. She and Chloe were perfect for each other. They were
both assholes who trespassed in her personal space without warning in the most delightful way and
fuck them.

"Thanks a lot Max." Victoria snapped. "I'm already worked up enough about someone trying to kill
us, without you trying to latch your gaping maw onto me like some weird uncle who's waited all day
under the mistletoe."

"I- I'm sorry Tori." Max quickly replied. Victoria seemed genuinely slightly shaken. "I can-".

"Don't be absurd, Max. I've told you before, your power is too valuable to use correcting minor
"Social faux pas. Just try to be understanding. Not everyone has superpowers to protect them from an assassin, and some of us that don't, get a little freaked out."

"They said they were going to do it 'indirectly' though," Max noted defensively, "so it's not like they'll jump out at us with a knife. How do you think someone goes about killing you indirectly, anyway?"

"I'd rather not." Victoria replied with indecent haste. "There, back of the building, second right most window, ground floor."

The ground floor wing of the Prescott dorm had a room out of service due to a burst water pipe. The leak, of course, had been quickly rectified by the ever vigilant caretaker Samuel. But the water damage inflicted on the room in the meantime had rendered it unfit for habitation, at least by the standards of trust fund students. Needless to say, Blackwell's student body had made good use of having a ground floor room that was never inspected. The window latch quickly found itself vandalised, to allow unmonitored access in and out of the dorm after curfew. A close inspection of the room would generally also yield a handful of illicit items, secreted away to avoid Madsen's storm troopers executing a surprise dorm inspection.

Victoria effortlessly vaulted the distance to the window ledge, then was forced to aid the shorter, less athletic Max. A tingle ran up her arm as she reached out past the window and they interlocked hands. Max's powers still terrified Victoria. They would always terrify her to some extent. But slowly that terror had evolved; the fear of imminent death or being used as a puppet had lessened, gradually being supplanted with a nervous thrill, not unlike riding a rollercoaster. The trembling anticipation as you were hoisted to a precipice, and about to take flight.

Max jumped and Victoria pulled. Max shot into the air and found herself partway through the window, where she successfully managed to balance, not quite able to remedy the situation by her own means without risking a minor injury. She half giggled and half groaned at the precariousness of her position, in a manner Victoria felt she wouldn't mind hearing more of. Victoria found herself rolling her eyes anyway. Impatience and frustration were expected from her, along with quick, expedient solutions, and she didn't want to disappoint in the supply of either.

"Wrap your arms round my neck, Max."

Max took the advice to heart, and Victoria began walking backward, slowly extruding her through the opening and into the room. Max's feet finally cleared the window, and her bottom half suddenly became unopposed by gravity. Her body swung down like a pendulum, crashing against Victoria's. The larger girl noted with some pride that for the first time that day, she'd actually managed to absorb Max's momentum without getting pinned against the wall or falling over. Of course, Max had used it as an excuse to hug her again, arms already tight around her due to necessity. Victoria noted with some annoyance that she'd reciprocated automatically, bringing a single hand around Max's back in an admittedly half hearted manner.

"You've been smoking. It kind of makes you smell like Chloe, but with less muscle and rough edges and more roses."

Victoria stared in disbelief; she suddenly felt labelled as weaker version of someone else, and the idea pained her. She was wearing her clothes and everything. She was especially pained, for reasons beyond her, that Max had been the one to say it. Infuriated, she began to pry Max off herself that instant, and strongly considered giving up smoking all together. She was not going to be known as Chloe Price lite! And how did someone smell like having rough edges anyway?
A brief yet incredibly awkward pause later, the two photographers were slinking down dorm corridors, en route to their own rooms on the second floor. Suddenly Victoria froze, catlike, having noticed the faintest creak on the dorm stairs. They advanced cautiously, and two shadows came into view, interlocked. It was a scene of amorous exchange in silhouette: a decidedly feminine figure pressed against the wall as a larger one leaned over, kissing and caressing. They took a couple of steps into the stairwell and glanced up. Victoria's face instantly became a picture of disgust, while Max was lost in a moment of curious fascination.

"Looks like Dana's found yet another boyfriend. That dolt Trevor. How many does that make in the past two weeks? Max?"

"Three, I think. Wowser." Max said vacantly, most of her mind momentarily lost to higher thought, her cheeks crimson. "And Trevor? I guess it's nice that he hasn't let the nasty injury he picked up skateboarding slow him down."

"Really, Max, it's almost like you've never seen a couple hook up before."

"Don't be ridiculous." Max responded defensively. "I've must have watched every Richard Gere movie there is."

Victoria snorted.

"Then just think of those, and don't base any future entanglement you may have on what Trevor's doing. It's clear the clumsy oaf hasn't got a clue. I mean just look at the way he's pawing at her!"

Max was pretty sure she already was.

"No finesse, no understanding, no tacit communication."

"Dana doesn't look that unhappy."

"Dana's clearly rather easy to impress. She'd probably fall head-over-heels if you quoted something remotely poetic at her. What did you say about an injury?"

Bathed in the soft illumination of their phone lights, Max showed Victoria the photo of the "skating incident's" aftermath. Trevor keeled over in agony, having somehow propelled his board into a rather sensitive spot. Sadistic glee spread across her face, temporarily displacing annoyed frustration.

"I guess that'll lower the risk of an unplanned pregnancy, at least." Victoria quipped, unaware of how on-the-nose her observation was. "Alright, lets go."

"We're going to just walk past them?"

"Sure. It's their fault for carrying on in public. I don't see why we should be inconvenienced just so someone else can get enjoyment. And if we stay here, they're only going to get more frisky. I'd rather not wait here and risk seeing them escalate their engagement to shucking the seafood."

Max stared blankly. "Shucking the seafood." She could almost understand that. At least in abstract.

"I am not waiting around for Trevor to be the latest in a long line of people to disappoint her!" Victoria clarified. For some reason, she was in the mood to make a scene, breaking out her phone to photograph the couple, flash turned on of course.

"Don't worry Dana," she called out, her voice easily identifying her in spite of the flash having caused the cheerleader momentary blindness. "I'm sure this will only increase your facebook
follower numbers. And it's positively lovely you've decided to care for a cripple. Perhaps you could offer to massage his wound while you're at it. Oh wait, you probably already are."

Trevor just stared, dumbstruck. Max was glad she wasn't the only one the phrase 'deer in the headlights' could be applied to. Clearly, Victoria was a little bitter Dana had more facebook friends and followers than her. And perhaps ever so slightly still annoyed about being Chloe-lite. Dana, on the other hand, wasn't going to take things lying down (current appearances not withstanding), and now that her vision was returning, decided to make an observation of her own.

"Victoria?" Are you honestly wearing an anarchist shirt? Fuck the system, now get me some cucumber sandwiches? You look like a wannabe version of that vigilante punk girl everyone's talking about. The one that beat up Nathan."

Clearly Victoria wasn't the only one who could accidentally manage to be on-the-nose.

"Don't complain about my shirt when you're only half wearing yours." Victoria managed in response as she hurried past, dragging Max along with her.

Max looked apologetic. "Don't worry, I'll get her to delete the pic later," she mouthed silently, as Victoria pulled her up the stairs.

"Richard Gere does have, from a purely technical point of view, an impressively romantic kissing technique, but most of the romance movies he's been involved in don't hold a candle to the true classics. Now 'Gone with the Wind' is a truly great piece of celluloid, based on an even better book."

For reasons beyond their comprehension, but perhaps inspired by walking in on Dana and Trevor, Victoria and Max had ended up engrossed in an in-depth discussion on the romance movie genre, as they continued on the way to their dorm rooms. Clearly, Victoria's preferences lay amongst the less politically correct classics rather than their more modern contemporaries.

Max repressed a snigger at Victoria's mention of 'Gone with the Wind' as they passed Stella's room. The lights were still on - Stella was probably intent on staying up all night again, putting in the hard graft to secure another perfect grade. Max's derision did not escape notice by Victoria, who seemed to take grave personal offence.

"Honestly, Max. You try to pass yourself off as a retro aficionado, yet you have no regard for a true classic like 'Gone with the Wind'?"

"No, it's just- Wait, let me guess, you imagine yourself as Scarlett O'Hara every time you watch it? Suddenly everything makes sense."

"I think she has many admirable traits." Victoria replied, desperately trying not to give a direct answer, as their leisurely pace continued. Kate had her lights on as well, though she was the polar opposite of Stella. Early to bed and early to rise the next day, a schedule practically burned into her by her staunchly conservative parents. It was practically unheard of to see her up at this hour.

"She's definitely a deeply flawed character," Victoria continued, "but she's a survivor, who rolls her sleeves up and does what she has to do to protect her family and their property and deals with enormous tragedy when certain other characters just up and leave. And she never gives up, even at the end. I think that's incredibly admirable."

"She's also narcissistic, almost to the point of parody. Disliking war, but only because it was a subject that didn't revolve around her."
An angry scowl now began forming on Victoria's face. They were almost at their respective rooms, the last two in the corridor. Victoria's on the left and Max's to the right, directly facing each other as befitting their status as photography rivals.

"Are you implying-"

"And she's disturbingly submissive in the bedroom isn't she?"

Victoria decided that perhaps she'd just better shut up. Unfortunately for her, Max knew a few of the more famous quotes from the movie, and seemed happy to shamelessly act them out.

"'-No I won't kiss you, though you need kissing badly! That's what's wrong with you! You should be kissed, and often! And by someone who knows how!'"

Max grossly hammed each line; each one she uttered burnt a progressively brighter red glow across the Blackwell Queen's cheeks. Victoria grit her teeth and reached for her dorm key, at the same time as she reached for a counter to Max's horrific acting.

"I guess I'm fortunate you're still completely clueless then, Miss 'Tori, What's Kissing Like?'-"

Something was wrong. She'd put the key where the door lock should have been, only it wasn't there. She noticed Max had suddenly covered her mouth in shock. She actually bothered to look at the door and realised it was already ajar. Semi detached Wood splinters covered a rent in the door frame where the bolt receiver should have been, and more lay strewn on the ground where it actually was. The door had been forced, probably with a crowbar.

Victoria's legs suddenly felt like dead weight, as her mind arranged a handful of facts in a decidedly unwelcome pattern. The Prescotts wanted her dead, and someone had broken into her room. What if they were still in there, waiting for her? She reached around to the side of her pants, thankful for the gift Chloe had left her. The .38 calibre revolver borrowed from David Madsen.

"Max." She whispered, and felt an almost electric touch in return as a small hand grasped at her shoulder. "Do you think you could stay back, be ready to rewind if anything bad happens."

Max had heard this plan before. It sounded very similar to the one that got Victoria beat up earlier in the day. Now she was using it again, but the stakes had been raised dramatically: a gun was in play.

"Tori? What the hell? Chloe gave you her gun? Do you even know how to use that?"

"It's a double-action revolver. You just stick your finger in the trigger guard when you're ready to fire, and pull the trigger."

She gripped the pistol tight in both hands, pointed forward and ready to use. She was no Chloe Price when it came to fire arms, so there'd be no casually holding the gun single handed and scoring bull's-eyes without even trying. But hopefully, she'd manage at least one out of six hits if it came down to a point blank exchange. She gave the door a kick, and it swung open effortlessly. Her room was an utter mess, though there was no time to think about that. No one visible, either. She leaned tightly to the doorframe, and then glanced around the corners, while keeping the gun in a ready to fire position at anyone she might find hiding behind them. She didn't have much experience in gun usage and no military training whatsoever, but even a moron could figure out that someone might be standing flush on the other side of the near wall, lying in wait. Still no one. She stepped inside, immediately rechecking the blind angles, and the room's wardrobe. Thank fuck, the room was deserted.

Confident she wasn't about to be murdered, Victoria looked around the room again, and her heart sank. Messy really didn't begin to describe what had been done to it. Someone had taken to her bed's
mattress with a knife, repeatedly slashing it long-ways. Most of her expensive outfits had received the same treatment, slashed to ribbons, and thrown to the floor. Her desk chair had several legs broken off. And that inane phrase Nathan had used earlier, "Snitches get stitches, bitches" had been slopped roughly over one of her walls with red paint.

She sat back on the edge of the bed, too exhausted to really emote much. She looked back at the doorframe and saw Max peeping in, worried.

"You might as well come in Max. Whoever did this is long gone."

As Max made her way to the bed, Victoria's eyes were drawn to a mysterious tin under her arm. After a moment of thought, Max joined Victoria on the edge of the bed. There was a slight ripping noise, as the added pressure on the bed propagated the tears in the mattress. Max acted instantly, trying to get up, take her weight off the mattress. Victoria waylaid her with a hand to the shoulder.

"Don't worry about it, the bed's already a write-off."

"God Tori, I'm sorry. This was such an awesomely laid out room too."

"Yes it was."

"I know it's not much," Max began, opening the tin, "But maybe a couple of these will make you feel a little better."

Victoria doubted anything of Max's could make her feel better right now. But as with Chloe, her nose once again betrayed her to give a dissenting opinion. Beautiful chocolate chip cookies. Her olfactory sense's insubordination not withstanding, Victoria still harboured misgivings that even chocolate baked goods could make her feel better. She took three anyway. Just to give them a fair chance. Her final conclusion on the matter was 'inconclusive', but somehow Max always made her feel a little uncertain.

There was one mitigating factor amidst all the destruction. Her swimsuit poster had miraculously been spared any damage. Victoria ran her hand down it slowly. Her mind went back to the cruise she'd taken on the family's new yacht a year ago, along with a few professional photographers invited to exhibit for the first time at the Chase family's gallery. One of them had confused her for a professional model, and begged the opportunity to photograph her. It had been the one time anyone had ever thought she was 'good enough' to be a model. Though she was easily tall and statuesque enough, she'd always picked up snippy remarks about little details. Things like her "fat wrists", "small pursed lips that made her look like a witch" and definitely her "man jaw". In other words, just about every little area of Max's she seemed to jealously obsess over.

Victoria took another look around at the carnage wrought on her belongings, her room. She belatedly took out her phone and rang campus security. That's what anyone would have done if someone broke in, wrecked your room, and left a threat smeared on the wall, wasn't it?

In a darker corner of Arcadia Bay, a cacophony rang out as a precision photography tripod crashed against a reinforced metal wall, having been flung at it in a fit of pique. Eyes stared blankly through black rimmed glasses at the point of impact, and the destroyed photography implement lying directly below it on the ground.

An unsophisticated and unhelpful display, though it was enjoyable to express one's true feelings rather than constantly hide them behind a false front.

The eyes followed a line away from the point of impact back to a coffee table, and on it the root
cause of the disturbance: a burner phone. It had seemed like such a satisfactory day, a couple of entirely procedural messages; nothing more than preparation for future opportunities to carry on the work, expand the red portfolios. Then, for two blissful hours in the afternoon after class, absolutely nothing. Everything must have been running according to plan, better than planned even. Then he'd found the back window of his car smashed, with Blackwell Security pulling Nathan Prescott out of it.

Did someone know?

Beating his most important 'little helper' senseless then putting him head first through his own car window seemed like a 'warning' worthy of a Francis Ford Coppola film. And it had been so artistically done. He'd had to fight off the urge to break out a camera and photograph the scene: there was an indelible beauty in the rage this mystery attacker had wrought, the casual disregard they had shown for either Nathan's wellbeing or the property of others. The way the cuboids of shattered safety glass had lightly scored his face when it was driven through the window, and then rained down on the concrete like a fine snow of slightly bloody diamonds. Still, he felt there was something wrong with the aesthetic, something more that could have been done. Perhaps there was not enough blood? Of course. He sighed, contemplating how much a possible shot could have been embellished by the addition of a crimson stream pouring down the door whose window Nathan was wedged through, dripping into a pool beneath. It was such a shame Blackwell security were swarming the place, and that Sean Prescott placed such irrational value on the life of his son. A quick nick of an artery would have made the scene so much more powerful. After all, the life of a true work of art was far longer than the natural life of a person.

Naturally he had made haste to a secluded spot to warn everyone on his special list of contacts. His phone was turned off. Instant disgust filled his mind: how sloppy, how inattentive. There may have been messages he had missed, warning of this event. A chance to stop the attack, and save himself the fallout with Sean Prescott, or perhaps sit back from a distance with a telephoto lens and capture a moment of true expression in progress. His disgust turned to white-hot rage when the phone reported the lack of a sim card. Someone was fucking with him. When had that happened? His burner phone had been tucked in his interior jacket pocket the entire day. Surely not during class. He never took the jacket off during class, it was part of the uniform, the mask. Then perhaps lunch break in the staff room? Students never went in there, so that would make it another teacher, or auxiliary staff member. That security officer Madsen was always giving him suspicious glances. Had he practiced some sleight of hand? Or was he giving the paranoid dolt too much credit? He gave everyone suspicious glances.

It would be too difficult to contact his 'little helpers' now, at least until tomorrow. He was hoping to run into one of them in the 'dark room', the name Nathan had given the photo studio he'd setup in the Prescott's bunker. Personally he hated the name: a pretentious label born from an imprecise mind. The place had nothing to do with the manual development of film, he exclusively used a high resolution digital camera and printer. One of his more trusted helpers was supposed to stop by today, to bring him a delivery of sedative. His plan was to get a report from them, use their phone to contact the rest of his helpers, and find out what damage this sim card thief had wrought. Instead, no one had arrived, and by now it would be too late. Most of his helpers would have returned to their dorm rooms, and it would raise a few eyebrows if a teacher suddenly marched in and demanded to speak with them. Especially those who didn't attend his photography seminars. No, he'd definitely have to wait until tomorrow to attempt damage control, and restore his contact network.

In spite of his helper's no-show, he had to remain in the bunker. He'd received a message on his regular phone asking about an "open lecture for charity", an emergency code to wait in the 'dark room' for further communication from his patron, Sean Prescott. Yet there had been no contact. Why? The man was due back in Arcadia Bay by now.
Eyebrows narrowed with rage, partially obscured by the rim of his glasses.

This was a punishment, a casual way of his rich patron to explain the order of things. He had failed, fucked up, and now he was being made to wait. Arrogant fool. No matter, there was work he could busy himself with. He withdrew the red folder entitled 'Kate', and was hit with an instant sense of calm. A magnificent choice, all his subjects were, but this one, none had been quite so innocent. A finger gently brushed the photograph, savouring the glazed over look on her eyes, body limp on the ground, her hands delightfully bound and helpless. True beauty in a perfect moment of corruption, they had been so lucky for the chance to use her. In an instant he ripped the photo out of the folder and tore it to shreds. Levels were off, he'd need to correct those and reprint. He made a note in his diary.

Which brought him to future business. The two competitions he'd been running concurrently. He'd whittled down the prospective candidates for each down to two. The same two. He smiled, and withdrew an envelope containing two photos. They showcased work from two very different artists.

A sentimental piece praising an exhausted father. How wonderfully traditional, meek, innocent. Quite unexpected from Victoria Chase, the normally aggressive, domineering, strumpet who embarrassed herself trying to seduce him at the end of every class.

And a declaration that one's own life was sufficiently heroic to be worthy of record. Magnificent arrogance. He wished he could have said he'd seen nothing like it, the truth was he'd seen it once, six months ago. Who'd have thought the quiet, shy Max Caulfield could reach Rachel Amber levels of self aggrandisement. Oh, but surely she'd protest, claim she was a stand-in that "everyone could relate to". In some ways that only raised the arrogance further. And it certainly didn't diminish the fact that she thought the title of hero was applicable to her.

Both were worthy entries into the everyday heroes competition. In fact he might have to pull some strings. Declare a tie and get them both invited to San Francisco. A degree of immortality was the least he could offer for such fine, budding photographers. But before that there was another matter to take care of: the other competition. The competition he really couldn't afford to hand out dual-winners for, and one that would offer a far greater degree of immortality – captured as art itself, rather than merely the artist. Both photos belied intriguing hidden natures: Max's showed an inner strength and arrogance, while Victoria's suggested a naïve innocence. He'd like to wait for their extra credit photographs to make his final decision, but felt confident enough at that moment to reach for a blank red binder. He smiled once more, picturing a pair of emerald eyes slowly glaze over, and the calmness that might bring him. He removed the cap of a spirit pen, and wrote "Victoria" on the binder's spine.

A cloud of despair hung over Victoria, as Madsen and his guards packed up to leave. They had made a sweep of the dorm, woken everyone up, coughed loudly when they reached the stairwell (Dana and Trevor seemed to have foolishly continued their activities there instead of moving to Dana's room), and generally proved themselves utterly useless. They were also less than sanguine about finding the culprit to Victoria's room vandalisation. Nathan was apparently in the clear, having been dragged off to hospital under police escort before the damage was done. According to Madsen, "with the number of people who tended to frequent Victoria's room, singling out the guilty party would be a challenge." Victoria couldn't help but feel there was an insinuation somewhere in there, which she didn't care for.

The offer had been made to put her up in a local hotel until the room could be sorted, but given how late at night it was, it had been suggested if she considered her room uninhabitable, Victoria might find it easier to just 'bunk with a friend'. Victoria found the suggestion pathetically lazy, but accepted
it anyway. With someone out to get her, the last thing she wanted was to be alone and isolated, where she could be picked off. Of course, there'd been one person Victoria had immediately made a beeline to request the hospitality of.

"Max, do you think I could stay the night with you? I really don't want to stay in my room the night after someone's run a knife down my mattress, and slashed half my belongings."

There was a definite weariness about her, but also a certain defiance. The well hidden virtuous side of her legendary stubborn arrogance.

"Um, ok but what about Taylor? She's been a completely loyal friend to you, and you've known her much longer."

"I'd rather not involve her in this, in case they target her as well Max, and I feel safer with you since you have, well, a superpower."

A strange feeling of sadness came over Max at those answers. They were entirely logical, but Max had been hoping for something different. Perhaps that Victoria actually wanted to stay with her, or even trusted her more than any of her other options. She chided herself for her stupidity. Taylor and Victoria had been the closest of friends for years. Max had only known Victoria since she started attending Blackwell, and the only Victoria categories she dominated in were provoking angry and frustrated gazes.

"Um, no problem Tori."

Two minutes later, Victoria walked into Max's room pushing a mobile clothes rack while somehow still managing to cradle four pairs of expensive shoes in her hands. An orange satin gown clung suggestively to her, displaying around as much leg as Taylor's jean shorts. The gown seemed to be a virtual paradox, it made one incredibly curious as to what might lie beneath, while at the same time, putting enough on display to almost outright show you.

"Critical supplies I managed to salvage." Victoria explained. "I am not wearing that 'fuck the state' special any longer than absolutely necessary."

She had however, very carefully hung the anarchist shirt and flannel jacket on the end of the rack. She was taking very good care of the borrowed items. Max felt a little alarmed when the gun made its appearance. She reminded herself that Chloe had been safely carting around two of them the whole time they'd been together, though that didn't really make her feel better. She did feel slightly more relaxed when Victoria laid it on the nightstand, barrel facing away, and concealed it from view under a face towel. At least she didn't need to look at it now, or lay on it; she'd have probably freaked if Tori wanted it under her pillow.

Victoria allowed the orange gown to slip off her shoulders, and slink smoothly down her long arms, before being caught in her right hand. She casually tossed it toward Max's desk, and watched it parachute gently over her laptop computer. Something caught in Max's throat. Beneath the gown was a largely transparent chemise, clearly a little too small, but in a very good way. Occasional pieces of strategically embroidered black lace provided an almost token, yet utterly infuriating, attempt at modesty on her top half; and the only additional protection her nethers had was from an ornate g-string. It was a stark contrast with the baggy night shirt and shorts which hung off Max's waif-like frame; Victoria's outfit made Max feel like a child, though perhaps a rather lucky one.

"I don't really have much in the way of night clothes here at Blackwell." Victoria's honeyed voice explained. "I normally sleep nude, and my blouses don't make for good night clothes. Most of them have been slashed by the intruder anyway."
"Don't worry Tori, you've made me seethingly jealous." Max managed, quickly climbing into the bed and scurrying beneath the sheets. She didn't want to give either of them the opportunity to compare her figure with Victoria's.

"It's only fair. Chloe made me rather jealous this afternoon as well."

"Oh right. She was always athletic, running everywhere, always in motion. But I never realised she'd become so, um, so 'defined'." Max's voice became ever so slightly more dreamy. The slightest hint of annoyance and frustration crept into Victoria's answer.

"Yes. I suppose that made me a little jealous as well."

"What were you originally jealous of-"

"Never mind." Victoria quickly interjected, beginning to climb in alongside Max.

"I'm sorry it's only a single bed. There's not much room." Max shuffled has far as she could against her wall, trying to offer Victoria as much space as possible.

"That's fine Max. It's a lot more room than Chloe's tiny closet. I wouldn't be able to fit my shoe collection back home in that space, let alone my clothes."

Victoria joined Max beneath the sheets, relaxing into the warm spot Max had just vacated. While there was definitely more room than Chloe's closet, both Victoria and Max were still uncomfortably close to the bed’s edges, and getting any closer to one another tended to result in awkward pokes from elbows. After some shuffling around, they mutually came to the conclusion that lying side on was the most comfortable compromise.

Though she had her eyes shut, Victoria couldn't find her way to peaceful slumber. The events of the day came flooding back into her mind: Nathan jabbing the pistol into Chloe's gut, and pulling the trigger. His fist suddenly appearing in her peripheral vision, an instant before being knocked out in a total betrayal of her trust. The revelation that her hero and mentor, Mark Jefferson, was a criminal. And Sean Prescott nonchalantly ordering his hatchet woman, that horrible lady whose sinister gaze she'd endured since childhood, to kill them discretely.

"Max." Victoria whispered. "Please don't surprise me like you did outside again. I know it's rather amusing, but I'm really worried about this 'Grey' woman Sean Prescott sent after us. And after you've seen your room cut up like that, and everything else that's happened today…"

Max looked closely at the larger girl's outline beneath the sheet. She was actually shaking, ever so slightly. Max had always been scathing of Victoria's past treatment of others, so to have accidentally contributed to putting her in this state, even as a joke, made her feel like a hypocrite. Blindly following her future self's guidance, she had done even worse, unwittingly enacted a scenario of fear and danger, designed to ensure Victoria's loyalty. She had to help Victoria somehow. Comfort her. She gently placed her hand on Victoria's shoulder, then softly stroked down the length of her arm; upon reaching her hand she gently squeezed it. Victoria opened her eyes, glanced at the point of contact, and inhaled sharply. Goosebumps broke out all down her arm. Just what she needed right now, Max's hand of destiny.

Then in an instant, her sardonicism turned to sincerity, as other memories flooded her mind. Max undoing tragedy with the same hand that now engulfed her own, and allowing them to save Chloe. Then putting the same power to the far more trivial, but still appreciated, task of helping Victoria with the Vortex Club situation. And Chloe being pulled back in time by Max's power to return the favour, and save Victoria from Nathan. She felt her breathing slow, though the goosebumps
remained. Max may have the ultimate power in the universe, but Victoria knew that power was, literally and figuratively, in a very safe pair of hands. Her fingers intertwined with Max's, and she pulled Max's hand in close, draping the arm over her body, while holding the hand tight against it.

Victoria imagined they must look ridiculous. Her statuesque form the little spoon while the diminutive Max played the big one. For the first time since her teenage life began, she didn't care. With Max nearby, Victoria felt safe, and with the power of time literally draped over her the way Max's right arm was, that was an entirely legitimate feeling. She wriggled backward, pushing herself tightly into her Lilliputian protector's grasp. Somehow this all just felt right. Max had been her rival since the start of the academic year, and ever since then she'd worried about the waif breathing down her neck. She shut her eyes and felt Max's shallow exhale. What a silly thing to have worried about, metaphorically or otherwise.

Across the hall and one room down, Kate Marsh sat in a mire of impenetrable gloom. To think things had actually been looking up today. First Max had saved her in class, then she'd done something to Victoria. Kate wasn't sure what, but the bullying texts she'd been getting from her and her "flying monkey" Taylor ceased, and the "Kate's video" site seemed to have been deactivated. Then it had almost seemed like divine justice had struck – Victoria became the victim on her own video. Kate couldn't believe this justice truly holy though, as Max had been made a victim in it as well. She liked to think the all-powerful capable of avoiding friendly fire incidents and collateral damage.

But Kate's hopes were soon dashed. Courtney Wagner had quickly stepped up to fill the void Victoria had vacated as principal tormentor. And while the video had been taken down, most of the damage had already been done. Cruel messages from Kate's congregation were swarming her, both electronically, and by snail mail. She even received a few bile-infused phone calls. Many attempted to remain anonymous, but the communications that truly hurt Kate were the signed ones. Messages from people she believed to be friends from church decrying her as a slut, a whore. Her own aunt penned an elegantly written letter accusing her of being a Jezebel, and she received an email from her Mother calling it a 'mistake' to let her have any freedom at all.

And behind all of that, something else lurked, slinking from shadow to shadow in the back of her mind. She could scarcely remember the party she'd disgraced herself at, save one detail. One kind person who seemed to realise something was wrong, and offered to take her to the hospital ER. She dozed off in his, Nathan's car, but she woke up somewhere horrible. With something horrible. Something with a soft voice and surgical gloves, surrounding her with white but making her feel submerged under dark filth. Blinding her with flashes and binding her limbs. And handling her carefully, oh so carefully. But not gently. A nightmare she couldn't wake up from, couldn't remember, but at the same time was too terrible to truly forget. Until she finally did wake up, not in a hospital room as was promised, but lying half frozen on a park bench on the outskirts of town.

She wanted to keep crying, but no more tears would come. It was like she'd somehow exhausted her ration of emotion, and was left feeling nothing but emptiness and cold. She rocked backward and forwards with her knees curled up, wondering if she'd be able to get any sleep at all tonight. Somehow, she doubted it.

Chapter End Notes

There's the introduction of one outright original character in this chapter, Sean Prescott's chauffeur and hatchet-woman. I'm generally wary of inserting original characters, but it
felt like if I was going to have Sean as a major force he'd need a minion and enforcer to do his bidding. Here she'll probably mostly be an extension and enactor of Sean Prescott's will. Sean Prescott himself is a bit of a blank slate, all we really know about him is he has designs on drastically reforming Arcadia Bay, wants to build on land important to native Americans, and likes to dress his son in a sailor outfit. Obviously I'm also using the (bizarrely deleted) plot point that the Prescotts, and perhaps a few other people in Arcadia Bay, seemed to have foreknowledge of an impending disaster.

To be honest, in the canon game it sort of surprised me that Jefferson turned out to be able to manipulate the Prescott family so completely, and wasn't in any way worried that someone with as much power and influence as Sean Prescott wouldn't retaliate for casually off-ing his son. Or just decide Jefferson was a loose end, even if he didn't suspect him as the culprit in Nathan's death.

I know (if I was evil and super rich), and knew that the guy my (recently deceased) son had insisted I give a bunch of resources to, had repurposed my secret underground bunker to drug school girls and photograph them, I'd probably want to take measures to ensure that didn't become public knowledge. Maybe call up a hit man and ask if they had a discount rate for dealing with hipsters.

Actually if I was evil, super rich, had a secret underground bunker, I'd probably just push a button on my chair, watch Jefferson fall into a shark tank, then go back to stroking my Persian cat.
Awakenings

Chapter Notes

Please note that there's some stuff in this chapter that gets a bit unpleasant (nightmares resulting from Nathan).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

She awoke in a room of dull grey, curled on the ground in the fetal position. She recognised the room. She had been there before. She recognised him as well, the room's other occupant. He was standing over her, the gleam of a smile burrowing across his face like a worm. Thin rat-like eyes stared into her. He laughed, and brought up his camera. Flashes seared her eyes over and over, as she flopped around, trying desperately to will her muscles into action. She focused with all her might, and managed to make her arm lazily move. That only seemed to amuse him further. More laughter, more clicking of the camera shutter, more flashes blinding her. Her hand finally reached her jacket. He operated his camera undeterred, kneeling, and straddling her, camera shoved in her face to get the close up, to capture her horror. Her terror. Her despair. His breath was putrid. She groped blindly inside her jacket, finally grasping a familiar wooden grip. His laughter broke into hysterics as the gun barrel was brought up. She tried to line up his head, but her arm barely had the strength to raise the gun to his jaw-line. He seemed to find that especially amusing. She pulled the trigger over and over again, wiping the smile off his face rather literally. Blood, and thicker, more substantive things fell from his maw, splattering her face. He screamed in a high pitched whine, which was quickly drowned out by a sick gurgling as he collapsed on top of her. She was still pathetically weak, but summoned all her reserves and managed to shove him off. The act of doing so detached what little of his jaw remained, brushing the side of her cheek before falling to the ground alongside the rest of him.

Chloe wiped the bloody paste from her cheek in disgust. Bastard had stolen both her dignity and a last kiss. A lamp post suddenly crashed through the room's window, shattering it and driving straight through the wall behind. A colossal wind immediately invaded, scattering papers, photos, and assorted knickknacks toward the ceiling. She staggered to her feet and looked out the shattered window. There was a roar, not unlike an express train, as a swirling grey murk hurtled toward her. It engulfed the building, ripping it apart and pulling her skyward. A mess of debris flew past her, both bits of buildings, and bodies. The bodies always seemed to be facing her as they shot past, so she couldn't help but look at their faces; some were unknown to her, but others she knew: that polite religious girl who'd told her off for smoking in front of the primary school's bus stop years ago, that cliché fisherman who was always shouting "by Neptune's beard" from the docks, Police Sergeant Berry, who'd pulled her in for more than a few misdemeanour infractions then arranged to give her warning after warning rather than a formal prosecution. Then her Mother, Joyce Price. Someone who truly deserved her respect, yet had never really been given it. Not by her. There was one more thing she saw. A sheet of corrugated iron, ripped from who-knows-where, flying at speed into her neck and neatly bisecting it.
For a second time, Chloe woke. This time she was in her own bed, her heart thumping against her chest. Her neck was being violently squeezed, and her eyes darted round the room in terror, looking for the cause, the assailant. It took her a second to realise it was her own hand doing the choking, subconsciously trying to act out the end she'd seen in her dream, her decapitation. She quickly relaxed it, and was rewarded with the ability to breathe again. She checked the time: it was the crack of dawn, yet the room was still dull. The first rays of the morning sun should have appeared by now, bathing Chloe's room in a warm light, filtered through the Flag she flew in distress on her back window. Today there was nothing; the sun was obscured by clouds, the residue of the storm that appeared out of nowhere yesterday to dump that freak snow flurry.

She thought back on the dream. It was the moment after Nathan had drugged her, when she'd woken up in his room, but embellished with gratuitous violence. And a tornado. In reality, she'd just kicked out wildly, knocked over a lamp, and staggered out the door. She definitely hadn't killed anyone. Not until yesterday, where she'd fired in retaliation to his stomping Victoria's head, and made a mess of everything behind his own courtesy of a single hollow point round. Max had erased that moment from the timeline, brought both Victoria and Nathan back to life. It existed nowhere except in her head. At the time Chloe had been overjoyed: her first mate coming through for her in the most unimaginable way possible, manifesting superpowers just to help her. In the moment, she'd thought herself relieved of the burden, and in all practical senses she had. But with the excitement of yesterday gone, she found herself able to see it every time an idle thought crossed her mind, clear as anything. A pink spray hitting the parking lot wall, and Nathan keeling over with a hole in the back of his skull.

She found something to wear and staggered downstairs for breakfast. David sat at the table, his face awash with exhaustion. From what Chloe gathered before she went to sleep, he'd been dragged back to work at midnight, something about vandalism of a dorm room. The tips of his moustache had turned white, coated in milk from the bowl of cereal he periodically assaulted. Beside him was a stack of mail, divided into two piles: bills and overdue bills. There were a couple of hand-written letters too. Who writes hand written letters anymore? Chloe sighed wistfully. Max did, for one; the oh so rare letters Max sent had been a real lifeline for her in a time where she had nothing else. Then she had Rachel, and things were amazing. Then Rachel went away. But the letters still came. Nowhere near as often as she'd have liked, but they still came none-the-less.

"Chloe, have you got those samples of handw-?"

He was floored momentarily by Chloe’s blank sorrowful gaze. He'd seen it enough times in the mirror.

"Christ. Tell me you haven't done anything stupid. Tell me-"

"Calm the fuck down." Chloe replied, shoving two slices of bread in the toaster. "The 'missing gun' hasn't been fired so much as once."

There was something different about Chloe's voice this morning. It wasn't exactly quieter, but it seemed more tired than normal. Usually, it carried an undeniable energy, especially when delivering profanity. The dream must have really taxed her, because she just felt sort of empty. David was familiar with that tone as well, having heard himself speak in it on a few occasions.

"Then why do you look and sound like you're ashamed of living?" He demanded.

"I've got a nosy asshole for a stepfather."

That really wasn't called for. It led to an awkwardly long pause, David deciding he'd just have another few bites of his cereal and put on a wounded face rather than reply in kind. This new guilt
trip routine David had been working her over with was far more effective than their usual shouting matches. Once was luck, twice – he'd obviously changed up his tactics, figured out how to get to her. Bastard. The silence chewed away at her, until finally interrupted by her toast popping up in the toaster. That did it, she had to say something, maybe not apologise but at least explain herself.

"Look, I've had a really nasty dream – a near miss I had in the past, that could have gone really bad."

"Bad dreams about the past? Can't imagine what that's like." David retorted, taking a break from the cereal to swallow his medication.

Chloe wondered if David knew he could overplay the whole guilt trip thing, as she finished scooping the last of the marmalade across her toast.

Joyce Price walked in, already dressed for work at the Two Whales diner. She briefly kissed David, before suddenly recoiling and reaching for a paper towel. She hadn't noticed the milk on his soup strainer on the way in. Good. Parents (well, parent and step-parent), should know not to enact displays like that in front of their children. It was practically child abuse.

"Chloe, please tell me you're going to do something with your life today."

Joyce's voice sounded exhausted. It seemed everyone in the house was tired this morning.

"Actually I'm meeting an old friend… and maybe a plus one."

Chloe almost managed a smile, or as close as she could get to one while proceeding to demolish her toast, at the thought of first mate Max coming back into her life. And bringing adventure with her. She felt a little of her old energy returning. Perhaps they could even find out where Rachel had disappeared to. And Victoria really hadn't been that bad yesterday, after a few false starts she'd actually been pretty amazing. Still, if she was going to put Max down as an 'old friend', then it was a grand honour to be a plus one.

"Are these the same two friends you brought back into the house yesterday? The ones who brought drugs into the house? You know they were up to all kinds of trouble at school too? They seem almost as bad as your last friend, Rachel."

And here's where the family moment really goes downhill, Chloe thought. For some reason, Joyce's presence always amplified any troubles David and her were having. Perhaps David felt the need to act differently when in Joyce's presence, afraid that if he didn't speak up, then Chloe's would be the sole side of things Joyce heard. Perhaps David deliberately avoided topics he knew would lead to conflict when they were alone, but when Joyce brought them up he felt obliged to put his two cents in. Whatever the case, Chloe wasn't about to let him badmouth Rachel Amber.

"Rachel was literally the top student in school!" She protested.

That much was true; she had a perfect 4.0 GPA, and a ton of extracurriculars. Chloe suspected that might be an unspoken part of the reason Miss 3.9 GPA, Victoria, treated her like the Antichrist. "And it was just a joint man, fuck."

"Chloe, you know we've told you to be discrete with your and your friends'... habits so they don't reflect on David. With how short we are on money, David losing his job could be the end of us."

That was a reasonable request, and Chloe knew it. However David seemed to take more interest in the earlier part of Chloe's protestation: that Rachel was a good student. For some reason, he'd always been deeply suspicious of Rachel. And today, he seemed to have some brand new ammunition he wanted to try using against her.
"You know, I got a message from Blackwell IT this morning. Seems some of these 'top students' hacked the school computers a long time ago and have been downloading tests and model answers ever since. I wouldn't be surprised if Rachel had been one of them."

He paused his rambling for a moment, to take a sip from his coffee. He was grumpy. He'd had a midnight call-out, and now had to deal with the fallout from these hackers.

"It'd certainly explain how she managed perfect grades while spending all day getting high with you and that dealer friend. They only caught on to the hack now, because certain student antics yesterday made it obvious my new surveillance system had its records accessed. Now I've got to memorise another damn password in case my own account was compromised. One with numbers and symbols as well as letters this time."

"Just replace the E's, A's and O's with 3, 4, and 0, then put a dollar sign at the end, David." Joyce wisely counselled; clearly no one was guessing the password to her gmail account.

"No way did Rachel cheat like that." Chloe shot back. Both she and David seemed intent on completely ignoring Joyce's contributions, which amounted to attempts to draw the conversation away from conflict. They were similar in that regard, though neither would ever admit it. "She used to do some of her homework here, and I never saw her with a cheat sheet. In fact I had to help her with her assignments a few times, and she definitely didn't have any model answers."

A flat expression of disbelief adorned David's face. Joyce's seemed to be saying 'Oh Chloe…'. To be fair, anyone who'd seen Chloe's report cards for her last couple of years in school would be similarly sceptical.

"I did help her! At least a little. Anyway the point is I never saw Rachel cheat like that."

"The fact remains that Rachel hung around a drug dealer all the time – one I have photos of dealing in the Blackwell Academy car park, so don't start that 'not a real dealer' crap."

"Chloe, David's just worried about your choice of friends. A lot of the new friends you've brought over, even Rachel, have been a bit wild."

"As if Max could ever be described as wild." Chloe huffed. Joyce's face suddenly lit up.

"Hold on, the old friend you're off to see is Max Caulfield? Well why didn't you say so. David, Chloe knew Max years ago before she started going through her rebellious phase... phases. That girl wouldn't hurt a fly, and I really can't see that changing with the passage of time." Joyce leaned in close to David and quietly added "she used to rein Chloe in when she got a bit exuberant, too."

Chloe thought of Max's hoodie upstairs, secreted away and covered in her teacher's blood. Technically 'Mr Jefferson' wasn't a fly, though she suspected that Max's future self would attest to them having some similarities: she'd probably say they both ate shit, for one thing. Chloe just had to hope that when her mother looked over Max, it wasn't soon after taking a selfie.

"She's able to rein Chloe in?" David mumbled at Joyce in quiet disbelief. "Next, you'll be telling me she has god-like powers."

"I think I just did." Joyce quietly joked back at him, before raising her voice to a more audible pitch. "Chloe, why don't you offer to bring Max and this 'plus one' to the two whales diner for breakfast. I'll look them over and make sure she hasn't suddenly become a remorseless murderer while no one was looking. Will that do, David?" She asked, already on her way out of the house to work.

"It'll have to." He gruffly replied.
Chloe finished chewing the last of her toast and grabbed the milk carton. There was only about a cup left in it, so she just upended the thing and swallowed. David mused that while Chloe definitely did not take orders like a soldier, she could eat at least as fast as one. She checked that Joyce was out of earshot before turning back to David.

"I'll get you the handwriting samples this morning. Somehow." She said quickly on the way out.

David stared blankly in disbelief. Chloe was actually leaving the house before him, and trying to follow through on her promises. Something must have come over her – she was never awake this early. Perhaps this 'Max Caulfield' had superpowers after all.

Just outside of town at Blackwell Academy, the dull glow of the overcast dawn permeated Max's dorm room, bathing two students in a gentle light. Slowly awakening them from a far more pleasant slumber than the nightmares Chloe Price had endured.

Victoria Chase felt the embrace of consciousness, awaking to find herself protected from the cold morning bite by more than just blankets. She felt Max behind her, draped over her, encasing her in a cocoon of living warmth. She turned her head and let her eyes settle on Max. She was still asleep, those wonderful doe-eyes shut tight to the world, her full lips pursed slightly, taking slow regular breaths that tickled Victoria's neck with each exhale. She allowed herself a moment to luxuriate in Max's embrace. To lean back, close her eyes and press herself tight against her tiny protector. Feel the kiss of their bodies denied only by thin layers of fabric. For the first time in what seemed like forever, her face took on an honest expression of joy.

Another feeling lingered on the periphery of Victoria's awareness. A subtle, yet undeniably enjoyable ache. She tried to roll slightly and felt a tug at her chest. Her breath caught as the ache exploded into her mind's forefront. She gasped as she realised the cause: Max's hand of destiny had slipped free of her own during the night. It had migrated a little north, where it had found ample purchase. Her face flushed hot and her brain short circuited. Her breast was being cupped by literally the most powerful thing on the planet, its every gentle touch a wonderful agony.

She had to regain her composure. This was pathetic, Max wasn't even awake. She reached for the all powerful intruder, intent on gently decoupling herself. Something made her reconsider, most likely hearing her own voice whimper incoherently. She found herself running the tips of her fingers down Max's forearm instead, gently encouraging rather than removing, and threw her head back as Max's own hand flexed in reciprocation. More than a few others had held her like this. None of them had felt as good, as tender or as safe. 'Safe'. That was the word. For once in her life Victoria felt truly safe, secure, perhaps even able to be herself. And absolutely no one could be allowed to see her like this! Victoria Chase melting in the arms of Max Caulfield; it was completely wrong on so many levels, and that made it feel even better. She felt she should make another attempt to stop this. She had to, Max had no idea what she was doing. No idea what she was doing to her either. She was about to intervene, when Max's lips opened a crack to inhale, ever so slightly brushing Victoria's ear.

"Chloe..."

Victoria's face instantly turned scarlet. Rage boiled within her. Every fucking moment she found herself in ended up ruined! She twisted her neck and her eyes darted back to Max. Her eyelids were still shut tight: She was sleep-talking! Taking her into her arms and dreaming about someone else! She couldn't understand her own reaction. Why the hell did this matter so much to her? None of the others had mattered. Well maybe one other had. But none before that, or since! Her eyes began to well up, feeling an idiot. Toyed with, humiliated, destroyed. Fuck Chloe Price! That stupid over-muscled punk who'd teamed up with Max to tease her yesterday, and who'd saved her from Nathan,
and carried her off in those stupidly over-muscled arms, and stupidly called her a badass.

"...Chloe move over..." Max's whisper continued. "We have to make room for Tori... We can do it together..."

Victoria's face remained scarlet, the threat of tears still menaced, but a whole mess of other feelings were now competing with her rage.

"...Four hands are better than two..." she whispered.

Mathematically and context-less, a very reasonable statement. In her current state though, it sent Victoria's mind spiralling out of control. Victoria secretly longed for someone she could be herself around. No masks. Two truly loving, accepting hands would be worth more to her than any number of others. But what if all four of the hands were loving, understanding, the mathematical part of her brain shot back. Dedicated to her and completely trusting. Her legs shuffled subconsciously, further confusing her contemplation, and thoughts of Chloe's toned body, fresh in her mind from yesterday, joined with those of Max's slender physique in the forefront of her mind. Caressing her, provoking her, making her theirs.

She summoned all of her will and managed to snap back to reality, quickly clambering out of Max's embrace and adopting a sitting position on the bedside, lest she was pulled back under by the merciless predator that clearly lurked beneath Max's own mask of innocence. Besides, the town was about to be ripped apart by a giant tornado and she was seriously contemplating a threesome? Dear god she was a pervert. Of course it was all Max's fault. Letting her stay the night when she was terrified, cramming them both together in that tiny bed and acting as the big spoon. Holding her hand as they drifted off to sleep. Then whispering in her sleep about some ménage à trois or threesome or whatever the hell it was.

Victoria suddenly realised that, although Max was still soundly asleep and blissfully ignorant of what had transpired, there were hundreds of faces watching her. Hundreds of Max's faces watching her. The great assembly of Max Caulfields that comprised her selfie wall looked down in judgement. She fought a patently stupid urge to blush, and another to study each and every one of them that instant. To critique their artistic merits, see Max's development as a photographer, or however much of that selfies might show. See her physical development too, though that was likely to be just as subtle: Max had a waif-like physique at 18, she'd either look identical at 13 or been a literal baby. Or fat. Max could have been fat as a child. Victoria tried to imagine a chubby Max, that had somehow shed its excess over her teen years. She really couldn't manage it. She found a shot where Max looked younger: she had an awful haircut – a pony tail and a woefully unwise application of dark hair dye. She looked sad, almost in shock. Victoria imagined she would too, if she had hair like that. Still it seemed slightly deeper. She flipped the photo – it had a caption "Just arrived in Seattle, didn't even get to stay in A.B. for William's funeral." Damn. She'd always maintained Max looked totally tragic. It seemed she was right.

She scanned a few of the other photos. Almost all of them seemed to be from the five years Max had spent up in Seattle. Some of the earlier ones were noticeably rougher than her current offerings. In a few she hadn't quite got the knack of angling her arms to exclude them from the shot, and one or two were slightly blurred. A couple even had an invading finger partially occlude the corner of the frame. How amateur. Even then they held a charming innocence and simplicity, which captured their respective scenes well. In fact as her eyes lingered on each photo, Victoria almost swore she could imagine herself injected into the scenes before her, even hear the events displayed play out. On a whim she ran her finger down a photo. She recoiled instantly as a feeling of terror suddenly encroached on her. In a strange way it reminded her of how she felt holding Chloe's gun. It was like there was an incredibly dangerous power lurking, that could change everything in an instant.
Victoria quickly got up and moved away from the photo wall. She definitely needed a moment's separation, not just from Max, but from her photos too. It was clear she was suffering a Max overdose. She walked over to Max's desk and made herself busy, using her computer to check up on Blackwell Academy gossip via social media. Most of it seemed to be related to Max and herself, people discussing a fight in the Blackwell car park, and how Nathan hadn't been seen since. A bit on that bloody "Maximum Victory" comedy video that Courtney had circulated to attack Victoria, and associated comments on how she'd been rolled as Vortex Club chair. She did notice one other area being fiercely discussed. It involved a nearly fatal car crash just outside of the Blackwell Academy front gates. Apparently everyone's favourite student "at elevated risk of contracting type two diabetes", Alyssa Anderson, had lost control of her car and nearly crashed into some students. There were already several comments that she'd got a KFC drumstick stuck under the car's brake pedal. Alyssa had posted a reply herself, insisting that her brakes suddenly failed, and she'd desperately pumped the brake pedal to zero effect. Some kind person had pointed out to her that she was just feeding the trolls. A substantially less kind person had then made a joke about her knowing a thing or two about feeding. Victoria decided she'd seen enough of that particular exchange, and switched to randomly browsing for various tornado related facts. She doubted they'd be of much help, but you never could tell.

Max's awakening was almost the reverse of Victoria's: she awoke from, rather than to, a wondrous place. She'd been somewhere warm, and safe, and happy, and for some reason she couldn't fathom, decadently rose-scented. A place where people and tornadoes definitely weren't out to kill her. She was greeted by the dull glow of cloud filtered sunlight, the memory that said people and tornadoes were, in fact, out to kill her, and finally a strange sense of absence. It took her a moment to realise the cause. Victoria had gotten up first. She thought back on the previous day, and the previous night. Of somehow going from arch-rivals to sharing a bed. Not in a romantic sense of course. At least not yet, it had only been a day. Hold on, 'not yet'? Did she really just have that thought? Memories of the previous night became more vivid. Of lying next to Victoria, of trying to comfort her when she was clearly scared out of her wits. And of Victoria suddenly reciprocating, pushing herself tight against Max's body in that incredible see-through outfit. Yeah, all right, she might be entitled to have thoughts like that.

And what of Chloe? Just a smile out of her could make Max go all gooey, and Victoria seemed to think the reverse was true. They'd only reunited yesterday, and she'd changed, 'hella changed' even. But beneath the blue hair, the tattoos, the crazy strength and the glorious toned muscles that granted it, the anger and badassery, was the old Chloe. The young Chloe. Max could see it even if no one else could. Chloe had somehow gotten herself involved in truly crazy trouble: her altercations with Nathan were the tip of the iceberg for a criminal conspiracy, with some crazy link to paranormal weather. Her past was haunted in tragedy and pain. It almost felt like the universe was out to get her. Now it was the three of them against the one universe. Max had never been good at maths, but drew a little confidence from that. After all they seemed to have the universe outnumbered.

Staggering to her feet, Max regarded herself in the mirror. She had her typical morning face: eyes still half shut in rebellion at having to wake up before midday. Gross. But interesting. She immediately reached for her camera. She had just pressed the shutter when she noticed Victoria's reflection in the mirror. Given Victoria's choice of night attire, she was somewhat difficult to miss.

Victoria, or Tori (she'd more or less surrendered to the fact they were calling her Tori, and seemed to have come to enjoy it) stood leaning over Max's desk. Her tail-bone swaying like a metronome as she browsed the internet on Max's laptop. Her posture seemed awfully familiar. It reminded Max of her usual displays at the end of Jefferson's class. Of course Max was fairly sure Mark Jefferson didn't get to witness her pose wearing nothing more than a g-string and chemise, so that must put her ahead on points.
Max checked the photo her camera had just spat out. As she suspected, it had caught Victoria in the background, leaned over and wearing almost nothing. She quickly secreted that shot away into hiding, a smile across her face. She'd thought of what she considered a fairly witty title for the shot: 'moon-lit morning-face'. Max was rather disappointed she'd never be able to show it to anyone, except maybe Chloe. But she was sure Victoria would have a fit if she found out about it.

Then suddenly, her smile was gone. She walked with purpose toward the desk, taking some small pleasure in the shudder that ran through Victoria's body when she tapped her on the shoulder.

"Excuse me Victoria, I need to grab some pens and paper. I have a lot to write and ironically not much time to write it in."

Victoria turned, intent on displaying some level of indignation. A protest to appease her conflicted feelings and bruised ego. She quickly shelved the idea when she noticed Max's dopey half asleep look had been displaced by one of grim resolve. Future Max was paying them a visit. Victoria felt her legs go a little weak, taking in Max's sudden change in intensity, and the air of superiority and confidence that accompanied her. It seemed in many ways to be at odds with her more shy, clumsy and cute current iteration, though even then Max could be remarkably determined and commanding when pressed, like when she'd first stood up to her in the girls bathroom yesterday. All features Victoria rather appreciated. Not that she could ever say so.

She wondered what could affect Max so much to make that her default state of being. Perhaps it was just the evolution of her powers: Interacting with the past, and having complete freedom to recant whatever happened and replace it with something else probably left you feeling a little, well, god-like. Not completely omnipotent and omniscient though. The little talk they'd had yesterday had proven two things: that Future Max could be tricked and manipulated, and that she was fiddling with events without fully understanding the outcomes. It was a topic Victoria felt critical they discuss in more depth soon. Just as soon as she calmed down a bit, she thought. In truth, the arrogant confidence reminded her of Mr Jefferson. No wonder Max had her swooning. Perhaps that wasn't surprising though. It was clear Max was Jefferson's favourite, so he probably saw within her the potential to become like him. Of course, since he was apparently a sociopathic criminal, that was hardly reassuring. The most primitive part of Victoria's mind did however, find it just a little bit exciting. Future Max was dangerous! She stepped aside and let Max snatch a pen and paper from the desk. She watched as Max began scribbling furiously, and repressed a gasp at the first paragraph Max had written.

You have a busy day today, so I'll get straight to the biscuits. Firstly, MY ( MAX'S ) ROOM MAY BE BUGGED. I DON'T KNOW HOW OR WHEN THIS HAPPENED, BUT FOR NOW JUST SHUT UP ABOUT ANYTHING IMPORTANT IN MY ROOM!

"It's going to be a hella busy day Tori." Max said incredibly nonchalantly. "Hey, did your video camera survive the asshole sacking your room? Perhaps we should go check. Right now."

She threw Victoria her satin dressing gown, who quickly slipped it on. She placed her hand on Victoria's shoulder and guided her to the door, seizing a chair with the other and dragging it behind her. Victoria's chairs had all been smashed yesterday, after all. A quick look up and down the corridor revealed it to be clear. Both Victoria and Max scurried across the hallway to Victoria's room. It was in the same miserable state they'd left it in. Destroyed mattress and shredded clothes lying everywhere.

Victoria stood motionless after taking a few steps inside. Max thought she understood. Having your home invaded, your possessions wrecked like this was incredibly traumatic. She'd have to get used to it though. Far worse things were ahead if they really planned on permanently saving Arcadia Bay's
"Victoria? Are you-"

"Do you honestly start using that obnoxious slang of Chloe's in the future?"

Or she could be equally traumatised by Max's use of 'hella'.

"We all do." Max replied, finding a moment of relief in the way Victoria's face contorted in disgust. "Embrace it, Tori. Sometimes you just can't fight fate."

There was the slightest hint of bitterness mixed in with the otherwise playful tone in Future Max's voice.

"And yet you travel back into the past and keep changing things."

"I pick my battles." Max managed. She took her place at Victoria's desk, pushing Victoria's incredibly comfortable, yet broken chair out of the way, and replacing it with the much more humble one she'd dragged in.

"So anyway, your video camera?"

"Oh, so that wasn't just for the benefit of whomever was listening?" Victoria opened one of her drawers and proudly extracted her video camera. Still completely intact. Cameras, Video Cameras and phones seemed to be all merging into one device. But this one actually looked like a proper video camera, and it had a decent lens and large memory capacity.

"We're going to do a spot of fishing this morning", Max said, pausing from desperately scribbling down instructions to wave the phone with Jefferson's stolen simcard. "We seem to have gotten a couple of bites last night and it's time to reel in. Six looks like a good target, stupid enough to reply 'OK' to your 'do not reply' message. Of course, we've stirred up the big sharks too, though they seem too busy biting at each other's tails, to notice the otters in the water."

Victoria took a look at the burner phone Max was waving. It seemed there had been several missed calls during the night, between Jefferson's phone and 'one' and 'two', whom were strongly suspected of being Sean Prescott and his hatchetwoman. Max having muted the phone's ring tone meant they had gone unnoticed. Four new texts had also come through last night: a message from 'six' in addition to a few further contact attempts by Sean Prescott and Grey. And just minutes ago, an fifth one had arrived from 'seven'.

**Three Missed Calls from One.**

**One Missed Call from Two.**

**Five unread messages.**

Victoria cycled to the messages.

**Zero: Plans have been put on hold. Do not attempt further contact directly or by phone until contacted again from this number. Do not visit dark room.**

**Six: OK. Sry 4 l8 rply.**

**One: Contact me immediately. We need to discuss what transpired today.**
One: Have you forgotten how to answer your phone?

Two: Be advised, the old man is terribly unimpressed with you. He and I will be making a personal visitation, to try to understand what difficulties you may have had.

Seven: I know you asked for no further communications, but I'm really worried about five's delivery. It's still sitting in the gym lockers, if some teacher or guard with the master key searches them, we're dead.

She scoffed in disgust at this 'six' person. Use of text speak and replying to a "do not reply" message with 'OK'? They were definitely going for the weakest member of the herd here. The messages from Sean Prescott and his 'assistant' Grey (whatever her first name was, Victoria had always heard her referred to as Ms Grey) from yesterday conveyed something else to her. They'd already heard Sean Prescott and Grey express their displeasure with Nathan's special tutor. Having them text as much to Mr Jefferson's phone confirmed the tutor was him. What the hell was he tutoring Nathan in? She knew Max's future self wouldn't be forthcoming on that. Restricting information was the only way she could guarantee them following her plan.

"I take it we're going to to order 'six' to go some place people usually avoid, and record who shows up with my video camera. What about 'five'?"

"Oh, I'm sure we'll find some opportunity to search the Blackwell Gym today."

Victoria was doubtful. Neither her nor Max had PE that day, and the swim teams were in full-on training mode, practising both after school and at lunch time. Their only chance would be to sneak in at night after the place was locked up, and short of forcing the door that would require keys that only a security guard would- oh right. Chloe's Father was the head of Blackwell Security. Well that made everything so much simpler.

"I know there's something else you want to ask about Victoria." Max suddenly said, pre-empting Victoria's intended questions.

"What is Jefferson supposed to be privately tutoring Nathan in?"

"Photography." Max answered very simply. "What else would you expect from a photography teacher."

Oh very cute. She'd completely deadpanned the delivery too, in an incredibly cold tone.

"Try asking about something more interesting, Victoria. I know you've been thinking about something I said yesterday. You like to think about these things more than Chloe, or my past self. Your default is bitter and brooding, sort of like what I become in time."

"You don't know everything about the future." Victoria's voice maintained an even tone, yet there was something about the speed at which she said it, that conveyed a sense of dread.

"I learn by doing. You wouldn't believe how many possibilities I've run through. Things I've changed then changed back, then changed again."

"There's a certain danger in that isn't there." Victoria quickly noted. "If you change the time line in a way that gets yourself killed in the past."

"Then I cease to exist, probably. I've never been put in that position yet. I did come back to my present and find myself shot in the leg once. Suffice it to say that time line went out the window."
Though I do have an emergency backup plan, and I'm quite happy with the test run I gave it yesterday. Well, yesterday relative to you."

"What backup plan?!" Victoria demanded.

"Oh, you know..."

Max began advancing on Victoria with a slightly unhinged, and rather predatory smile. Victoria caught herself nervously biting her lip in response.

"I found a replacement." Max said, gently bringing her hands down on Victoria's shoulders. Victoria froze rigid. "Someone a little more cynical and practical than Chloe and my past self. Someone who realises that you aren't likely to stop a tornado by solving a crime, and are probably better off creating a scenario to get everyone out of its way."

"I'm your backup plan?!!"

"If I stop putting in appearances Tori, then it'll be all up to you. Just keep my younger self, and Chloe from doing anything especially stupid, and we should all be fine... In the mean time, I need you to make some dank memes at my expense!"

Well that came out of nowhere. She supposed it was something that Future Max could sound as dorky as her past self, that her innocence wasn't completely gone.

"W-what?"

"Come on Victoria, I'm sure you must have a picture or two of me looking like a moron, stowed away somewhere."

Victoria felt that an arrogant presumption, that she obsessed over Max so much that she secretly kept a few photos of her. It was also an understatement. Victoria's computer had quite the library of photos in a folder called 'Maximum Stupidity'. In the past, she'd used it to relax and calm herself on days that Max had managed to annoy her. So most days. It had everything, from Max with her trademark deer in the headlights look, to looking sad and remorseful, to being caught the moment a fly decided to land on her face ( ). A couple had this really cute hint of a smile that had no place being in a library dedicated to her mockery but she really couldn't bring herself to delete them for purely technical reasons (which involved her button nose and freckles).

"I was thinking something along the lines of Max the Prophet. Not very catchy, I know, but try to do something with the idea."

Victoria's eyes went to the letter Max had gone back to working on.

"You really want your past self to do that? Are you-"

"Cereal?" Max finished for Victoria, her voice dripping with self depreciation. Her past self would have said it with more sincerity.

"Everyone will think you're crazy."

"Not if it's done subtly enough. Do it right, and I'll be a typical girl sharing her feelings to an internet which really doesn't care since I haven't taken my shirt off. Of course the trick is to do it subtly, and still have everyone notice it. For that, I'll need a little help. Besides it's ultimately an extension of the idea you had on the cliff. One that has the chance to be noticed by the majority of the bay residents."
Another pause ensued as Max returned to the desk and finished up her letter.

"Oh, there's one other thing, Victoria. All the little changes to the timeline have caused a really minor but still, um, leverageable event's deletion. I was kind of hoping you could fix it for me. It won't take more than a few minutes of your time."

Victoria's eyes narrowed instantly.

"Why don't you put it down in your letter, like you do with everything else. Why don't you want your past self to know about this?"

"It's nothing really. Technically against the rules, and you saw how much my past self worried about missing curfew. I really don't want her, me, burdened with anything else at this point. She, I have a very big day ahead of me. You can probably do it any time this morning, just find an excuse and slip away for a few minutes. Can I count on you?"

A minute later, Victoria was back in Max's room. She stretched out, yawning. Her gown became loose, displaying a lot of what laid beneath. She didn't bother to retighten it. The only person likely to see her was Max and that didn't really matter. In fact she rather enjoyed the feeling of Max's doe-eyes on her, appreciating her form. Max had already seen her last night anyway, wearing even less; a further look would either make her jealous of Victoria's figure (desirable), or somewhat awed (more desirable). Perhaps it would even get Chloe out of her dreams, or at least make Victoria more of the focus in them.

Victoria had elected to handle the camera trap for minion number six first. The Tobanga totem poll looked like the best bet. Off the path, yet easily accessible with its location known by everyone in the school. And it was in sight from Max's Windows. Perfect. She had just setup the tripod, and looked out the window to sight the camera. A few people were walking about in the courtyard, but the place was mostly deserted as was expected for such an early hour. Except for one person. A pair of eyes were aimed directly at the window, at her, a disgusting look on their face.

"MAX! GET OVER HERE THIS INSTANT!"

Max's present self had slumped back to sleep in Victoria's room, when her future self departed. She awoke to Victoria yelling across the hall from Max's and vigorously pointing at the window. Her voice was uncharacteristically shrill, and obviously sickened. She pinched her satin gown closed in front and looked enraged, almost violated. Max was about to get up when she saw her future self's letter sitting in front of her. Her eyes were drawn to the first paragraph, that had been triple underlined. Someone had bugged her room? They'd probably have gone deaf with all of Victoria's shouting. She got to her feet, and staggered back across the hall. She glanced out the window, bewildered, but saw nothing out of the ordinary.

"Do you see that fuck!" Victoria screamed, pointing out the window in horror. Max followed her finger. The next wing of the Prescott Dorm was built at right angles to the central wing Max and Victoria inhabited, so much of its outer wall was visible from Max's window. Victoria was pointing at the very corner of that wing's wall, pretty much the place Max and Victoria had hidden the previous day while figuring out what to do about the Vortex Club's ousting of Victoria. She couldn't see anything there though. Victoria snarled in frustration.

"The cowardly degenerate's gone to ground. Rewind about 15 seconds."

"Better put that gown on properly first", Max sleepily counseled, "or you'll risk giving the 'degenerate' another free screening of Tori's peep-show."
Victoria re-tied her gown in a fluster, making herself slightly more decent with an indecent haste. Max wrapped her left hand around Victoria, and raised her right to effect the time reversal. The dull white light of the cloudy morning turned to crimson and the few people in the courtyard began walking backward. Max was exercising her fine control of time, as she apparently had with Chloe, rewinding in slow motion to catch every detail. Victoria felt it an incredibly strange feeling, and somehow quite intimate. Like a romantic walk, though one that led them outside the universe instead of through a lakeside park or other more conventional venue. There they hung, sitting alone in a bubble of their own personal reality, while peering back at the world they'd left behind. It was a slightly ironic feeling to have while trying to catch a voyeur.

"There!" Victoria announced, and Max let crimson fade to white. Max understood why Victoria had been so unhappy. She felt as though she'd dipped her foot in a box of large hairy spiders, and the content had decided to begin slowly creeping their way up her leg. Peeking out behind the corner of the building, a figure stared directly at them, entranced. He looked largely unremarkable, easy to ignore. The only thing of note about him was that he felt the height of men's fashion was to simultaneously wear two tee-shirts. Victoria balled her fists in disgust while Max placed her head in her hands. Warren Graham was spying on them.

Several miles from Blackwell Academy, residents poked their heads over their fences and out of windows, alarmed by another person, who seemed at least as upset as Victoria and just as happy to loudly share her discontent. Another motorist actually stopped her nondescript white sedan to have a look, though managed to maintain a more impassive look on her slim auburn framed face than the residents. Something, either a second volley of profanity, or the raft of neighbours watching, convinced her to drive on. Chloe Price's truck had run out of fuel. She really should have picked up some yesterday, with the whole cash score from Nathan. Instead she got swept up in everything, did about three times as much driving as she was planning on. Fuck. She really wanted to show up early too, have some time with Max before her classes start. No choice then. She pulled a bag out she'd labelled 'emergency breakdown kit' in black marker pen. The sum total of its content were an old pair of shorts. As discretely as she could after drawing half the street's attention, she traded her trousers for the shorts. She left her jacket on the car seat, and slammed her beanie in her pocket. She was about to start running when a thought occurred to her.

Chloe quickly pulled out her phone and called ahead to Max. None too pleasant words were being screamed in the background, in a very loud but still honey soaked voice. It was nice to know she wasn't the only one having a bad start to the day.

"Hey Maximus, I just found out my truck couldn't handle the combined awesomeness of the three of us yesterday and broke down. Actually I think it just ran out of fuel and-"

"FUCKING FILTHY LITTLE PERVERT. I'LL SKIN HIM ALIVE AND USE HIM AS A WELCOME MAT!"

Chloe quickly found herself lowering her phone's volume.

"Sorry Chloe, Victoria's a bit pissed."

"Really? She sounds almost the same as normal." The punk reflected that she really wasn't in a position to criticise, having just had her own swearing fit. Though since neither of them knew that, it left her free to mock. "So what upset her?"

"Warren. She saw him… looking in the direction of my window while she was in a state of limited dress."
"Warren was trying to perv you and Tori through the window? That's sick. And more importantly, how limited a state of dress?!!"

"I think he's still out there, to be honest. It's kind of worrying. And it's not really that she wasn't wearing anything, more that a lot of it was transparent."

Of all the days to have her truck breakdown.

"Max, what did you do to get him so… wrongly convinced he had a chance?"

"Well he kind of helped me out in science class. His answers were perfect and I got full marks for once. I felt, I don't know, like I owed him, and the periodic table was right there in front of me so after class I texted him and said…"

"Said what?"

"I wanted to know if he was made of copper and tellurium."

Max marvelled that the sound of a hand slapping a forehead came across the phone network so clearly. It was followed by a moment of silence, while Chloe composed herself.

"Do you want him gotten rid of?" Chloe finally replied, evenly.

There was something about Chloe's tone that made a rush of fear come over Max. It felt dangerously close to her recollection of how Sean Prescott and his enforcer Ms Grey casually discussed murder. The memories of Chloe gunning down Nathan in some of the erased time-lines decided to pay her a visit as well. She panicked.

"Don't kill him Chloe!" She spontaneously pleaded, attracting Victoria's attention, equal portions amused and intrigued. Needless to say she ended up feeling like an idiot in short order.

"Dude, I just meant…" Chloe began, confused and a little hurt Max would assume that of her. "...Look, I'd never do that. For one thing, it'd take hours to wash the pathetic off my hands."

Chloe heard Victoria snigger and make a few more muffled comments.

"What was that?"

"Victoria says she'll let you borrow her gloves, so that won't be an issue. But I'm still opposed to you doing anything like beating him with his own severed limbs."

"I'm not killing him, all right? I won't even smack him around. Damn. Why does everyone think I can't solve problems without murder, or at least a savage beat-down."

There was a moment of silence that hung over the phone. It was finally broken by Victoria, who leaned into Max's phone and said "Don't kiss him either".

Chloe added Victoria's name to her 'moderate vengeance' list, before returning to the problem at hand.

"Look. I'll just convince him that you're not interested. That you make these lame, innocent periodic table jokes with everyone. All I need you to do is to fake a text conversation between us. The only thing that might get damaged is his sense of dignity. Is that OK?"

"OK."
Chloe texted the instructions to Max. Max looked at them bemused. Science definitely wasn't her subject. She resolved to send them anyway. She knew she could trust Chloe.

"Um one more thing. Victoria's 'state of limited dress'. You didn't happen to-"

"Chloe, that would make me no better than Warren!" She heard pacing, and realised that Max had suddenly decided to relocate. The next words she heard were spoken in a hushed tone. "Though there is a selfie I took this morning that kind of had an accidental addition to its background."

"Accident. Got it. Your ninja powers know no limits Max. See you soon."

"No honestly it was a-"

Max would have continued, but realised Chloe had already hung up. She was standing in the doorway to her room, and saw Victoria eyeing her suspiciously. Probably wondering why she'd suddenly gotten up and walked away while on the phone.

"Going somewhere Max?"

"I was thinking of taking a shower." Max said, quickly placing her phone on her bedside table. She was rather proud she'd thought up such a convincing excuse so quickly. "What about you Tori? You're forehead's kind of had this radiant sheen to it this morning, which is actually quite attractive, but you're normally meticulous about being prim and rose scented."

Radiant sheen? Victoria thought, her cheeks reddening. How low rent! And it was entirely Max's fault too. Feeling her up in her sleep.

"In a minute. There's something I need to take care of first."

She watched Max shrug and head off to the shower in her night clothes. Annoyance suddenly flared within her.

"I don't believe this!"

Max spun around midway down the corridor, confused. Two other students loitering in the hallway, Brooke Scott and Alyssa Anderson, looked up, interested in what had caused the latest Victoria blow-up. Victoria noticed their attention. It only made her more aggravated.

"Max, you have a Douglas Adams quote on your facebook..." Victoria began. Max still didn't get what she was driving at. She managed to catch something soft and fluffy after it gently hit her in the head.

"… and you still forgot your towel. Unbelievable." Victoria chastised. "What were you planning on, standing in the shower for half an hour, drip drying? Or maybe walking back in soggy nightclothes, and waterlogging the hallway? Honestly I-"

"Thank you Victoria." Max interrupted her with a mild tone and smile. If there was one thing Victoria didn't know how to deal with while upset, it was thanks and praise.

"J-just get it together." Victoria snapped, taken aback by the interruption and sincere thanks. "A lesser person might have let you walk back soaking."

"I'm lucky to have you then."

Victoria caught herself flushing at Max’s casual compliment. Her exchange seemed to have caught
the attention of both Brooke and Alyssa, who were both staring attentively. Her flush intensified. Their minds were probably concocting a preposterous romantic interpretation of what they'd just seen, which was dangerously close to reality. She fixed both Brooke and Alyssa with a death stare. They wilted, as most people who weren't Max did when she locked onto them, and returned to whatever they were doing beforehand. Watching something on Brooke's tablet, it appeared. Victoria took the opportunity to slip back into Max's room.

Victoria waited a minute until Max was out of sight before heading off on her "mission". Her first stop was the toilets. Brooke had wisely moved elsewhere in the meantime. Only Alyssa remained in the corridor. Victoria bit back the urge to insult her: she'd stared at her and Max in a way she didn't care for, with an expression which screamed "just like in one of my romance novels." The instincts of the school's queen bee were to grind her into the dust in retaliation. Victoria managed to walk straight past her without incident. Alyssa was too easy a target at the best of times, and attacking her while that car accident was fresh in her mind would be beneath her. Plus she'd resolved to amend her ways slightly, and not be unnecessarily horrid. She took out her frustration on the door of the girl's toilets, slamming her hand into it with unnecessary force.

The door swung inward rapidly, and there was a dull crack, followed by an exclamation of "ouch!" Victoria peered around the door and located the source immediately, her face adopting the appropriate disgusted expression. Some idiot girl from one of the dorm's other wings had been lurking straight behind the door, a toilet roll in hand. She had obviously planned on ambushing the next person to walk down the hallway, which would have meant Alyssa. Immature little cow. No wonder their dorm hall was always being coated with TP. Still, rather convenient, given her mission. She snatched the roll off the girl, extracted a length she deemed sufficient, then extracted a second "ouch" by throwing the remainder back in the little bimbo's face, before casually marching out. It was fine to punish the guilty, right?

Having accidentally saved Alyssa from one minor humiliation (no doubt many others awaited her, she seemed to be something of a bad luck magnet), Victoria continued up the building's main staircase on her way to her objective: the small roof-level room that contained the dorm's hot water cylinders. A toolbox lay next to one of the cylinders, and the roof door was open a crack. Someone was clearly in the middle of maintenance and had gone to take a quick break, perhaps a cigarette on the roof. Perfect. Victoria set about her mission, taking pieces of toilet paper and stuffing them into the door's bolt hole. She tested the door. It still closed properly, and would appear closed to most probing tugs at its handle, but a concentrated effort would now overcome the bolt and open it. Excellent. She returned the roof door to the partially open position she'd found it in, and was just leaving when a horrible monstrosity appeared out of nowhere, blocking her way. It held a rather menacing looking power drill in its hand, and was bearded and bespectacled.

"Oh I'm sorry my little one." An unnervingly soft male voice replied. "Samuel had two jobs up here today. That strong man Madsen said the door was broken up here, that it wasn't always locking, so Samuel just replaced the lock. Now Samuel is busy fixing the hot water cylinders. Samuel doesn't want to see any little ladies have their soft skin scolded by nasty, too hot water. But the little ones shouldn't be up here so early in the day. It's a long way down, and no one's around."

And people wondered why there were rumors about Samuel being a disgraced catholic priest.

"Look, I just want to get a few shots of the sunrise from the roof for photography class. Is that really asking too much?" Victoria sighed. "I know you let Rachel come up here a few times."

It was a completely fraudulent reason for going up there, she'd achieved what she wanted already. She didn't even have a proper camera with her, just her phone in her gown pocket. Of course if he
inquired down that line, she'd tell him that the high pixelcount phone camera was perfectly adequate for taking wide shots of the horizon, where a large zoom lens was superfluous. And if he didn't, she'd claim to have had a small camera on her if it was brought up later. Victoria Chase would not be seen to settle for a 'perfectly adequate' solution if she could avoid it. Though right then, she just wanted the opportunity to leave without arousing the suspicion, or anything else, of the creepy caretaker. Especially not while in her dressing gown. Ironically, Victoria actually found golden hour photography to be overused; she felt it an easy subject for amateurs, because you were virtually guaranteed visually impressive images doing little more than lining up the horizon and pressing the shutter action. A scowl formed on her face when Samuel nodded enthusiastically at hearing Rachel's name.

"Rachel Amber, yes. Rachel was adored by all. People do things for those they adore. Not always smart things either."

Victoria began fuming. It always came back to Rachel Amber. Yes she'd actually brought her up this time, but she didn't need another lecture on how great Rachel was. Perfect grades and adored by all. Rachel had been the consummate politician in Victoria's mind. And like any good politician, opportunistic, manipulative, unfaithful, and after large financial donations.

"Not everyone adored her. She had a darker side."

Samuel nodded again. Victoria nearly turned purple at the stupidity of his next answer.

"Even sunlight casts a shadow."

"No, it actually doesn't." She quickly retorted.

"How can someone in darkness claim to know the sun."

Victoria was about to launch into a series of expletives, when Samuel elaborated on what he had allegedly meant in more direct language.

"It's looking overcast. Not good for photography this morning. Come back this afternoon, there might be something worth photographing."

Victoria took a last look at the clouds. She was severely doubtful as to the conditions improving. If anything, she felt it likely to rain that afternoon, and the weather forecast she'd seen agreed with that. Still, the weather did seem to be going to hell, and Samuel had a weird sixth sense about these things. Maybe there'd be something to photograph that afternoon after all.

"I guess I'll be going then."

She slinked off like a cat with a bird in it's mouth, trying desperately not to reveal that she'd gotten away with something. After all, she'd accomplished the mission Max had given her, rendered the roof door lock ineffective. Though Victoria was a little confused by her mission. Why had Future Max insisted she ensure the roof was accessible today? She didn't think too long on it, she could imagine a completely valid reason: It was one of the highest points on the Blackwell Campus, so a perfect platform to look down and observe people from a distance, in case they needed to do a little more spying. To that end, she decided to bring out her 'proper camera' today, and carry it with her, just in case. At the least she could show Max how impressive a real camera with detachable lens was, when compared to that bloody Polaroid. And as unlikely as it seemed, Samuel could be right. Perhaps she'd see something worth photographing that afternoon.
Chapter End Notes

I heard that one of the Life is Strange devs said Max isn't a good person, or at least is significantly less good than she thinks she is. I found that rather peculiar, as Max is actually quite self-judgemental in-game, and is on the whole nicer than almost anyone else in the school. But I also found it interesting, given the direction planned in this fic, with Future Max doing far more morally dubious and manipulative things than you've seen in the canon game. Especially with what she convinces Victoria to do at the end of this chapter. I wonder how many readers would consider future Max presented here to be a 'good person'?

Next time:

Chloe has a polite chat with Warren! What Juliet plans to write about Chloe in the school newspaper! And how a post on the internets might end up saving the majority of the Arcadia Bay residents! Oh, and wasn't there some minor plot point in the canon game that Max is supposed to attend to on Tuesday morning? Something about a religious girl in trouble...
Kate Marsh sat bleary eyed in her room. She had predicted she wouldn't sleep at all last night. She had been right. Her brain wasn't really firing properly, though in some ways that was preferable. It stopped her from thinking so much about the abyss her life had collapsed into. A dull beeping made her head throb. She eventually figured out it was her morning alarm. She really should get up, brush her teeth, get dressed. That's what was expected of her, wasn't it. Get dressed on time and not become an abject whore. Nice simple rules to run her life by. She stumbled out of bed, wondering if god considered 50% to be a pass mark at life.

Staring at the shameless slut in her mirror, she cast her mind back to the night. It had become clear she'd get no sleep, so Kate had turned to the one thing that always gave her enjoyment: drawing. In happier times, Kate had worked diligently on a secret project, a children's book featuring her own highly stylised characters, creations she guarded fiercely almost like they were her children. She attempted to draw some of them again, perhaps find hope and inspiration within a realm of her own creation. What she produced was horrible: misshapen tortured wretches. She indulged her miserable feelings, and continued sketching. Perversions of her beloved characters, ugly horrific demons took shape. The hell she'd lived through since that vortex club party took form, and she spent all night covering a sheet of paper with sketches of towering monstrosities, looming over everything. She fashioned each with a vicious gaze, and torrents of hell-fire that burst from their scalps in place of hair.

She peered once more through a crack in her drawn blinds. There were a few students out already, mostly joggers enjoying morning exercise. One looked like she might have overdone it, the tiny figure below was taking a moment to recover, her legs looked like they'd temporarily turned to jello. Kate's eyes were transfixed by the runner's hair. It was dyed a brilliant blue, like a clear sky on a summer's day. It was a stark contrast against the dull grey of the overcast morning. For an instant, Kate found it nice to have a reminder of better days. Then she thought on it more, and changed her mind. It was just another reminder of something from the past that was lost.

Strangely inspired by the end to her phone call with Max, Chloe Price ran the distance to Blackwell far faster than she expected. By the time she arrived, she found herself paying for that haste. She was soaked in sweat, short of breath, and her legs ached. She took a few minutes to compose herself in the Prescott Dorm courtyard, wanting her alpha swagger back instead of wobbly legs if she had to see off Warren. It was still early in the morning: There weren't that many students out, and just one apparently inept security guard. Just like last night, the guard seemed to place a higher premium on the newspaper crossword than vigilance. Chloe was nonetheless careful to keep her left side to him, just in case he looked up; the large tattoo on her right arm was a liability infiltrating anything other than a motorcycle gang.

Feeling strength return to her legs, Chloe scanned the perimeter of the Prescott dorm and quickly located the world's least-competent stalker. Warren was still hiding behind the corner of the building, leaving him just out of sight from Max's window. He had stopped attempting to peep, but seemed intent on staying there and waiting Max out. She noticed he was desperately clutching a couple of small bits of paper. His eyes showed a barely contained panic, not unlike a soldier on the first wave of the Normandy landings, who'd just seen what happened to the landing craft directly in front of him, and knew they were next in line. Chloe found herself deeply conflicted. On one hand, Warren
was kind of pathetic, and it felt bad to belittle or intimidate him. On the other hand, someone pathetic was creeping on her girls.

"Hey Warrick. So how's the view?"

Warren pulled a pair of headphones out of his ears and spun around, perplexed. It seemed that perhaps he and Max did have one thing in common, they both listened to music when nervous. He looked about to explain that his name wasn't "Warrick". Then he saw it was Chloe, and something convinced him not to bother. Most likely abject fear. Chloe felt the way his eyes practically bulged was a little over the top. Even Juliet, caught in an emotionally weak state, hadn't wilted like that when Chloe made her introduction.

"The view of this magnificent, well actually it's a pretty shitty day." Chloe clarified in a completely unconvincing manner. "So why are you up so early?"

Warren quickly presented the slips of paper in his hand, apparently tickets, and fought to suppress a nervous tremor. Chloe guessed her rep must have been further exaggerated by what took place yesterday. He seemed honestly convinced a severe beating was on the table. He was incredibly lucky Chloe didn't think like her stepfather: if David saw him like this, his mind would be uncontrollably screaming "he's afraid, therefore he's feeling guilty, therefore he's guilty!"

"I bought some tickets to this retro drive-in cinema in Newberg." Warren blurted out with indecent haste. "The original King Kong's playing there and it's only sixty miles away. I was hoping to ask Max if she wanted to GO APE with me. But she often forgets to reply to text messages, so I thought I'd catch her when she left her dorm this morning."

So that was what all this was about. Then him peeping in the dorm window was just to check she hadn't left. Or was it? Anyone except a complete idiot would realise that peeping through someone's window at this hour had a high chance of catching them changing.

Wait, did he seriously think Max 'forgot' to reply to his messages? Chloe shook her head. He was just an idiot after all.

At that moment, a particularly large bead of sweat dripped from Chloe's hair to her forehead. Without thinking, she grabbed the bottom of her already damp singlet, lifted it to her face and wiped it off. She suddenly realised Warren had grown rather silent. He stood frozen, gawking at her exposed midriff, as her sculpted abs glistened.

"Waldo?"

It seemed she'd broken him without really doing anything, and in perhaps more ways than one. Chloe's body really was a temple, though admittedly one that burnt a lot of incense. More over it was the competition, and he knew he couldn't compete. At least not physically, Warren's most impressive feature was his unblemished 4.0 GPA, which he'd gone the extra mile to secure. If only there was some way he could leverage that to his advantage. If Max were struggling in a subject, he could rush in and save her with his brain. They'd start spending evenings together, him tutoring her, and her reciprocating his kindness. It wouldn't be long before she went ape on his banana.

"Wally?"

"Whuuht?!"

Warren snapped back to reality. To be fair, he wasn't the only one Chloe's midriff had a hypnotic effect on.
"So, you're going to drive all the way to Newberg in the old blue Grandma-surplus hatchback I saw yesterday?"

Warren actually turned a little pale.

"Come on, Warrio, we both drive rust buckets, right? Though yours is a little more modestly proportioned, and missing a window. You were looking so proud of it in the parking lot yesterday. No need to tuck it away now."

"Oh right. I guess it was all so intimidating, an expelled student suddenly showing up like a rock star and treating Nathan's head as something to break her guitar over. Even if he did deserve it."

Well when put like that, Chloe could appreciate how he could end up a little frightened. Though he didn't need to rub in the expelled part. In any case, him trying to take Max anywhere was, obviously unacceptable. She just had to make it clear to Warren that Max's interests lay elsewhere.

"I'm not sure it's such a good time to be asking Max out. I might have given her some bad chemistry advice that cost her marks on her last test. She's pissed and liable to take it out on anyone."

"Chemistry!" Warren beamed. This was the opening he'd been looking for. "I usually get great marks in that." Though, admittedly, recent events were complicating things for him slightly in that regard. "Maybe I can offer my services. As a tutor. You know I've successfully helped her in that subject before. She asked me if I was made of Copper and Tellurium!"

Chloe found herself slightly sickened in how he said the last sentence, somehow dreamy and corrupt both at once.

"Oh, because the atomic symbols spell out a word." Chloe responded dryly. "That's great, she kept mentioning xenon and sulfur to me, after I confused her."

"Sulfur and xenon?" Warren asked, confused.

"Xenon and sulfur." Chloe answered.

Warren thought for a minute. Their symbols didn't spell anything. And as far as he could remember, xenon didn't react with anything except fluorine. It sure sounded like Chloe had messed up badly, and confused the hell out of Max. Just the opportunity he was looking for, to ride in like a knight in shining armour. Rescue the fair maiden from her incompetent comic relief suitor and-

"Here's one of the texts she sent me this morning." Chloe said, holding up the phone's screen and interrupting his chain of thought. She noted a touch of envy in Warren's eyes from just reading the time stamps, messages coming in seconds apart. He was lucky to get Max to reply twice to him in the space of an hour. It kind of made Chloe feel guilty about what she was doing.

Max: Chloe, you confused the hell out of me and nearly made me fail the last science test!  

Chloe: whoa. hella chill, max. what happened?  

Max: Every time I think of you, I want Xenon and Sulfur together! Everything you've taught me has got me thinking backwards!

"Man! No wonder she's mad at you! Xenon is a largely unreactive gas so no way would it do anything with… sulfur."

Oh right. Thinking backwards. He looked up at Chloe. She did her best to seem oblivious.
"Maybe... Maybe I should leave the chemistry to you after all."

His eyes suddenly became downcast. He looked like someone had run over his dog. Right in front of him. With a steamroller. Chloe continued the charade of ignorance. Revealing she had always understood that message and deliberately shown him would only make him feel worse. Still, she felt awful. In fact she was almost tempted to give the poor guy a friendly commiserative hug.

"I guess I could take Brooke instead!" Warren suddenly exclaimed. "I originally told her I'd go with her, but she kind of sounds like a robot with a head cold and is really dry and intellectual, and told me she prefers a 'sensitive' approach to courting which translates as 'won't be having sex with you any time soon', so I thought I'd try Max, and keep her as a backup. Hey, there's something else I've been wondering. Don't take this the wrong way but are you even allowed to be on campus?"

And suddenly all the guilt and sympathy Chloe had been feeling evaporated. Unbelievable, the little bastard was a player as well as a perv; through means beyond Chloe's understanding, he'd already got to one poor girl and was keeping her on tap while pursuing Max. Perhaps one one billionth of what Chloe felt at that micro-instant showed on her face, because Warren suddenly stopped talking and immediately began slinking away from her in a manner that somehow reminded her of a slug. Chloe casually cracked her knuckles and took a single step toward him. He broke into a very feminine approximation of a sprint. She watched him stumble off into the distance before carrying on to the dorm. Well she hadn't actually killed him, or beaten him with his own severed limbs, or even put her hands on him, so she had technically kept her promise.

At roughly the same time Chloe confronted Warren, Juliet Watson and Dana Ward loitered in the student laundry at the bottom of the Prescott Dorm. Tearful apologies, prostration, and the promise to do all of Dana's laundry had allowed Juliet to grovel her way back into Dana's good books, after wrongful accusations of sexting and trying to steal her boyfriend yesterday. Dana had even decided to accompany Juliet, even though doing so sacrificed the free time gained by Juliet taking over her laundry chores (really the main purpose of getting someone else to do your laundry for you) since she needed someone to commiserate with about the sudden ending to her previous evening's romance.

"God Jewels, Last night had so much promise." She groaned. "I was so tired of these footballer assholes – I think you got the one good one. And had met this totally hot skater, Trevor. The relaxed attitude was such a breath of fresh air! Anyway we were hooking up on the spur of the moment in the dorm stairwell. The next minute, we're suddenly surrounded by these crusty old guys with torches. It seemed like the whole Blackwell security squad decided to pay us a visit."

"Ouch, busted and beaver dammed."

"Totally. The moustache squad – have you noticed how so many of the security guards here seem to have moustaches, it's so gross, like they were all rejected try-outs for some seventies porn flick! They insisted on walking him back to the boys dorm and everything. At least you're back with Zachery. So did you enjoy making up with him?"

"We only really talked over the phone." Juliet sighed. "But he came to his senses and was so desperate he offered to spring for a really flashy restaurant."

"I know it's totally pathetic of me, but it sort-of feels good that I'm not the only one who missed out on some action then. Whatever you did to get him back must have been super effective. How'd you swing it?"

"It just took a little experimentation. Fortunately I found a willing partner."
It took a moment for Dana's mind to combine the wry smile on Juliet's face with the line she'd just deadpanned. Dana's eyes suddenly lit up and her hand shot to cover her gaping mouth. A second later she decided she wanted, no needed some elaboration, so had to pull her hand back down.

"JEWELS! You can't just tell me that much!"

"I was actually thinking of putting the whole thing in the newspaper. God Dana, this story had everything! Romance! Or some disgraceful farce thereof! A fight! Heroics! Hospitalisation!"

"You're lying!"

"I wrote it down here!"

Juliet thrust a copy of her new 'story' into Dana's hands. It was a re-accounting of a few events that transpired in the parking lot the previous day, with some 'minor liberties' taken. Admittedly, it read more like a trashy romance piece detailing an encounter between two girls, than a serious news report. It was bound to reverse the flagging readership of the school newspaper.

*Cupid Wears Combat Boots: Visitation from a Punk Venus and Valkyrie*

*It was the worst day of my life. I had acted like such a bitch to my bestie and a bully to probably the shyest girl in the school. In my defence, I'd just caught my boyfriend cheating on me by way of sext, so I was feeling betrayed and miserable. Not that that should excuse how vile I had been. In fact, I was such a c#$t, you could have given me a boy's haircut and called me Victoria.*

Dana looked up, smiling.

"Oh, Victoria's not going to like this. I approve already."

*I noticed her as soon as she entered the car park. No one could miss her. She had this presence, that drew your eyes in and left you completely at her mercy. She towered over me, lean and muscular and feminine somehow all at once. Her hair was dyed sky-blue, and there was the most incredible tattoo encompassing her right arm. I was in no doubt as to her identity. We had all heard the rumours, and seen that youtube video. Yet my legs grew weak, and I felt a quiver run across my lips when she spoke her name, as if I couldn't quite believe it 'till that happened: Chloe (time to pay the) Price.*

For a second time, Dana looked up from the manuscript, though this time her expression was one of confusion.

"Who's Chloe Price?"

Juliet sighed. No, wait, this was good feedback. She might include a more factual article detailing Chloe's rather messed up background, so she could be an actual journalist as well as a smut-peddler. And a hyperlink to that video in the online version.

"You remember when the Blackwell Bigfoots failed miserably last year, and the coach blamed the loss of two injured players?"

"I heard a couple of embarrassing stories, really crazy stuff about an insanely strong dropout girl beating the shit out of them." Dana nodded, before freezing in realisation. "Jewels, no! You mean you got with-"

"Keep reading." Juliet smiled.
Her eyes pierced me, and it felt like she had a sixth sense, somehow instantly working out the root of all my problems: 'Is this boy-troubles, Juliet?' she asked.

I was overcome by emotion, the combination of the betrayal of my BF and her piercing insight into my soul. I was about to burst into tears when her arms suddenly engulfed me and she whispered she'd give me a taste of true passion.

I've always considered myself hetero, but when she swooped in on me, literally hoisted me into the air with her strong arms, I just kind of forgot. When our lips met I knew I was lost. Caught in a maelstrom of feeling, of need. Heat and desire flowed uncontrollably; I wrapped my legs around her and her hands danced across my body; she was a virtuoso and I was her instrument, and she was building me to a crescendo.

In that instant I was hers, utterly. She could have thrown me down on a bench and taken me right there in the parking lot. Part of me still wishes she had. Instead we suddenly broke apart and she reminded me I was only getting a taste. Only then did I realise she had covertly photographed me, broken and frenzied, completely at her mercy, and sent it to my boyfriend. Warned him that if he didn't step up his game, she would claim me as one of her own. Naturally I was horrified at this gambit, yet within seconds my BF, who up till then had refused to answer any calls, had rung and was begging forgiveness. She was almost a goddess, somehow saving the relationship with my BF with little more than the press of her lips.

Some readers might get the impression from the above paragraphs that I was a little 'easy', that others may better resist her charms. What happened next proved the opposite. I witnessed another girl, whose love and affection for her own boyfriend were clearly weaker than my own, literally snatched away from right in front of him. The way she rushed to, flung herself at Chloe (I think the moment we shared gives me the right to use her given name), it was almost like they had known each other forever. She was utterly bewitched, like some old mariner plunging to his doom after seeing a Siren's alluring form bob amongst the waves. The poor boyfriend could do nothing but embrace the hopelessness of the situation, turn away and try to forget the horror, as the girl climbed aboard Chloe's pickup truck and embraced her right in front of him. Who could speculate what might have transpired between Chloe and this waif in that very car park, but for the sudden intervention of a crazed lunatic.

I think all of us have noticed that there's something 'wrong' with Nathan Prescott. But I'd never have believed he'd gutlessly punch a girl in the head while her back was turned. Yet I saw two figures rendered helpless amidst a surprise attack. And while I had temporarily removed my contacts, so was a touch too short sighted to identify the victims, the high pitched screams and gasps for breath told me all I needed to know: two girls brutally attacked and rendered helpless. Not satisfied with merely knocking two girls to the ground, this sick monster raised his foot above the head of one girl, apparently about to crack her skull. Clearly he had singled out the braver one, since I could hear the other pathetically screaming and wheezing in fear.

Then suddenly Chloe Price was there, charging into battle in a way that almost defied time itself, she had closed the distance across the parking lot in the blink of an eye. Two deftly chosen strikes later, and Nathan was staggering about, ruined but still somehow on his feet. It was then that my last lingering doubt that this was the Price of urban legend was banished, as she executed her signature move, introducing Nathan Prescott's face to the glass pane of a car's side window.

She paused to admire the destruction she'd wrought. Then like a Valkyrie of legend, she collected the braver of the fallen, the one who'd nearly had their head crushed by the school's resident psycho. I felt myself momentarily overcome with envy, as the fallen was taken into her strong arms, and effortlessly carried off. The braver victim joined the girl she'd clearly seduced moments earlier in
Chloe's pickup truck, and they drove off into the sunset. And while they had departed in an old beat-up truck down second street, rather than a Chariot ascending the bifrost, I was in no doubt that this Valkyrie would be leading them up a rainbow path to heaven soon enough.

"So what do you really think?" Juliet asked, hopeful since Dana seemed to have read the rest in silence, without any further interruption.

Dana paused for a second to collect her thoughts, and give a well thought out response, and to try to will her lips to stop quivering.

"OHMYGOD Are you really publishing this Jewels?! It's so..."

"I think I'll put it in as an anonymous contribution." Juliet quickly conceded.

"And it's all true? I mean I heard about a fight yesterday that led to hospitalisation. But not that it was that monster girl, and especially not that she could solve all your problems by making out with you."

"I may have embellished and/or omitted a few minor details. We might have discussed and planned out the whole kiss thing ahead of time, and it may have mostly been my idea."

While she didn't say anything, Dana's expression immediately shifted to her 'I knew it' stare.

"But the fight definitely happened as written!" Juliet replied defensively. "And she did drive off with two girls in tow like a total pimp. And spontaneous or scripted, when she kissed me it was so... Well if you ever see her, you'll understand. Maybe more than me, Miss 'come to my horror movie club, bi-weekly and bi-curious!' She really knew what she was doing. And it all worked, didn't it. I kissed her and got my boyfriend back! Just like cupid, but with lips instead of a bow and arrow. See. I've even got the photo here."

Juliet proudly displayed the image on her phone, which she'd apparently also set as her wallpaper. Dana gasped. It really was a good photo, of a moment anyone would enjoy being trapped in; it was doing absolutely nothing to help her with last night's frustration. Her eyes were drawn to the mysterious blue haired figure, her face concealed behind, and buried in Juliet's neck. She wondered what this alleged goddess of lust and destruction actually looked like, beyond the blue hair and muscular tattooed arm. Probably some ruggedly handsome type, she guessed, adorned with battle scars from her innumerable street fights.

"Well, maybe I'll run into her and end up kissing her too." Dana Joked. "Maybe that'll spontaneously make the whole awkward mess with Trevor clear up and give me another chance with him ASAP. So when is this going in print?"

"Probably tomorrow. I'm still working on it. I think it needs more proof reading and some revision. I was kind-of hoping I could convince a BFF to read it over and offer a few suggestions. I've got another copy so..."

She held out the draft, and shot Dana a hopeful expression. Dana made a show of leaving her uncertain for a few seconds, before gently snatching it out of her hands with a smile.

"Well, I guess I've got to wait for the laundry to finish, so I might as well do my own corrections here."

"Write that in the student laundry?" Dana looked around at the mildew encrusted walls, and the peeling paint. It was just about the least well maintained room in the dorm; extensive maintenance would require the prior removal of the washing machines and dryers, which were both heavy and always in demand. "Are you sure this place sets the right mood for writing something so..."
romantically descriptive?"

Juliet finished emptying the last of their laundry into the washing machine. Then wearing a knowing smile, she increased the spin speed to maximum, hopped up and sat squarely on the washing machine lid, and reached for the start button.

"Inspiration can strike in the most unlikely of places."

"OhMyGod you thirsty… And this was supposed to be a punishment. Fine, I'm out of here. Enjoy looking for spelling mistakes."

Dana Ward made her way back to her dorm, spare copy of Juliet's 'news story' in hand. She found herself re-skimming the content, in spite of having read it moments earlier. Before long, she'd become rather engrossed and was no longer watching where she was going. Her frustration over missing out on a chance with Trevor must be worse than she thought. No matter, she knew the route back to her dorm so well she could have been struck blind that instant and still made it back. Which is what her grandmother would suggest might happen if she kept reading the thing.

There was a sudden thump as Dana stepped onto the first floor landing. She'd run into another girl. And possibly brushed lips with them. God, a little embarrassing. Still no harm done; fortunately the person she'd bumped into was strong enough to catch her before their heads really clashed. She felt her heart race slightly at the casual display of strength, the way she'd been caught so effortlessly. Matters weren't helped much when she looked down at the ever-so-slightly tensed arms, protectively holding her and saw glistening muscles bulge. This girl was really strong.

Dana laughed inwardly at herself. The frustration from last night's denial, and binging on Juliet's rather dubious tale seemed to be having consequences. Maybe Juliet had been right: this was what she deserved for putting that overly flirtatious bit on her horror movie group poster. That the meetings would be "bi-weekly and bi-curious." She wasn't even sure why she'd written that, it had mostly been an impulse, a whim. No one had ever taken her up on or even mentioned that part of the poster anyway, and her curiosity had gone unsatisfied.

Dana took a look at the girl she'd just banged into, beyond the impressively strong arms that held her. She was, well, actually a lot like the character Juliet had written about. For an instant, Dana became convinced her heart was going to jump out of her throat. Fortunately, her mind was able to quickly identify several key differences between the girl before her, and the fantastic character in Juliet's story. Dana breathed a sigh of relief, she had no clue what she'd do if she found herself standing a foot away from the 'real' Chloe Price.

Yes, this girl had the blue hair, and a pair of wonderfully strong arms that had so easily caught her. She even had a tattoo. But Juliet had written that Chloe Price towered over them and had a presence, a piercing gaze. This girl was only slightly taller than Dana or Juliet, and wore a cheeky, slightly devilish grin on a face that seemed too beautiful for the veteran of a hundred street fights. Her body radiated heat and her skin glistened, which screamed out that she'd been doing some serious running. A sight Dana had trained herself to appreciate, having been involved for so long in cheering and participating in the school's sports teams. The way her damp singlet clung to her body made it clear she was defined as hell. But Chloe drove a pickup according to Juliet, so it didn't make sense that she'd be running anywhere, least of all to a school she'd been expelled from. Maybe Chloe Price had an athletic little sister in one of the other dorm wings?

"Could you point me in the direction of Max Caulfield's dorm." She asked, gently releasing Dana from her protective grasp.
That was the final nail in the coffin for Dana. It couldn't be "The Price". No way would a quiet shy girl like Max have anything to do with the town's resident delinquent badass.

"Oh sure, it's just down the hall from my room, I'm on the way up there now if you want to come with. Um, you're friends with Max Caulfield? No offence but you don't really seem the type?"

"Really? What's Max's type?!"

There was an inquisitive enthusiasm behind the question. Her tone also belied more than a little innuendo. It sounded like she wasn't really asking about friendship. Rather what her grandmother might have described as 'very good friendship'. She took a second look at the girl before her. Basket ball style singlet, with large arm holes, putting the sides of her bra clearly on display, short dyed blue hair and the aforementioned huge tattoo on her arm. And the boots. Big-ass steel toed combat boots. She definitely conformed to certain blatant stereotypes, on the other hand she completely rocked them. If she'd walked into the horror movie club at the beginning of term, Dana suspected her curiosity might have ended up satisfied in short order. The way her deep blue eyes flicked over Dana's figure just for an instant did little to dissuade that suspicion.

Dana managed to pry her mind off the strangely handsome girl in front of her long enough to think on her question. Truthfully, Max was a bit of an enigma. Yesterday she might have said Max's type was 'Warren', the stereotypical geek couple. But Max seemed to try to avoid him like the plague, even using Victoria as an excuse to dodge the idea of them together. She was sort of friendly with Kate Marsh, they actually went out together. Just for tea, but it was a lot more than Warren got. But Kate was staunchly religious and had become kind-of withdrawn recently. Yesterday Max had actually seemed congenial with Victoria, and Victoria had even let her in the Vortex Club. The thought of Victoria leading Max around in her typical abusive fashion, bullying the smaller girl was a worry. But from the absence of a certain photo on any social media, it seemed Max had somehow gained a degree of influence and control, maybe even dominance over her. Dana nearly cracked up. Control and dominance? What did Max do, put on her one-of-a-kind leather hoodie, announce she was "Mistress Maxine", throw Victoria across her knee and pick up a riding crop? All right, that suddenly got strangely specific. Somehow her mind had ended up in a really weird place this morning. Dana looked again at the story draft in her hand. Damn it Juliet.

"I'm not sure. It's just that she's so shy, and you're so, well, loud." Dana eventually managed, trying to banish the equally absurd and intriguing idea of Max the dominatrix. The answer she received failed to help matters.

"Max can be loud when she wants to."

Damn, Chloe thought, what a leading statement. She had meant it innocently, as a reflex defence against the idea Max was a fragile, shy girl. The fragile and shy don't rush to save people from gun wielding psychos, spy on some organised crime conspiracy, try to save the town from a tornado, and generally make space and time their bitch. She decided to let it stand without elaborating further. Acting defensively could easily make it sound more rather than less plausible. Besides, Max could do with a little bump to her profile.

"Why so interested in Max, someone as hot as you must have your own stories."

A faint blush crossed Dana's cheeks at that rather overt statement of fact. It was accompanied by a sensation of being casually checked out, again. Yes she and the other cheerleaders often complimentsed each other. She and Juliet had been known to share several especially crude confidence building exchanges, super-praising each other's anatomy and what boys might want to do with them, when they were feeling miserable. But when this blue haired girl said it, it felt different. Sort of like the difference between cheer leading practice and competing at the nationals.
"The last one had a complicated ending. And the current one had a false start. It was a kind-of impromptu hookup but we got caught in the stairwell before things could get interesting. Now things are kind of awkward, and I'm not sure where either of us stands."

"Ouch. Sounds like an acute case of cliterference. So, what's the name of this Romeo?"

"Trevor, he's a skater and-"

"Yeah' I know the guy. Real chill, and last time I saw him he was great on rails but couldn't land a Tre Flip to save himself."

"He's still can't manage it consistently." Dana giggled. "Though he told me this weird story: his fail saved all his friends yesterday. The way he tells it, all his friends got up to laugh at him on the ground and just missed being hit by an out of control car. I know it sounds crazy, but the car's driver Alyssa completely confirmed it for me. Her brakes just suddenly failed for no reason. Apparently Max actually has a picture of it. She was there too."

Chloe smiled. If Max was there then there'd be more to the incident. She probably manipulated Trevor into bailing and getting laughed at in order to save everyone. Damn, that's some harsh 'needs of the many' shit, Max. Chloe was glad she could say with confidence Max would never pull that on her.

"Well here we are." Dana said, unlocking the door to her room.

Chloe took a discreet, nosy peek inside. Pennants and posters of the school's sports teams were everywhere. It looked like Trevor had bagged the school's most dedicated cheerleader. She discreetly ran her eyes down Dana's body for the third time. Also probably it's most attractive, damn.

"Max's room is at the end of the hall on the right. Careful you don't go left, that'll take you to the resident wicked witch's. Though since Victoria had her place broken into last night, I haven't seen her. Maybe we got lucky and someone dropped a bucket of water on her."

So the break-in last night was in Victoria's room? No wonder Step Dork was so grumpy about Max and Victoria. They were creating a ton of extra work for him. And between the break-in and Dana's casual remarks behind her back, it seemed the queen of the school didn't actually enjoy that popular a reign.

"If I see Trevor, I'll try to talk some sense into him." Chloe assured her. "Maybe remind him that he's got a chance with one of the hottest girls in the school and not to waste it, before some other skater who can land a Tre flip lands you as well."

To be fair, the other skater she had mentioned could have easily been Trevor's friend Justin. It wasn't, but it could have been. The way Dana silently gulped at Chloe's flippant comment suggested she'd figured that out.

"Wait. Do you need my number? Just, you know, just so you can warn me if you do run into Trevor, and it turns out he's not interested in me anymore after what happened last night."

Well that was about as transparent as the lens on Victoria's most expensive camera. Waitjustaminute. Was this for real? Dana was basically the embodiment of the centrefold of every magazine that Chloe had ever read excellent articles from. An incredible body, a liberal attitude toward its uses, and what seemed to be a genuinely warm, bubbly personality. She was an almost perfect fantasy, made real. Chloe found herself gently bringing a hand up, and placing it on Dana's shoulder.

"No need. Trevor will see sense, he'll definitely be interested in you, and he'll call you himself."
Three figures arrived in Max's room, one after the other. Chloe was first, and was a little confused as to find it empty. She took the opportunity on offer to fulfil half her promise to David, opening one of Max's history notebooks and snapping a shot of Max's handwriting on her mobile. Her phone wasn't exactly the latest model, and certainly didn't give as many megapixels as Victoria's, but it would suffice. She reflected that she could have just shown David one of the letters Max had sent her, or perhaps something they'd written together years ago, before Max left. But those were precious to her and private; she felt much better showing him some boring generic history notes that Max had been instructed to copy by rote from the board.

Shortly before this, Max was just leaving the shower, and was about to turn into her dorm's main corridor. Her lithe body wrapped only in a towel, and her nightclothes were bunched in her right hand. She froze momentarily on seeing her favourite blue-haired miscreant chatting in an awfully familiar manner with a slightly flushed Dana. Unbelievable. Did she intend to flirt with her entire dorm hall? She watched the conversation end with Chloe gently placing her hand on Dana's shoulder and patting her goodbye, as the school's most attractive cheerleader entered her room. Immediately there after Chloe headed straight for Max's room, and Max silently gave chase.

So intent was Max in her stalking of the punk that she completely missed another girl, roughly as short as her, quietly slip out of a doorway and head for the showers. Her head was hung low in a state of abject misery, that seemed entirely at odds with the cutesy pyjamas she was clad head to toe in. Had Max followed her normal routine, she would no doubt have woken later, perhaps even run into the miserable girl just outside the showers. However, Max had been awakened earlier than expected, disturbed by Victoria's perennial habit of rising early. It seemed that this morning, Kate would be alone with her demons.

Entering her room, Max saw the broad shoulders of Chloe's frame facing away from her, entirely focused on the content of her table. She allowed herself a moment to admire them, then quietly disposed of her nightclothes. Tiptoeing, she silently crept up behind her, just as she'd done so many times in years gone by; there was a very good reason Chloe had long considered Max a Ninja. When she was right behind her, less than a foot away, Max carefully extended a hand, and lightly brushed her fingers along the bare skin of Chloe's shoulder. The effect on Chloe from an outside perspective was decidedly humorous. Arcadia Bay's foremost badass delinquent found herself caught in a moment of shock. The hand's contact was unnerving in how gentle, how fleeting it was. Goosebumps rippled outward from the line it traced from shoulder to elbow. She leaped around, eyes wide, and shock suddenly turned to foolish giddiness as she saw Max standing straight behind her smiling, giggling, and clad only in a towel.

The nervous energy of the situation was such that neither could help themselves, drawing each other into their arms for a quick hug.

"Max the ninja strikes again."

When they broke apart, Chloe looked at Max with the eyes of an addict, who simply must have her fix. She paused for a moment, then glanced side to side in the most ridiculously suspicious manner Max had ever seen, her face grinning like an imp.

"So, do you have it?"

Max looked at her doorway. Victoria still hadn't returned. She smiled nervously, the same way she
had so many times in years past whenever Chloe talked her into doing something naughty, and removed a photo from her draw. It was the one she’d accidentally taken this morning, with her face half asleep in the foreground and Victoria caught unawares in the behind.

"Damn Max. You look like you're on crack in this." Chloe remarked at her bleary and half-closed eyes in the shot.

Max crossed her arms defensively. She didn't need this from 'Miss Flirts with Everybody', especially when she was sharing a secret treasure. Chloe's gaze was fully captured by the photo, and as her focus went from Max's dopey expression to the background, her face lit up in a decidedly unwholesome way. There, Victoria was bent over Max's desk, wearing some tight, flimsy, and mostly transparent thing. Her eyes traced down the outline of Victoria's slender neck, past the shoulder blades. They momentarily paused to consider the curve of Victoria's ample chest, how it extended outward just enough to be seen from behind her, and what it must look like unconstrained from the front. With slight reluctance they returned to the path formed by her silhouette, down the taper of her waist and to the flair of her hips, caught thrust out at the extreme point of her side-to-side sway. There she was met with the only thing to really supply a modicum of modesty, the narrow band of fabric that made up her g-string.

"In fact I think I can see the crack you're on!" Chloe concluded. "So, Tori was wearing that when Warren saw him? Damn, no wonder she wanted him gutted."

"I'm calling it moonlit morning face."

Chloe gave her the thumbs up, grinning, and Max sighed. Her best friend was a rampant pervert and she was enabling her. Not that the two of them really needed the photo: they'd seen Victoria getting changed yesterday and had the image burned into the back of their minds. She and Victoria may have kind of looked at Chloe changing too, to similar effect. In fact Max was the only one of the trio who'd thus far managed to avoid exposing herself in some way. No great loss there, Max mused. Victoria was gorgeous, and Chloe incredibly handsome. Compared to them she was virtually invisible. Not completely invisible though, she couldn't get away with wandering around in a towel all day, she needed some damn clothes. She began fishing through her wardrobe when she felt a strange sensation. Like she was being watched.

She looked up and saw Chloe still holding the photo. Chloe's eyes weren't on the photo. They were on her, tracing a downward path from freckle to freckle which was terminated by the top of her towel. Max looked at her, and Chloe immediately turned away blushing slightly. Max grinned; the badass had an unexpectedly cute side when she was flustered, though Max couldn't understand why she'd be flustered looking at her.

Then she saw Victoria standing in the doorway, apparently having just returned, staring at Max just as intently. Her gaze was aimed lower though, following Max's slender legs upward. She had a similar reaction to Chloe when caught, immediately looking away. Unlike Chloe, a defensive and put-out expression came across her face when she did so, like it was all Max's fault she'd been staring and she was being unfairly judged.

Of course, Victoria's attempt to look elsewhere brought her focus onto Chloe and the photo she was holding. She displayed her usual single minded reaction on detecting a photo, locking onto it like a missile and making a beeline for it. Max felt this an apt analogy, as she was likely to explode when she got close enough to see its content.

"It's a shot I took this morning. I, um, seem to have accidentally caught you in the background."

Victoria snatched the photo from Chloe, and her face quickly went through a wide variety of
expressions: amusement, then several distinct variations of disgust, then embarrassment, and finally a disturbingly unsettling smile.

"Of course it was accidental Max." Victoria's honeyed voice finally answered. "It's clear from the composition of the shot that you intended yourself to be the sole point of focus: You've aligned yourself more or less perfectly according to the rule of thirds, while I'm clearly displaced from the grid. And you'd have been shooting the selfie without looking through the viewfinder, so you'd really have no idea what was in the background."

All things considered Victoria was taking this incredibly well. And Max guessed it was nice Victoria had a sufficiently high opinion of her photography skills to discount malice on purely technical grounds. Victoria paused for a moment, as if there was something she wanted to say, but was struggling to get it out. That was unusual, Victoria Chase was rarely caught speechless.

"I'll trust you with it", she finally managed, motioning to hand the photo back to a bemused Chloe. "Besides, I look spectacular in the shot. If anything, it humiliates Max far more than it does me."

Internally, however, Victoria's thought process was somewhat more complicated, and she found herself turning away for a moment to compose herself. On some level she had an instinctual reaction to seek vengeance for any perceived slight, no matter who did it or what their motivation was. If she was brutally honest this was probably borne of her own insecurities. She couldn't possibly act on it here. There was more at stake now, the three of them needed each other. And if she was to act as the emergency voice of reason in case future Max disappeared, she had to try especially hard to get along. For a second she found herself wondering if that was just another part of future Max's manipulations, like her insistence on limiting them to the most minimal amount of information needed to carry out her plans. Perhaps Future Max wasn't in any real danger of accidentally eliminating herself in the past, and that it was just another means of control, to make Victoria keep her head down and work with the other two. If so, then Max was destined to become a completely magnificent manipulator, whom Victoria would gladly acknowledge as her better. And be utterly furious at forever. And worship her feet. Being bested at her own game brought out a lot of complicated feelings for her. Still, a manipulation of that sort did seem a little superfluous. Victoria was finding the company of her waif and punk companions strangely agreeable.

In fact, on another level, she rather liked the idea of Max wanting to have a picture of her like that, of wanting to look at her. After all, she had practically paraded herself in front of Max in her see-through night attire. Maybe this would make her a little more prominent in Max's dreams next time. And if that wonderfully muscled lummox Chloe Price took a look at it too, well that wasn't so bad either. Just as long as they defended it with their lives. If either of them let any filth like Warren Graham get so much as a glimpse of it, she'd coat their heads in panko flakes and shove them in a deep fryer.

In the intervening moment, she noticed Max staring at the hands she'd just embraced Chloe with. They were damp, glistening with a byproduct of her morning run. Victoria found herself recoiling. Perspiration was disgusting and incredibly uncouth.

"Wowser Chloe. And I thought Victoria had a radiant sheen this morning."

"What I had was a sheen", Victoria began defensively, "what she has is a drenching. Honestly Max you just had a shower and now you're latching onto that?"

"I did have to run several miles Victoria." Chloe remarked. "What got you hot under the collar?"

"Natural exuberance." Victoria quickly replied. She could hardly say that Max accidentally worked her into a fever while dreaming about Chloe.
"So anyway Maximus, since we're all here, what escapades related to time trav-"

Chloe suddenly found her voice muffled by Max's tiny hand. Damn, Victoria hadn't been exaggerating when she said Max had a penchant for suddenly gagging people. Of course Chloe could have dislodged Max with little effort if she wanted to. But she kind of didn't. Victoria rolled her eyes, then strode away and returned moments later carrying future Max's most recent letter. Oh, so Max's room was bugged.

The trio were about to make a quick exodus across the hall to Victoria's room, when Victoria spun around to face Max with one of her trademarked bursts of annoyance. Max continuing to rush about in nothing more than a towel had become intolerably distracting.

"Max, put some fucking clothes on before you succeed in seducing someone with that nymphetic yet somehow legal body."

"Don't listen to her Max." Chloe countered. "I'm completely prepared to risk falling for you if you want to safeguard your newly chosen naturalistic lifestyle."

That did it. Max immediately pivoted about face and rushed back to her room to change. She'd already looked out one of her many generic shirt and jeans combinations, so dressing wouldn't take long. She looked at herself in the mirror. Were they cereal? Probably not, the way they'd phrased their statements made it sound like they were joking. Especially Chloe, she seemed to always be saying silly things like that. Victoria sounded more annoyed or frustrated. Max had always thought herself plain and unattractive, possessing neither the classic feminine form of Victoria, or the undiluted bad ass (and also taut ass) that was Chloe Price. Definitely unable to seduce anyone.

"Damn, they really trashed your digs. Only looks slightly better than my room now."

Max's departure to get changed left Victoria and Chloe idling in Victoria's wrecked room. Victoria reflected that Chloe was being a tad harsh on her own decorating. It was true that her room was a bit of a dump, and filled with cheap crap. But that was part of the aesthetic. Every bit of graffiti, poster exhibiting the female form, and cheap furniture added to the atmosphere. It created a feeling that was rough and irreverent and uniquely Chloe Price.

What had been done to Victoria's room was the opposite, an intrusion that had destroyed the atmosphere, the expensive perfection Victoria had strived to create. It sickened her, the feeling someone had broken in, violated her space, and rifled through her personal possessions then slashed them, probably imagining her wearing them as they did so. She could almost ignore it when she'd had something to do: go get her camera or talk with future Max about the day's mission. Just standing there, idly waiting, left her with nothing to distract herself from the feeling. No place to hide. Her eyes lingered on the slash marks on the bed, and her body went cold, strength draining from her legs. She'd slept there almost every night since first attending Blackwell. She imagined the anger and rage of whomever did this. Ripping violently at everything they could get their hands on in a fit of pique. Wishing it was her body they were digging the knife into. It made her feel weak, defenceless, in spite of having a gun in the next room. At least Chloe was there, even if it meant her drooling over that picture on the wall of her in the bikini. From what she'd seen, the punk somehow had enough strength and technique to fight off just about anyone.

"I don't need any sympathy from you." Victoria finally responded. She was defensive, and incredibly unconvincing.

"Oh come on Tori, even badasses enjoy commiserating together. Which I still think you are by the way."
Chloe suddenly wrapped an arm behind Victoria and around her far shoulder, strong and reassuring and unnerving all at once, and thick with muscle like a serpent, tempting her. Victoria made a token effort to recoil when she felt the unsolicited contact, and a slightly less token effort when she registered the damp feel across the back of her neck and remembered Chloe was soaked from her run. Both efforts had little effect. Unlike Max, if Chloe Price wrapped her arm around you, you weren't getting it off without the jaws of life.

Victoria hated sweat. It was uncouth and disgusting and spoiled her immaculate image. So were overt displays of affection like hugs. The idea of being roughly hugged by some crass girl that was drowning in musk and muscle repulsed and infuriated her. The reality of it seemed to be doing something rather different, and that infuriated her even more. Being casually grasped and reassured, protected. Roughly claimed and almost bathed in her raw scent. It set her heart racing, and made her face hot. It made her feel vulnerable in a completely different way to the slashes on her bed. A strangely good way, as it turned out. But this wasn't some 'random crass girl'. It was the crass girl who saved her yesterday from Nathan, and performed the (admittedly lesser but still appreciated) service of seeing off Warren today. Not that winning a fight should grant you the heart of the person you saved. But it did bring you to their front door, which was enough for Chloe's singular personality and general attractiveness to function as a most effective battering ram.

And she was incredibly attractive. Victoria could say that in a dispassionate and professional manner of course, being a photographer. She more or less surrendered to the invading arm, and relaxed into her embrace. At the moment Chloe began to retract her arm and release her, Victoria surprised them both: turning to face Chloe and pulling them into a proper hug, even nuzzling at Chloe's neck in that way that Max so often did.

"Don't read anything into this. It's completely meaningless." She murmured caustically.

Chloe was confused whether this was a need for emotional comfort, or perhaps something more.

"It's just that you're strong and brave enough to make me feel a little safer when I know people are out to get me, and slash up my room with a knife."

All right, it was a scared girl needing emotional comfort. Ignore the way she's pressing her sizeable chest into yours, Price, and the shortness of her breath, and pat her on the shoulder in a friendly platonic manner.

"You're also rather beautiful, and I'd like it if you posed for my photography some time."

Now things were getting confusing.

"I ramble when I get nervous. I just do it far more coherently than most people."

Victoria knew she was making a fool of herself. For the moment, she didn't care. Chloe had already accidentally, and effortlessly broken her with those glistening muscles, and she was at her mercy. For the moment. She had a wonderful dream of revenge, of course. Of hiring a team of six guards to drag her blue haired assailant around every boutique store she could find, throwing credit cards around like money was no object. Which to her, it really wasn't. And leaving Chloe transformed into something suave and sophisticated. She'd have the scent of an expensive cologne, not the eclectic mix of natural musk, beer, weed and that old leather jacket she so often wore. Her nails would be professionally manicured, her hair would be styled, and she'd be wearing the most magnificent tailored suit. She'd make an impeccable toy to parade around parties and carry her shopping. Perhaps clean the family's swimming pool too, though she'd have to take off the suit for that, and maybe work up just a hint of her old scent doing all that manual labour, and then probably insist on hugging her again. How vulgar, she thought, while desperately chewing her lip.
"Didn't you say I needed a shower?" Chloe asked, finding their situations reversed: she was now the one in need of extrication.

"Yes I did." Victoria answered brutally, annoyed at her glorious revenge fantasy being interrupted. She made no effort to remove her face from Chloe's collar bone, where it was buried, instead inhaling deeply, deliberately. And reflecting on how much her body and higher mind enjoyed different things.

"Hey Tori", Chloe interrupted once more, causing Victoria's teeth to grind as she was pulled out of fantasy land again.

"What do you think Max's type is?"

"What?!"

Victoria seethed and she felt her back arch. It was happening again: first Max had groped her while dreaming of someone else, of Chloe. And now she had her body pressed tight against Chloe, hugging her. Hugging her! Something she never did with anyone, at least not without ample alcohol consumption. Literally offering the body she knew Chloe kept stealing glances at up into her arms. She was even enjoying the most wonderful fantasy about taming her and making her a personal 'servant', and all Chloe could do was think about Max.

In a moment of unbridled fury, Victoria dug her nails, hard, into the exposed flesh under Chloe's shoulder blades. Her nails bit deeply and she felt the flesh give way beneath them. She froze instantly, in terror. God, what had she done. Chloe had just been trying to offer her support in her endearingly rough, flirtatious way. In return she'd clawed her viciously, probably inflicted great pain. Chloe was ridiculously strong; if she turned on her from this distance, she could beat her to a pulp, and there'd be no way of stopping her. Victoria was about to make a desperate attempt to apologise, when she heard a sharp moan. Timidly bringing her face up, Victoria was met by a look of desperate hunger, of need. A look that screamed "I'm about to have my way with you and it's going to be rough. But we both know you're going to enjoy every second of it bitch, and beg for more afterwards, even though you won't be able to walk straight." It completely melted her insides and made her weak at the knees. And it sadly lasted all of three seconds before reverting to one of deep embarrassment, a state of being that Victoria found mirrored and amplified on her own face soon afterwards. And just at that instant they heard the door to Max's room open.

A final tug of her left shoe lace secured Max's converse sneakers: she was now officially ready to face the day. She'd elected to go for her usual clothing trifecta: washed out blue jeans, nondescript hoodie and printed t shirt. She took a last look in the mirror. Still the childlike waif hipster; she had no idea why Chloe and Victoria had looked at her so intently, so she'd acted rather bashfully and closed the door behind her to get changed. She chided herself for her shyness, neither Chloe nor Victoria had locked themselves away when they got changed, in spite of how much the other two had looked. And both of them had a lot more to look at than she did. She reached for the door handle and opened it, hearing a muffled thump when she did so, kind of like a person leaping and landing on carpet, intent on moving as far as they could in a single stride.

Max's first impression was that she'd clearly missed something. Victoria and Chloe were standing several meters apart, trying desperately to look in any direction other than at each other. Victoria was looking refined and dignified, a little too much so, almost like a cat that had been startled and was attempting to restore its casual aloofness as quickly as possible, going overboard in the process. Chloe was wearing that goofy look that could disguise almost anything. The one she usually brought out when she had something to hide. She also seemed to be trying to keep her front facing Max, turning a little too deliberately to follow her as Max entered the room. At least neither of them
commented on how shy and bashful she'd suddenly acted. What they did comment on was the clothing she'd selected.

"Honestly Max we need to upgrade your style. You could be so much more elegant and sophisticated."

"What's wrong with my current style?" Max asked defensively. She rather enjoyed her non-descript jeans, t-shirt and hoodie. They were comfortable, and she could exchange any of the three items with the myriad selection of other t-shirts, jeans and hoodies in her wardrobe.

"You don't actually have one, to start with." Chloe interjected. "And fuck sophisticated, if that means wearing boring woollen sweaters every day. We're going to make you a badass."

"Actually I believe an empty set is still mathematically a set, ergo 'no style' is still a style." Victoria noted argumentatively. "Though Max's could use some major refinement. And for your information I have a fantastically diverse wardrobe. It's just most of it was destroyed by whichever nut case wrecked my room. What about yourself, do you have nothing but singlets?"

Great, now both Chloe and Victoria wanted to turn her into little versions of themselves. And something else had definitely just happened. Criticising Max's sense of dress was definitely in character for both of them, but it all felt a touch too rushed, too stressed, and too mechanical. It was obvious they were trying to cover something up. It kind of felt like yesterday, when Max had returned to Chloe's car after buying the burner phone, and the two of them were acting incredibly suspiciously. Max resigned herself to the fact that there were mysteries out there that she might never know the real answer to. Fortunately this one seemed to be of utterly trivial importance.

"Can we get on with reading the letter, so we can figure out what we need to get done today?" Max asked.

The trio crowded around one another, Chloe taking the future letter by virtue of the fact she'd managed to grab it off the table first. Though they'd all seen and briefly discussed chunks of it, this was the first time any of them had bothered to read it in its entirety. Chloe insisted on reading the thing aloud, in a John Forsythe impersonation, for reasons that would become apparent on reading the first line.

Good morning Angels.

You have a busy day today, so I'll get straight to the biscuits. Firstly, MY ( MAX'S ) ROOM MAY BE BUGGED. I DON'T KNOW HOW OR WHEN THIS HAPPENED, BUT FOR NOW JUST SHUT UP ABOUT ANYTHING IMPORTANT IN MY ROOM!

They'd already seen this part. Chloe had even had it thrust in front of her while gagged by Max's hand, so was unlikely to forget. Still, it brought up a very strange question that she really felt they should ponder.

"I still don't get how that happened, Max's room door wasn't forced or anything. Did you forget to lock it or-" 

"Clearly nobody knows, Chloe. Frankly I'm more worried at hearing a disturbingly good rendition of Charlie Townsend go from his usual 'good morning angels' to telling us all to shut up."

"Maybe I can borrow one of Step Dork's gadgets later, sweep the place and catch this fuck. Still, hella strange that Max's completely secure room gets bugged, but Victoria's, which we know has been invaded by one of Nathan's psycho friends and has a broken door, is clean."
We need to act to get a little more use out of the stolen phone sim card before its absence is discovered, and try to identify Jefferson's lackeys, or they'll become a real problem later on. Number six is a moron so try to work him/her over. Tell them you need them to retrieve something from a location people wouldn't normally go, and covertly film that location.

"A little more use?" Chloe inquired. "Did we actually get much use out of it yesterday? The most we did was tell them all to not contact each other or develop their photos right?"

"We told them all to avoid some place they called the 'dark room', which, yes is normally the name for a room dedicated to film development. I get the idea this is probably more of a code name for something else. Max's future self must consider that significant."

"Just how dumb is this six guy?" Chloe inquired.

"They replied to that go to ground and do not reply instruction several hours later, with 'OK'." Max said flatly.

"Damn, really?" Chloe looked dubious, so Max showed her the message they'd received. "I mean retarded gets used as an insult a lot, but against this guy it would probably be a statement of fact. So how are we gonna trap this fool?"

"We're going to tell him to pick something up from near the Tobanga totem poll. Victoria was already setting up her video camera tripod by Max's window to catch whoever went off the path toward it, when she was disrupted by Warren."

"He's been 'taken care of' by the way, so it's safe to carry on with that." Chloe smiled back, before feeling the need to add "not dead or dismembered either. Though he may have over applied his imagination, and assumed that was what was about to happen to him, and ran off terrified."

"I thought you were just going to talk to him and explain things?!" Max asked accusingly.

"I totally did Max. Then once he knew he had no chance with you, he started going on about how he had some other girl named Brooke on tap. And then he saw what I thought of that, and decided to be somewhere else."

"Figures", Victoria snorted. "Brooke and Warren would be perfect for each other."

"You mean because they're both into science?" Max asked.

"I mean because they're both peeping toms."

Chloe and Max both raised their eyebrows. A statement like that demanded elaboration.

"Have you noticed how Brooke usually really likes to fly her drone with the high resolution camera around the boys dorm?"

Well damn.

On that subject, Max was still a little worried about setting Chloe on Warren. He was just so… pathetic. Perhaps she should have left the poor guy alone. No, the logical part of her mind, the part that didn't cry endlessly inside her head on seeing road kill, which she roughly equated Warren with, shot back; it was probably for the best. It would be yet another issue if Warren had seen them set up the camera in the window, and they had to deal with him asking why they were conducting surveillance on a totem poll. And it could have blown the whole thing if he started asking other students about it.
Number five seems to have left something incriminating in the gym lockers. Encourage them to lay low and take the day off school. That gives us two chances to catch them: once during a search of the gym, and once checking the school's attendance roll.

"Future Max and I had a talk earlier. She felt the only real chance to check the gym was to break in late at night."

"You want to break into the school?" Chloe asked doubtfully. "You realise it's hella more difficult than just me swiping the step-tator's keys. There's the alarm system we'll have to disable, otherwise we'll trip a passive infrared sensor and have the place crawling with rent-a-cops. Not to mention the new video surveillance system, unless you want to be on the other side of the camera, and have your shots displayed down at the bacon station."

"I'm sure we can work out the details later. But for now, I have great confidence in the ability of Arcadia Bay's foremost delinquent to burglarise anywhere she pleases."

Chloe's face went ever so slightly pink on hearing Victoria's compliment. Good, she thought. It was nice to see someone else flustered by a compliment for once.

*Second, in order for Victoria's plan to have the greatest chance of success, I need my past self to do something that may cause temporary embarrassment.*

Max gulped. What the hell was she going to end up doing?

"Naked rain dance?" Chloe suggested on seeing the look of consternation on her face.

Her suggestion didn't really improve things, though it did cause Max to blush slightly, while murmuring "dork". Victoria shoved her head in her hands. Not only was that incredibly culturally insensitive, but now she was stuck with an image of Max stretching her slender limbs, prancing around all au naturel.

"But that would only encourage the storm. Maybe if she did it backwards. Or did it while rewinding time."

Max and Victoria wisely decided to leave that without further comment, and keep reading.

*Leave a post on facebook explaining you've had an awful dream showcasing a series of supernatural events on successive days: a freak snowfall, an unscheduled solar eclipse, whales beaching, the appearance of two moons, and finally a giant tornado that utterly destroys the town. In that exact order.*

Max didn't understand, hardly anyone followed her facebook account. The number of people who'd see it would be infinitesimal.

*Then Victoria needs to share and respond to that, exactly how she would if she saw it last week.*

"Oh, so I'm going to be publicly mocked on social media!" Still it would raise the audience from a handful of people to well over a thousand. Victoria had cultivated quite the following.

"Max, the only way this plan will work is if those events all actually occur in order. In which case after one day you're going to look like the fucking Oracle of Delphi, and I'm the one who'll look like a miserable bitch."

"You get to play against type then." Chloe smirked.
Victoria shot Chloe an angry gaze, then quickly withdrew it when Chloe threatened to hug her again.

"How likely are people to give a post like that any attention?" Max asked. The idea of anyone changing their schedule based on a blog of someone else's dream was difficult for her to fathom.

"Those events are incredibly varied." Victoria said in a harassed tone, eyeing Chloe cautiously. "Several are outright scientifically impossible. The odds of picking them all to come true in sequence on consecutive days are astronomical. If that did happen, Max would be the most successful doomsday prophet in verifiable history, and I can imagine anyone of intelligence deciding to take the day off on Friday, just to be on the safe side.

"Besides it doesn't have to convince everyone", Chloe chimed in. "We only really need to get to whoever has the power to declare a local emergency evacuation. And if they don't completely go for it, Max can go meet them later on in the week once most of that shit has come true, and they're scared as fuck. Then break out some sort of psychic act, and finish the job."

"This isn't going to get me sent to area 51 for dissection or anything, is it?" Max inquired gingerly.

"Between supernatural weather and a criminal group out to get us, I think that's the least of your problems at the moment Max. Besides you can probably pass it off as a one-off thing. And with the exposure this will give you, it's unlikely the government could easily make you disappear."

Well it was reassuring she probably wouldn't end up vivisected by the government, though this plan did result in her becoming a centre of attention. A position Max despised on any level of magnitude, let alone one for the whole town.

*There's another little matter I'd like Victoria to work on. There's ample evidence of her editing skills being circulated, so perhaps she could make the tiniest modification to that audio recording taken of Sean Prescott and his 'driver' Grey. Try to make it sound like they decided to kill Jefferson. I'm sure you'll find a use for this soon enough.*

*Finally, it is absolutely vital that my past self does not miss the start of Jefferson's photography class. In fact make sure she gets to school well before that, Chloe.*

Victoria cringed at the implied rebuke. It was clear Future Max was having a go at her for her editing and releasing Kate's Video. Even though she'd taken it down yesterday, and set the kates-vid domain to redirect visitors to a youtube Rickroll. She'd even suffered poetic justice in having her own video released, co-starring Max. She glanced at her two companions. Chloe seemed completely oblivious of what the 'editing skills' referred to. Max seemed a little suspicious but nothing more. Good. It had been a petty act, and the sort of thing that would utterly enrage Max. Assassins and vandals notwithstanding, it had been rather enjoyable to be on Max's good side, and she'd rather stay there. Hopefully the whole thing could just remain buried, and they could get back to saving everyone without yet more drama on the side.

There was a sudden pause as the trio finished reading future Max's instructions. Of course Chloe wasn't about to let dead air go unfilled for long.

"Busy day then. So, um, does anyone else have anything they'd like to do, or have we decided to forego our free will in favour of becoming unthinking conduits for Future Max's designs?"

"Well we both do have school Chloe… Although our English class got cancelled this morning on account of the teacher getting ill and them not being able to organise a reliever."

"Honestly, for all its prestige, this has to be the slackest school. I do have a little chemistry homework
to finish this morning. Oh and Courtney's wasted no time in loading me with responsibilities as the Vortex club secretary. I have to organise the guest list for the party on Thursday, and arrange everything from the sound equipment delivery to the flavour of the potato chips, nothing I couldn't get done this afternoon though."

"Well that's hella convenient, cos I've got a few plans for both of you." Chloe said, a glint in her eye.

Both Victoria and Max gave Chloe an incredibly suspect glance.

"Nothing like that. Yet. But I figured we could all get breakfast at the two whales diner. Joyce really wants to see you, Max. And then maybe we could all go somewhere secluded and private afterwards-"

"Here we go-"

"And I could make sure Victoria could handle that pistol I leant her. Maybe you could even let Max fire off a round! Honestly, it's like the two of you hear what you want to hear. So to recap: I'm going to show you my secret place and give you something you'll enjoy eating."

"Oh, Max. You and I still have that extra credit assignment for Mr Jefferson." Victoria suddenly cut in.

Max groaned. She'd been dreading that, which was really quite an accomplishment, given it was up against a giant tornado, and an assassination attempt on them that was bound to happen sooner or later.

"We'll have to get on to that, but it feels wrong. Turning in photos of one another to someone we know is a criminal psycho. I definitely don't want to use my original idea. It'd feel gross given everything we know now. Maybe we should just try to grab candid shots of each other during the day."

"Max what was your original idea?" Victoria asked, desperate for more information. It almost sounded like shy little Max had planned something Mature, even a little risqué.

"I was thinking about doing something inspired by his, um, 'implied consent' series. It would be more like a response or critique of it really."

Chloe noticed Victoria had suddenly gone very quiet. In fact she kind of looked like she'd been struck by lightning. And Max was suddenly avoiding eye contact with her.

"What's implied-"

"All you need to know," Victoria began sharply, cutting Chloe off mid-sentence. "is that tasteless shot displayed on the school's front lawn, with the creep pawing his hand over the teen girl's exposed shoulder, is from the series. In fact it's the tamest shot in the series. Honestly Max, you were planning on having me play some weak vulnerable girl, helpless and about to be preyed on by some sick pervert?"

"I said it was going to be a critical response inspired by it." Max clarified. "It was going to have a woman in the position of power. In control, and rejecting the advances of another character."

"Oh, well you're right. It wouldn't feel right handing it in to Jefferson after everything we've found out. Though I'm not sure it sticks with the brief: showing a non-obvious part of my personality. I mean it would just be me in my natural dominant position as queen of the school, rejecting some unworthy suitor." Victoria said smoothly.
"Actually Chloe was going to be the woman in the position of power." Max clarified. "You were going to be the one being rejected."

Victoria's hands instantly balled into fists in shock. Chloe broke out in a toothy grin.

"That sounds awesome Max. We so should do that just for your private portfolio. Though I might need several practice sessions. Just so, you know, I can build up resistance to Victoria's many charms, so I can adequately resist her and-"

"CHLOE SHUT UP."

Victoria actually looked slightly deranged. She took a second to compose herself.

"Look, I actually do need to finish my damn chemistry homework. So if neither of you have anything significant to add, then I've got one last an addendum to the day's schedule: go take that fucking shower, Chloe. You're soaked in sweat and it's incredibly unappealing. You're like some horrid barbarian. Marching into a peaceful village that's completely unable to mount any resistance. Probably about to despoil the mayor's beautiful daughter and – you get the idea. Just go wash."

Victoria thrust a pale pink towel into Chloe's hands, then a bag containing an enormously varied range of overly expensive shower products. Chloe left the room and turned into the hallway, then paused uncertain.

"It's to your right and then down the small corridor on your left."

Max's eyes squinted for a second, suddenly noticing something as Chloe turned to leave.

"Victoria did you notice that Chloe has these odd crescent shaped marks just beneath her shoulders?"

Victoria froze perfectly still for an instant, as if petrified. To be fair, she was, just not in the geological sense. A second later she replied, her voice artificially calm.

"It may have been collateral damage from that horrid slut Juliet, Max. I'm sure we all remember how she was driven wild by that staged photo they took yesterday. Honestly, what a cheap whore. 'Pretend to kiss me, it'll make my BF jealous'. Then she utterly loses control and melts in the arms of someone she barely knows the moment they get close. Pathetic, desperate harlot. Completely unworthy of anyone's trust."

Max decided to drop that conversation. Victoria was sounding strangely upset and bitter. Instead she watched in silence, as Victoria prepared to do her homework. This was a rare chance after all, a chance to see how an honours student went about maintaining those high grades she enjoyed rubbing in everyone's faces.

Victoria's study technique initially confused Max: rather than consult text books, or even look at the question sheet, the first act of preparation was apparently to log into some internet site, then produce a small wallet, and extract one of several high limit credit cards. Needless to say, Max quickly found herself somewhat disillusioned.

"I told you this wouldn't take long." Victoria said, keying in her credit card details. "Don't look at me like that, We have a town to save. I can't afford to waste all my time on homework."

Kate Marsh stared vacantly at the mirror in the girls' shower room. While Max had felt half awake this morning, she felt half alive. She stared into her reflection, and found herself lost in her own haunted eyes. She was trapped in a dark tunnel, and every step forward moved the light at the end of
it further into the distance rather than bringing it closer. She really felt she should be doing something, but exhaustion had shattered her mind, and she couldn't quite remember what that something was. Probably related to the toothbrush in front of her. Instead she just kind of stood there, a third asleep, a third hypnotised, and a third wishing she hadn't been born.

"Hi Katie. Something the matter?"

The voice snapped Kate back to reality, at least for a moment. Courtney walked into the Girl's shower room with her new 'bestie' Sarah. Her former BFF Taylor had steadfastly refused to have anything to do with her after her vortex club coup, but Courtney had found a replacement easily enough. To Kate they were like vultures circling a wounded animal, willing her to succumb to her injuries so they could devour her carcass.

"N-nothing. Everything's fine."

"Whatever." Sarah managed, and then immediately looked to Courtney for approval. She seemed incredibly happy to receive a nod.

"I think it's great you've brought back old fashioned religious preaching," Courtney began in a mocking tone. "All that oral work you did at the last Vortex Club party trying to get your message across. Still, I'm not sure it was communicated clearly. So many of the people I talked to said you were speaking in tongues."

Courtney shot another glance at Sarah, who got the hint after a couple of seconds, and started laughing like a hyena.

"I've got good news for you." Courtney beamed with mock enthusiasm. Kate felt like the ground was giving way beneath her feet.

"I know you were disappointed someone decided to censor your freedom of expression or whatever, and take down the video of your 'sermon' at the last Vortex party, so I had it put back up on a completely new site! Aren't I totally just the best friend ever? The number of hits it's getting is incredible. And just to make sure everyone can enjoy seeing you reach out and commune…"

Courtney tapped a couple of commands on her phone. Seconds later the massed chime of message received jingles could be heard from the students in the hallway outside. Kate's already miserable day took another nosedive into darkness. Courtney had just messaged the link to the entire school's student body.

"So much more efficient than writing the link on the shower room mirror." She smiled maliciously. "Still, why not cover all the bases."

She withdrew a tube of lipstick and wrote the link across the bathroom's mirrors in elegant running writing. Each letter caused a slight squeak as the lipstick rubbed against the mirror's glass. In reality they were almost inaudible, but to Kate it felt like fingernails run down a blackboard. Courtney and Sarah stood either side of their handiwork, daring Kate to try to wipe the link off the mirror, a silent implication that something more, something worse might happen if she did so. Kate slumped against the wall; were she not up against it, she'd have probably collapsed. In her mind she was falling into an endless void, with no chance to climb back out.

For the first time in her life, Kate Marsh had a truly hateful thought. She wished she was bigger, stronger. Someone they wouldn't be stupid enough to pick on. Or maybe someone they would be stupid enough to pick on, so she could pummel them into a bloody pulp with her fists. But she wasn't. She was weak little Kate Marsh, 5'5" and never having been in a fight in her life. She'd never
even insulted someone, except one of her sisters, once, and had immediately felt bad about it and apologised. Her vision began to blur as tears forced their way out, spawned by a mix of rage and powerlessness and rage at her powerlessness.

Having no other way of slacking her rage, she stared across at Courtney and her idiot lackey Sarah as her welling tears blurred them into abstract objects of hate. She suddenly began to imagine them set upon by one of the demons that had haunted her last night, and that she had sketched in the morning. Towering over everyone else, their hair a mop of the hottest flames imaginable. They were the most horrid things Kate's mind could come up with, creatures with near total knowledge of sin and violence and vice; no school bullies would possibly have a chance against one. Their every communication would be dipped in vulgarity. Her rage grew and she actually found herself pleading, praying for just one them to be real, to appear before them, so it could teach some humility to these horrible fucks. That's right, she'd just called them a profane word in her head. And a verb too. How could someone be a verb? She found herself giggling a little, in spite of the situation. Perhaps she was going insane.

A creak, so quiet it almost went unnoticed, echoed around the shower room as the entrance door swung open. The steady tap of boots rang out on the tile floor. Kate looked up, her vision obscured by teary eyes and saw it: Towering above her tormentors, the blury visage of something tall, its arms packed with muscle. Its hair was unnaturally coloured, like a torrent of blue fire. For some reason it had a light-pink towel slung over it's shoulder, which slightly detracted from it's fearsome image, but only a fool would have said so to its face. It turned to face Courtney and just like Kate had imagined, profanity erupted from its mouth.

"Bitches, leave."

Sarah quickly spun on her heels to meet this rather rude intruder, uttering a comeback befitting her intelligence as she did so.

"You leave, Mmmm-kay….eh?!"

Sarah's response was truncated as she realised whom she was facing, and decided it best to immediately scurry for the door. Courtney turned as well and tried to stand her ground, but found her legs becoming rubber. Realisation struck her: she was face to face with the person who'd oh so casually put Nathan in the hospital.

"I'm hella good at imitating a few other scenes from Robocop too."

That was it. Courtney rushed to join her lackey, the image of being thrown through pane after pane of glass did not sit well with her.

A stillness descended on the shower room. The only noise came from the in-use shower cubicles, their occupants blissfully ignorant of the drama that had unfolded on the other side of their shower curtain. At least one was actually singing, with rather questionable adherence to any melody. Kate looked up at the demon and realised her folly. It had certainly scared off those… verbs, but now she was stuck with the demon she wished, prayed for. Something that looked many times as nasty as the bullies it had displaced. Perhaps she was the one who was about to learn a lesson in humility.

Chloe Price looked down at the miserable waif in front of her. Another day, another encounter with a crying girl. This one seemed completely different to Juliet though, she actually had real problems. Problems Chloe doubted could be solved by kissing her either. Her eyes looked blurred to the point that she could hardly see, with dark circles hanging around them that screamed "sleep deprived". Chloe had seen herself in a similar state after William's death. Sitting in her room, waiting for dawn. A moment of clarity brought Chloe a rather disturbing realisation. This must have been how it was
trying to handle her after William's accident, except now she was the scary new character that showed up out of nowhere and clumsily tried to force her back to normal. In this scenario, she was David Madsen. Still, at least Kate didn't look like the kind of girl who'd run a person through with a cake knife.

Do the easy part first, Chloe told herself. Demonstrate your good nature by wiping that link off the mirrors. Chloe ran her hand over the writing, turning it into a waxy smear on the glass and her hand. Fucking hell. It was even more of a mess than that time she and Max borrowed Joyce's lipstick and tried kissing their mirror. Still, that could be someone else's problem. She ran her waxy hand under the tap and immediately had someone screaming at her from behind the shower curtain about a loss of pressure.

Chloe reduced the flow to a trickle, and scratched her head in bewilderment. There were a whole bunch of showers running, yet running the water in a single basin could cause such a massive drop in pressure? Whoever designed the plumbing must have been a complete moron. It seemed especially dumb as one of the showers was presently vacated. Clearly there had to be additional capacity on the water system. Wait, wasn't there something else Chloe was supposed to be doing than critiquing the plumbing. Oh right. Kate.

"Um, hi." The demon whispered. Kate felt this was a strangely nervous sounding demon. Drying her eyes enough for her vision to clear revealed it to be a rather human looking one. Actually quite pretty too, but still more than a bit terrifying.

"Is there a friend I can call for you? Someone you could talk to?"

Kate thought for a moment. Most of her friends in the dorm seemed to have abandoned her. Stella was in one of the strange moods she seemed to go into periodically. She'd shut everyone out and locked herself away, studying to extremely late hours for several nights in a row. Alyssa had been nice, but had her own problems with that car crash, so Kate didn't want to bother her. And Brooke always seemed very busy, um, flying her drone.

"Max. Max Caulfield." Kate finally blurted in an unsteady pitch.

The demon, or person; Kate was almost completely sure it was actually a person now, though definitely a scary one, smiled at hearing the name. It seemed they knew each other. Max wouldn't know any demons, so it was almost definitely a person.

"I'll ask her to come to your room. And walk you to your room first, to stop those assholes coming back."

"What if they do come back anyway?" Kate asked, after flinching slightly from the casual use of profanity.

"Then I'll ask you to look the other way for five seconds."

"Can you really make problems go away just like that."

"Of course I can." Chloe replied, cracking her knuckles for effect.

Kate wasn't sure what to think. Perhaps she'd summoned a demon after all. Though somehow she'd gotten lucky and been sent a rather nice one.

"Just one question," the nice demon asked, holding up a bag containing an extensive array of expensive looking shower products, all with French labels. "'Gel Douche' is just a body wash gel, right? I mean I'm pretty sure it is, but with a label like that, I really don't want to make a mistake."
Victoria ran her fingers through her hair in frustration, then looked back at her computer's screen, enraged. She'd paid good money for the model answers it displayed, and they were utterly worthless. Max looked on sympathetically. Well, as sympathetic as you could look at someone who was blatantly trying to cheat to maintain her GPA. On the other hand, perhaps she'd have more time to finish her homework properly, were it not for the time escapades Max had dragged her into.

"I wish I could help you, but I don't even know what periodic means."

"I really hope you mean that with respect to chemistry and not in general, Max." Victoria snipped back. "I refuse to believe my arch-rival in photography is that ignorant."

Chloe suddenly stormed back into the room. The first thing they noticed was her anguished expression. The second was that she was still sweaty as anything.

"Ahh. I think I can see the problem." Victoria began, "Chloe, you'll find the shower substantially more effective if you try turning the tap until water comes out and-"

"Max, there's this hella depressed girl who needs to talk to you!" Chloe shouted, cutting Victoria off mid-sentence. "I just rescued her from some bullies."

Victoria and Max stared accusingly.

"I didn't hurt them either!"

Max found the door to Kate's room ajar, leading to a dim and foreboding interior. The morning sun, already occluded by the clouds, was further screened by the blinds on her windows, and the lights were all turned off. It made her room feel more like a cave than a dwelling, a cold dark place filled with sorrow and hopelessness. Kate sat in her chair, still clad head to toe in pyjamas. Dark rings encircled her largely vacant gaze, both symptoms of having not slept the night before.

Kate was so beautiful, so fragile, so broken. She was trying to balance on a crumbling rock of hope amongst a rising sea of despair. It felt so evocative. Max's hand slipped into her camera bag. An instant later she thought better and restrained herself, disgusted. It was the second time she'd had an urge like that. The first being yesterday, on seeing the back of Nathan's head blasted out. Everything that had happened, all the violence and suffering she'd seen and casually undone, must have been having an affect on her. A growing feeling that it didn't really matter, that horror and pain weren't quite as real as before, that she could erase them at her leisure. At least she hoped that was the case, the alternative was she was naturally a horrid person. Someone who'd prefer to photograph and capture suffering than abate it. She thought of the end of her and Chloe's childhood. Of innocence and fun ripped away and done insult to right at the start of her journey to adulthood. Chloe's Father William, someone she loved as a second father, dying in a freak car accident. And being pulled away to Seattle by her own parents new jobs, before she'd had a chance to process it all. Pain and fear and loss haunting her for the longest time. Still haunting her now, really. She looked back at Kate. The photography urge had passed, and there was only love left. A fierce protective desire to take her into her arms and hold her until the pain went away, until she felt safe. And to find the people who did this and confront them. Do whatever it took to keep Kate safe. Her power gave her the means, and she had the will to use it. As much as it took, to keep everyone safe.

Max wished she could have brought another person with her. But Kate had specifically asked for her, as someone she could trust. Her two companions weren't really suited either: Victoria was complicit in bullying Kate. And Chloe, well anyone who didn't know her tended to find her a little intimidating. Let alone a staunchly religious girl who'd been bullied out of their wits. Besides she
was sweaty as hell and really needed to take that damn shower.

"It'll be all right Kate. And if something really bad happens and those assholes come back, we'll just call in Chloe and get her to scare them off. Or throw them through the window."

"That dem- um, that big girl is in the shower though."

"If Chloe thought something bad was about to happen, she'd rush out of the shower and down the hall stark naked."

"Oh dear lord. Re-really?"

"Well, I like to think she'd wrap a towel around herself, but honestly the odds are fifty-fifty each way."

Max watched Kate's face manage a brief smile, before degenerating back into a desperate grimace. It was heartbreaking to see moments of joy snuffed out an instant after they'd been ignited.

"Kate, this, everything... Is this about that video?"

"I guess everyone's seen it by now. You must have, suddenly becoming good friends with Victoria. She's the one who recorded it all."

"Kate, I haven't actually seen it. I heard a couple of people talk about it yesterday but-"

"Really, Max, you haven't watched it?" Kate stared in blank disbelief. "You must be the nicest person in the school."

"Kate." Max took her hand, held it tightly. She wore her most sympathetic smile. "I can't possibly be the nicest person, when I'm looking at them."

"Now I know you were telling the truth. No one could have watched my video and still said that. It's not cute and funny, like the one with you and Victoria. It's me staggering around throwing myself at anything with two legs, locking lips and worse, while everyone else laughs their asses off. And I can hardly remember any of it."

Memories of yesterday in photography class, of Taylor throwing a note at Kate that mentioned a 'porn video', resurfaced in Max's mind. So this was what that had been all about. She tried to keep her fury in check. The initial video circulation was Victoria's doing. She'd almost forgotten how mean and cruel Victoria could be, or at least had been. Victoria seemed to have taken the video down yesterday in a sudden crisis of conscience, which incidentally coincided with her learning that Max and time had a special relationship. Since then, Max had seen a better side to Victoria, a vulnerable, frightened side that she felt strongly about protecting too. She wasn't sure how she'd feel about Victoria after this. She'd just been served a brutal reminder of what she had been, so soon after she'd had a glimpse of what she could be.

"Are you all right to talk about it?"

"That's why I asked to talk to you, I suppose. You always like to listen."

"You said you were staggering around? Did you drink anything or take anything-"

"I took one sip of red wine and that's it. It didn't even taste nice, bitter and a little salty like it had turned. Then just water. That had a slightly odd taste too, come to think of it, but I was so nervous and I wanted something to do. I thought a drink straight from the bar would be safe, and there's
actually not a lot to do at a party if you don't want to drink, or smoke, or... or rub yourself against someone and pretend it's dancing."

Max's heart sank. A few odd tasting drinks, and Kate suddenly acts grossly out of character? It didn't take a genius to realise she'd been dosed. Max could sympathise with Kate's social anxiety though. She was never really sure what to do at parties, or any social occasions. In fact, looking at smokers, she occasionally wondered if the real draw of cigarettes was that they gave you something cool looking to do, when you'd otherwise be sitting awkwardly in the corner, or trying desperately to come up with a witty line to say during conversations. She refocused her thoughts. The important thing here had to be the person who served Kate the drinks. Plural. Even if her wine was dosed with some sort of drug, a single sip couldn't possibly intoxicate her that badly. If it was that concentrated, and she'd drank the whole thing instead, she'd have probably needed an ambulance ride and a stomach pump. No, both the wine and the water had to be drugged to get Kate in that state, which meant someone repeatedly gave her drugged drinks. An evil, patient predator, adjusting the dose on each subsequent drink based on how much of the last she'd consumed.

"Who served you the wine and the water?"

"I-I don't remember. Someone behind the counter in the vortex club's VIP section though. That's the only place they gave out alcohol. I can't remember much about them."

Disappointment tried to force its way onto Max's face. She tried her best to suppress it. She really didn't want to make Kate feel any worse for forgetting details while drugged, but this could have been a critical clue to identifying the culprit.

"Do you remember anything else?" Max asked.

"Only people laughing. My speech slurred, my face felt hot and I was staggering around. I guess that's when I started debasing myself. Acting like a pathetic slut, a whore."

"Kate-" Max couldn't stand to hear Kate use that kind of language to describe herself. She wanted to interject but Kate wouldn't let her.

"That's how I acted Max! Like a cheap whore. I was all over everyone, it didn't matter who they were. I think I might have tried to make out with almost as many girls as boys. The comments left on the video site seem to think that's the best part. Even my own Mother emailed me, explaining that I'd betrayed their trust and disgraced them all."

"Kate, you were obviously drugged. It's not your fault."

"It doesn't matter Max. Everyone's seen the video and drawn their own conclusions. Besides all a drug like that would do is lower my self-control. It means that deep down I really am some slut."

Max looked at her, heartbroken. She didn't know what else she could do or say. How did you tell someone you thought their own parent was a moron, and that you knew better? She decided to try to move on as quickly as possible.

"Do you remember how you ended up leaving the party?"

"Nathan Prescott saw me in that state. He was the only one who didn't laugh Max. I thought he was looking out for me. He said I really didn't look good, and offered to take me to the hospital, just to be safe. I guess I went to sleep in the car. I woke up in a really bright place. I was in a white room. White everywhere. I thought it might have been the hospital, but it didn't seem right. There was a person there. They had a soft voice, like a doctor, but-"
Her voice was hoarse and shaky. She knew she should be terrified of that moment, but couldn't remember enough to know why. Max grew despondent at the revelation Nathan was involved. That meant Kate was another of his victims, like Chloe had been. Only Kate hadn't been so lucky, hadn't gotten away like Chloe had.

"But they didn't feel caring, or kind, or like they wanted to help me." Kate said shuddering. "They just kept moving me around. Carefully, but not with any regard for me. It felt cold, horrible. Does that make any sense?"

A soft voice. Definitely not a description you could apply to Nathan Prescott. And that narrowed it down to, well, probably a quarter of Arcadia Bay's population, at least by itself. But Max knew Mark Jefferson was part of whatever Nathan was involved in, and he just happened to have the soft mature voice you'd expect from a caring doctor. When you factored in Nathan had done something very similar to Chloe, drugged her and carried her off with at least the partial intent of taking pictures, and Mark Jefferson, the foremost photographer in the town, probably the state was involved, it started to come together. God. How was she going to face him in class today, knowing what he was?

"Then what happened? Kate?"

Kate tried to bite back tears. She wasn't successful. Her words struggled out as a sob.

"Then I woke up the next morning, freezing on a park bench on the miles from town in my flimsy party dress and with no shoes."

She took a moment to wipe the tears from her face with a tissue. It joined a pile of others in her rubbish bin.

"I was just lucky Alyssa was driving past. She gave me a lift back into town."

"The person that offered you the drinks. It wasn't Nathan too, was it?"

"I don't think so." Kate replied after a moment's thought. "No. I remember the hand giving me the drink. The skin colour was definitely different to his. Max, every time I try to think about what happened there, I just..."

Kate's voice trailed off into nothing. Max watched Kate's hands tremble, and felt like she was about to explode. She was furious at everybody: Kate had been drugged, it was so obvious. Worse, she'd been abducted. And literally everyone else were so pig-headed, they just pointed fingers at her and laughed. She was so caught up in fury, it took her a while to realise Kate had asked her something, and was giving her a pleading look, praying that Max would give her the answer she was hoping for.

"Max, should I go to the police?"

That should have been an easy question. It wasn't, because of what Max had heard eavesdropping on Sean Prescott yesterday. He had casually given the order to arrange an 'accident' for Max and Victoria, in response to their reporting of Nathan. Max had the ace up her sleeve of time travel, but Kate had no such weapon to rely on. At the same time Max wondered if Kate hadn't already been identified as a potential threat; Sean had talked about eliminating a "larger problem". What if that problem was Kate, and what she remembered about the abduction. What if staying quiet would just mean being picked off quietly, as loose ends to be tidied up at the Prescott's leisure, whenever their absence would seem least suspicious. Max also found it strange her future self hadn't mentioned anything about it at all. Either she trusted her to make the right decision, or for some reason considered that it was completely irrelevant.
"Yes." Max finally replied. "You should definitely go to the police. We've already reported him for waving a gun around in the girl's rest room, and he's been both arrested and hospitalised for fighting, so now is the perfect time to come forward."

"Hospitalised?"

"He was trying to seriously hurt other people, so Chloe hurt him first. It took about five seconds. I hear people usually completely recover from broken eardrums, though."

Kate gasped. Then Chloe had meant the line about looking away for five seconds literally. She knew she was being stupid, but this friend of Max, this Chloe, definitely did sound like a demon. Or maybe an angel, she did beat Nathan in order to save others. Just a very old testament, eye-for-an-eye angel, who dressed and spoke like a devil-worshiper.

Max herself was having strongly "old testament" thoughts. What Nathan had done to Kate, and Chloe, and probably countless others, made her seethe with rage. She still held the same opinion as yesterday, when Chloe spouted that bit of hyperbole about Kill Bill ninja-plucking his eyes out. That she'd be happy to hold Nathan down while Chloe got her Bride on. She'd just have to use her power to make sure that no further harm came to Kate, or anyone else. As much as it took, to keep everyone safe.

"I suppose I could lend you one of my exquisite Cashmere sweaters. You were saying how much you adored them weren't you?"

Victoria enjoyed the look of undisguised horror on Chloe's face. Chloe had just walked back from taking her shower. She'd been sitting at her desk, annoyed beyond belief that the homework solutions she'd paid so much money for were duds, and was stumped on one of the questions, so was glad for an amusing distraction. And Chloe Price returning from the shower, and suddenly realising she had nothing to change into was both amusing and distracting.

Chloe was in a predicament: she couldn't borrow from Max, the size difference would make all her shirts look like crop-tops, and she'd look ridiculous. The closest person to her body size was Victoria, but that left her in a vulnerable position. It was a complete turnaround from yesterday, when Victoria had been the one forced to dress up from Chloe's wardrobe, and she'd taken a certain glee transforming Victoria into in her words a "degenerate anarchist". Now perhaps it was Chloe's turn to 'pay the price'. Chloe reflected on just how obnoxious that catchphrase was, as Victoria rose from her chair and slinked around her. She was like a cat stalking its prey, savouring this brief moment of power over the normally indomitable Chloe Price.

"You'd look ever so refined and attractive." Victoria continued in her voice of honey coated doom. "We could go out to a positively lovely luncheon. Enjoy a pot of Earl Grey tea and cucumber sandwiches, perhaps a small plate of savouries, and make small talk about diversifying our investment portfolios. Of course you'd have to do something with that awful haircut. Trim out the roughness so your appearance could match the sophistication of the outfit."

Chloe looked like she was about to retch. Victoria was laying it on thick here, a hair's breath away from switching to an aristocratic British accent and calling her Mr Darcy.

"Or I suppose you could wear the clothes you leant me yesterday." Victoria finally relented. "They're on the rack over there. I only wore them for a few hours so they should be..."

Her speech tapered off, as Chloe flew like an arrow to retrieve the clothing. Victoria closed her eyes for a second, savouring the moment of finally getting one up on the normally indomitable Chloe.
Price. When she opened them again, her look of slightly sadistic pleasure was replaced with a blush as Chloe shamelessly brought the borrowed clothes up and gave them an experimental sniff. Was Chloe trying to insinuate something? Surely she wouldn't be so hypocritical. Not after she'd been an intoxicating slick of musk moments earlier. Besides, Victoria's perfume selection ensured she always smelt of beautiful roses. Victoria's blush noticeably intensified as Chloe held the shirt tight against her face and inhaled deeply.

"Hella, yes. Between this and your bath supplies, I'm gonna smell just like you Tori. Everyone's going to think we decided to co-invest, long cucumber stocks or whatever."

Victoria felt her jaw clench in annoyance. She decided it was high time to point out yet another obvious problem that Chloe seemed oblivious to. In her opinion at least as important as a tornado.

"I'm not sure what you're going to do for a brassiere though. One of mine would naturally be several sizes too large," she stated proudly. "And Max's would have pretty much the opposite problem wouldn't it."

"I don't actually need one."

Victoria's face immediately went flat. How slovenly.

"Having pecs this strong keep my girls hella pert and perky. I only wear one so I can wear basketball-style singlets without exposing everything. And go running. Chafing's a bitch." Chloe replied grinning.

Victoria became equal portions disgusted and envious. She returned to her chair and tried to finish her chemistry homework, though she was now further distracted by Chloe's apparent attempt to bring back 1960's style feminism.

"So I heard you were frustrated."

That's one way of putting it, Victoria thought, as she craned her neck back at Chloe. Doing so did little to avail her of that condition. Chloe had dropped the towel and just slipped the fitted anarchist shirt over her head. Victoria watched in fascination as the tight fabric was carefully brought down, slowly wrapping the top half of Chloe's taut body. Victoria swore under her breath. The glorious bitch was right, she didn't need a bra.

"Something about chemistry homework." Chloe clarified, tugging the shirt so her head finally popped through the hole, then stepping into her jeans shorts, having apparently chosen to eschew underwear entirely. Well she did like guns and military boots, so why not go commando?

"Blondes." Victoria suddenly said in realisation, before blushing. Chloe looked at her, confused.

"You asked about Max's type earlier. The answer's blondes, particularly ones she can rescue."

Chloe shrugged and finished fastening her belt, unsure why Victoria had decided to suddenly share this revelation. She walked over to Victoria, then looked around for somewhere to sit. There weren't any other chairs except the really comfortable looking office one, which sadly had one of its legs broken by the vandal. She picked it up and managed to balance on it precariously, and wheel herself in close to Victoria.

"Oh yeah, homework. Reminds me why I dropped out of school. That, and mindless rage against the establishment. Good times."

"Yes, well some of us worry more about our futures than others. Normally, I have some help on this
subject. Either from Courtney before she succeeded at backstabbing me, or…”

Chloe smiled at Victoria’s sudden pause to look around. Such a cute attempt at cloak and dagger, in stark contrast to the far higher stakes version they’d played the previous night with Sean Prescott.

"There's this site."

"Wow. Next thing you'll be telling me is that it's on something called an internet."

"SHUT UP. Anyway for a 'contribution to the site's maintenance', it will give you the tests, assignments and their model answers to the classes in Blackwell. Anyway, I got today's model answers and they seem wrong."

A wide grin spread across Chloe's face, remembering David's rant earlier today.

"Yeah the step dork was going on about how the school's network had been hacked for ages, and they only just caught on to it yesterday. Something about rich entitled students."

"Fuck you."

"Don't worry Tori, I told you I still think you're a sexy badass."

Victoria was sure Chloe had inserted an adjective that wasn't present the last time she'd said that.

"Anyway, the guys running the site probably found their information goldmine cut off, but didn't want to give up their customers. I bet they tried to work out the right answers themselves without having a clue. Anyway, with all the shit you went through yesterday, just don't bother. You could probably get an aegrotat pass on anything."

"I'm not risking my GPA on my ability to garner sympathy."

"Oh right, that's probably the one area you'd get an F in."

Daggers shot from Victoria's eyes at Chloe. The response was a patronising smile and single arm draped over her shoulder to execute another unsolicited hug. A hug that suddenly became unexpectedly tight and close, as Chloe unbalanced on the broken chair, and nearly fell over, before unceremoniously using Victoria as a means to steady herself. Well at least she smelt less animalistic now. Having availed herself of Victoria's bathroom supplies, Chloe was probably the sweetest smelling delinquent in the state.

"All right then Tsun-toria", Chloe began, rebalancing herself. "Let big sister Chloe have a look at your homework."

A furrow formed on Victoria's brow. Honestly, you accidentally quote verbatim from your favourite television show, that happens to be from Japan and animated, and you got immediately branded a stereotype. It wasn't like she actually acted that way, or anything.

"Come on Tori, I used to help Rachel with her homework, and she got good grades."

In fact she got perfect grades. Something which still eluded Victoria by the slightest of margins, to her endless annoyance.

"Remind me what your GPA was, before they finally kicked you out of here?"

"1.7" Chloe proudly answered, taking the question sheet in hand.
A C- average, in other words. Utterly pathetic. And Chloe was seriously trying to help her? Victoria's lack of confidence wasn't exactly assuaged by Chloe rotating the sheet 180 degrees after staring at it for ten seconds. Apparently it had been upside down and she hadn't noticed.

"Yeah this one is obviously wrong", Chloe said, immediately singling out the question Victoria was stumped on. It was prep work for a practical she'd have to carry out in her next lab period, so it was especially critical that she get it right. "Sodium and Potassium are both alkali metals so they do the same thing when you dump them in water."

"Yes, yes, the reason it's called a periodic table." Victoria replied in a condescending tone. "Chemicals in the same group display very similar properties, owing to having the same valence electron configuration."

"And what those two do in particular is awesome! But not what they're looking for, unless you're a complete moron, or want the experiment to blow up in your face and maybe splash a hella caustic solution everywhere. Seriously you could have your servants clean your oven with that shit, Tori."

Victoria grumbled under her breath. Against all odds, and her academic record, Chloe actually seemed to know what she was talking about. Of course, her methodology to answering the question was based around knowing which answers would cause explosions, or otherwise inflict severe injury, and eliminate them. It figures the one part of chemistry class Chloe paid attention to was 'how to maim and blow shit up'. Disturbingly enough it seemed to be working so far.

"So what's the point of this experiment, anyway?"

"We're supposed to identify this colourless solution and figure out some reaction that will convert it to a purple solution."

"Iodine's purple." Chloe noted reaching for Victoria's chemistry textbook, and flicking through the pages. "And some of its salts are colourless and soluble in water."

There was a pause as her maniacal face returned.

"You can blow shit up with it by mixing it with ammonia! It's so fucking cool, you get this stuff called nitrogen triiodide which gets so sensitive when it dries out that a feather will-"

"Yes, I'm sure knowing countless ways to deflagrate or detonate things is fascinating, but-"

"Found it. You use chlorine gas! Like what would have killed everyone in Das Boot, if they hadn't contained the flooding and it had really hit the sub's batteries. Or if you're a pussy, chlorine dissolved in water I guess. That'll oxidise any iodide in the solution to iodine. Oh, but that's sort of a brown colour in water. Maybe if you extract the iodine: evaporate the water so iodine crystals start forming, and put them in an organic solvent, or just pour some organic solvent over the top and shake if you want to be quick and dirty, the layer of organic solvent will go purple then, and you can decant it off the top of the water."

Victoria's mouth hung open for just a second. The idiot punk had just given her the answer to a question she'd racked her brain over, without really trying. Chloe Price was, to use the idiot's own terminology, actually "hella smart".

It wasn't fair: Victoria had struggled, schemed, cheated and ruthlessly trodden on people to get her academic marks. Then it turned out the local drop out could have matched her easily if she wasn't so unmotivated and slack! Then again, perhaps this wasn't that surprising. Perfect Rachel Amber did drag Chloe everywhere with her, so there had to be more to her than her impeccable physique. Of
course, Victoria was nothing if not practical, it would be stupid to get upset about someone being better than you at a subject, when you could get them to help you in said subject instead.

"Your smarter than you look." Victoria managed.

"It's better than looking smarter than you are. I was just lucky I remembered some stuff I heard once."

Clearly Chloe remembered a lot of things she'd casually heard once. Be they instructions on how to blow things up, or insults from John Cleese.

"So, anything else I can help you with?" Chloe asked seductively, feeling rather proud of herself at that instant.

"Yes." Victoria replied, turning to the next page of her chemistry homework. "Buffer solutions."

Returning from Kate's room, Max was met with an almost unbelievable sight. Chloe sat, head buried in a text book, while in deep conversation with Victoria about something called a "pea-kay-eh". It reminded Max of the old Chloe. The kind energetic student who could pull in 'A' after 'A' fuelled with nothing but the praise of her Father. Before what happened to William, she had always been there to help Max when she struggled in a subject, or needed a hug. She also always swore her head off as soon as she was out of earshot of her parents, and concocted plans to try to steal their wine. Chloe was always a little wild and rebellious, even as a straight A student.

Victoria's expressions were equally intriguing. The normally superior Victoria was eyeing Chloe with admiration for something other than her musculature. Their progress had slowed somewhat – they'd apparently moved on to a portion of chemistry that wasn't immediately linked to mass destruction, so Chloe's highly selective branch of knowledge was of more limited utility. Nonetheless, they seemed to have figured out the correct answers together, and were just about finished. And that meant Max had to act fast.

With one last flourish of her pen, Victoria finally finished the last question of her homework. She found herself looking back at Chloe with a dreamy gaze of sincere gratitude, her usual insecurity and anger at being bested conspicuously absent. Perhaps it helped that Chloe just saved her academic record; perhaps it helped that Chloe didn't attend the school, and therefore wasn't her competition; perhaps it helped that Chloe was just so damn handsome.

As she continued to look, she found a strange pity and sadness creeping into the mix. The idea of someone having so much potential, and squandering it. Of getting expelled when she had the intelligence to just about become the school's Valedictorian, if she'd actually bothered to apply herself.

It was a rare moment for Victoria, combining selfless pity and sincere gratitude. With the click of a shutter, Max captured it.

Victoria's moment was abruptly terminated by the flash of Max's camera. She glanced upward with a brief scowl, angered by the intrusion. As far as Max was concerned she could deal with it; it was nothing compared to what Kate had gone through, and while Victoria had since tried to recant her part in Kate's suffering, Max still couldn't help but feel angry. Besides, she'd warned her that she was going to take candid shots today, hadn't she? Victoria quickly got over it. Her interest in the content of the photo winning out over the anger she felt at having it taken without warning, and she sauntered over to Max to watch it develop. Chloe joined her after a moment, there was something she had to do first, of course. Withdrawing her phone, she quickly snapped a shot of Victoria's
homework answers while her two companions were otherwise occupied. Now she had both handwriting samples for the Step-Dork. Though she still had no clue why he wanted them so badly he was prepared to trade a gun for them.

"Well I've got my extra credit photo." Max announced, to Victoria's chagrin. It was an excellent, if understated shot, which ticked all of Jefferson's boxes, catching her in a moment which showed hidden and non-obvious qualities. Victoria fumed. Well, two could play the candid shot game. She'd definitely be taking one of her prized DSLR cameras with her today, and the full set of lenses, and catch Max in what many people might consider an uncharacteristic moment. Maybe her playing the hero, or something. It was too bad most of Max's great moments involved reversing time though. It made capturing them on film so very difficult.

Chapter End Notes

We get to see smart Chloe this chapter. It was important for me to not just have her instantly know the answer to Victoria's homework. While she has high intelligence, she's not paid much attention in school so doesn't have the knowledge (except apparently related to explosions, because she thinks they're 'so fucking cool'. I imagine this version of Chloe downloaded the anarchist cookbook and was bitterly disappointed when she realised the "auto-exhaust flame thrower" design didn't actually have access to enough voltage to work). She uses her limited knowledge to give her a hint and eliminate some obviously wrong answers, but still has to consult a text book to solve the problem.

You might also recognise the 'chemistry homework' Victoria has. It's based on the experiment Warren does in the game. I forget what reaction that allegedly was, and I'm not sure the game devs know either – adding sodium or potassium to aqueous solution, really guys? They both form the same reaction products, and said products have a high risk of exploding. Or if they mean ions, they're highly soluble and unreactive. In the end, I decided to make the reaction they were studying the oxidation of iodide, since you actually can use chlorine for that (the correct answer in the canon game), and it can actually yield a pinkish-purple solution (just like in game).

Of course there's one thing I'm sure grabbed everyone's attention in this chapter – something so explicit you couldn't help but think "what the hell, did I honestly just read that?!". Yes, Chloe is described as wearing combat boots, while in the game she wears cowboy boots. That's mostly because I think combat boots are a bit more punk. If you want some deep meaning behind it (symbolism right up there with "omg Chloe's necklace has three bullets"), then consider it a sign of her having a better relationship with David, and better knowledge of guns and gun safety. I'm sure it won't become a plot point later, or anything.

Also please don't do anything silly like make nitrogen triiodide. Your fingers are important to have if you want to type out fanfics.
Deception, Departure and Dirty Laundry

A solitary ray of sunlight broke through the cloud cover for an instant, and found its way through the Prescott Dorm windows. Max Caulfield smiled as her room was bathed in a warm natural light for a fleeting moment. She and Chloe sat on the side of her bed, engrossed in typing out an SMS message, part of an elaborate plan concocted by her future self to identify the students involved in the Prescott/Jefferson criminal collaboration.

"Do you really think we should add the part about being watched?" Max whispered. "It makes it sound like something out of 1984."

She belatedly realised that a little ironic. After all, they themselves were being watched, or at least listened in to. Certain things, like what they were currently discussing, had to be mentioned in hushed tones in this room.

"All the better Mad Max." Chloe replied. She'd definitely taken the revelation that there was a listening device somewhere in Max's room to heart, enthusiastically leaning in close enough to feel the warmth from Max's body as she whispered her reply. "It'll spook whoever we're sending this message to, making them less likely to ask questions, and do whatever the hell we tell them instead. We've even worked it in as an explanation for the instructions we're giving them."

"With manipulative skills like that, you could be a member of the vortex club." Max smirked.

That drew a look of mock-horror from Chloe, and a derisive "himph" from the third member of their little band. Victoria Chase, (presently) deposed Vortex Club Queen. She stood by Max's window, engrossed in a different plan to identify another of Jefferson's lackeys, by setting up a video camera to surveil an area they planned on luring the said lackey to. She was the only one of the group yet to properly dress, still clad in a short gown of orange satin that displayed what Chloe would later describe as 'hella leg'. Belatedly, the pair managed to return their gaze to the phone, and gave the message a final once-over before Max dispatched the message to contact 'five'.

Zero: Three's idiocy has drawn far too much attention. I have reason to suspect you are being watched. Take the day off school today to drag their attention elsewhere, I will have someone else handle the collection of the delivery in your locker. Do not attempt further communications until tomorrow.

"Hello. E-excuse me girls!" A nervous, male voice suddenly called out, moments after the send button had been pressed. The trio immediately froze, their eyes were instantly drawn to the doorway to the main corridor, where the voice originated. "We've had reports of a non-student trespassing and threatening members of the student body with d-, defen-, um, being thrown through windows. I'm going to have to enter and check for this intruder."

There was a pause of roughly five seconds, during which Max, Chloe and Victoria froze and stared at each other. They'd have to use Max's power, there'd be no way to sneak Chloe out if the guard was on his game and already moving down the corridor searching. Max brought up her hand, only to be interrupted by the guard's voice interjecting at the last instant, apparently having a change of plans.

"J-just as soon as backup arrives." He corrected.

Max quickly glanced out the door. She wasn't the only one: every resident in the dorm hall had stepped out of their rooms to see the source of the commotion, in widely varying states of dress, all
gawking at the source of the voice. One of Madsen's security guards stood just outside the entrance to the dorm wing's corridor, right by the stairs' first floor landing. It was almost comical the way he treated the door frame, like he was a mime blocked by an invisible forcefield. He was worried: entering the girl's dorm at a time when heavy use was being made of the showers was a nightmare for a lone underpaid male security guard, especially one who valued job security. There was an excellent chance of running into some overprivileged student clad in a towel, or having a fictitious story fabricated to that effect, then having the rich parents of said student call up the school five minutes later and demand the wage slave's sacking, arrest and/or flagellation. That, or he was afraid he'd actually end up finding the "intruder" without any support, and get beaten senseless. His own attempted mention of defenestration left little doubt as to the identity of the suspected 'intruder'.

"Fuck. Those vortex harpies must have called up security." Chloe began. "Or maybe Warrick. I don't think it was Dana though, she seemed nice."

Max cradled her head in her hand. Everyone knew nice was supposed to mean friend-zone, but the way Chloe said it made it sound a little too friendly. She shook her head. With the exception of that fight with her stepfather, Chloe really did seem to only have two settings: 'flirt shamelessly' and 'smite evil'. Though on further reflection that wasn't completely true, she did have a third setting that seemed exclusively reserved for Max: 'act like a slightly pathetic dork'. Though Max had no idea why she chose to go that way every time they got within a few yards of one another.

"Where's the fire escape?" Chloe asked, interrupting Max's attempt to pigeon-hole her into something postable on TV tropes.

"Through the smoke-stop doors next to this room." Victoria replied.

"And Chloe", Max added, "be careful throwing around terms like 'vortex harpies'. I mean, you know I'm technically one of those Vortex harpies now, somehow."

"Damn Max. I never realised. I mean Victoria obviously, but you too?" A look of utter betrayal and sadness spread across her face, not unlike Caesar on seeing Brutus join the others stabbing him to death; it was only partially successful in masking her mischievous grin. "That's awful… You can put a cream on your lip that masks most of the symptoms though, right?"

"Get going, you dumb ass." Max growled as Chloe began to slip out the door.

Victoria had seen Max and Chloe interact like this before, and it was still a little startling: Chloe Price had managed to cultivate such a reputation that few would dare to call her a dumb ass. Even fewer would have her grinning like an idiot when they did so, or relax and connect with her enough to trade jokes of extremely questionable taste. Still, if she was going to sneak out the fire escape, it'd only prove Max's point.

"Wait! You'll trigger the alarm if you open the external doors at the bottom of the fire escape." Victoria pointed out, crossing her arms as she demanded Chloe's attention.

"I'll slip back into the ground floor dorm rooms then, and find somewhere to lay low. I can double back once rent-a-cop pisses off". Chloe replied. "Thanks, Tsun-toria".

"What's a Tsun-toria?" Max asked, confused, as Chloe quickly darted toward the fire escape.

"Nothing whatsoever." Victoria snapped back, before mumbling "stupid Chloe" under her breath. "You know what, it's my turn to take a shower. I've already perfectly aligned our little trap, so I'm sure you can manage to bait it."
Metallic clangs echoed through the fire escape as Chloe's boots dashed down a flight of roughly painted steel stairs. Midway down, her stampede was interrupted. Chloe's phone had sprung to life, belting out the oppressive opening theme to Blake's Seven. Of course, that particular ringtone was reserved for only one person on Chloe's call list. She looked back up the stairwell, checking that the guard hadn't overcome his sense of caution. It was still clear. Relaxing slightly, Chloe slowed her pace to a brisk walk and answered her phone.

"Yo, Step-tator."

"Chloe," David Madsen's gruff voice replied. "I just got an emergency request to come in to work when I'm supposed to have the morning off. What the hell's this I'm hearing about an extremely dangerous intruder breaking into the girl's dorm and threatening students."

Chloe scoffed, trying to play down the incident.

"Dude, that description could fit almost anyone."

"I hadn't gotten to the description yet Chloe: Dressed like a punk, dyed blue hair and threatening to throw students through a window."

Well that did kind of narrow it down.

"Why are you on Blackwell grounds anyway?"

"To get the handwriting samples you asked for. How do you expect me to get handwriting samples of students that literally live and do all their work on campus, without going on campus?"

David sighed. He had asked her to do that, hadn't he.

"Which I've got, sending now. Anyway, I saw a couple of bitches bullying a defenceless cinnamon bun. They needed to be scared off, but no glass or faces were broken. You know, your security's actually pretty shit. They just sat outside the dorm timidly. If I was actually up to no good, I'd, you know, have done no good by now."

Not the most eloquent summation of things, but it did get it's point across.

"It's more difficult than that Chloe." David fired back. "Carelessly marching into a dorm containing young members of the opposite sex who are changing is a fast way to lose your job, and probably your liberty."

"I'm not complaining, it made it easy to get away."

In fact she was rather well acquainted with that particular weakness, having exploited it to remove David from her room the previous evening, after he started asking questions.

"Just saying if you changed up your recruitment, got some 'hella fine' lady guards that could put in random appearances in the girls dorm and make bitches heel, I wouldn't have needed to jump in and protect the resident angel in the first place."

A series of low-pitched sniggers shot down the phone line. They grated at Chloe's ear and made her feel like punching something. David's laugh always sounded so pathetic. Mercifully he didn't do it much.

"I'm sorry, did the girl with the anarchist shirt just advocate for me to further oppress the youth of Arcadia Bay? Or is there some other interpretation to making 'bitches heel'?"
"Fuck you, man. It was a serious suggestion. Some poor girl's being hounded by these dicks while your deputies do the newspaper crossword."

David sighed. In truth Chloe’s suggestion to 'hire hella fine ladies' wasn't that bad. Except for the 'fine' part. He couldn't hire people based on attractiveness rather than competence. And the 'hella' part, he didn't have a clue what that meant. There wasn't actually anything restricting the security staff to men with porn-staches. Well, nothing except market forces.

"It's a small town. We haven't actually been able to find any ladies stupid enough to want to become a security guard, especially for the pay we offer."

At that moment, his phone received a couple of images – the handwriting samples he'd been asking for. This was turning out to be a strange day. The resident drop out anarchist had advocated for more security and actually fulfilled a promise with punctuality. Perhaps her new friends were a good influence after all. Or perhaps they'd be a grave threat. He'd know soon enough.

"Now find somewhere quiet and lay low for a few minutes, I'll discreetly have the guards back down."

He was about to end the call, when he remembered something he'd read, some new age article for parents that stressed positive reinforcement. "Would it greatly offend you if the 'resident fascist' told you you’d done a good job?"

"Yes it would."

"You've done a 'hell-uh' good job, Chloe."

"Fuck you, Stepdork."

On hanging up, Chloe reflected that she'd probably just had the most pleasant telephone conversation with David Madsen since she'd met him. Now all she needed to do was find somewhere to lie low until the Step-fuhrer called off his gestapo. Fate, or the building designer seemed kind today, as the wall near the fire escape door was furnished with a map of the ground floor. She quickly found the ideal hideout, conveniently near the main entrance in case she needed to leg it, and accessible without a key. The student laundry would be perfect.

Juliet Watson choked back a gasp, glad no one else had decided to do their laundry this morning. She'd been joking earlier, when she first jumped on the washing machine lid and announced to Dana she needed 'writing inspiration' from the spin cycle. Mostly. In spite of that she'd ended up staying where she was: There wasn't really anywhere else to sit in the laundry, and the wash and rinse cycles didn't noticeably shake the machine. She'd gotten lost in her writing, and then drifted off into a daydream. Her thoughts lingered on Chloe Price; how incredible she, and that brief moment they shared was. She'd tried to think of other things, remind herself how she liked boys and had a boyfriend (who was the quarterback and therefore the best boyfriend in the school!) That only served to remind her that Chloe was the reason she'd won back her boyfriend in the first place. And what they'd done to get him back. God.

Juliet wasn't even sure what she was feeling: she'd never felt this way about any other girls before. Well, maybe her oldest friend Dana, just a little. But she was literally the most beautiful, nicest person in the school, so that wasn't really a big deal. Juliet decided she had to face facts. She was crushing hard, and on someone she was never likely to meet again, who she had nothing in common with, no shared history. This was going to end in tears unless she stopped right now.

Yet she didn't. Instead she abandoned sense, and found herself leaning back, closing her eyes, and thinking of Chloe. She was oblivious to the muffled beep that signalled the washing machine
switching to spin cycle, and only belatedly became aware of a shudder building in the machine beneath her. A growing rumble that aided her imagination to no end, and slowly, relentlessly brought about a glorious anguish. Her mind began to brush aside what it now considered irrelevancies, such as thoughts of her boyfriend Zachery. It focused on the only thing that seemed important, Chloe and that brief embrace they'd shared.

She groaned as she relived it over and over. Chloe grasping her by the thighs and lifting, effortlessly throwing her into the air; her responding, wrapping her legs around Chloe's waist, consumed by shock but desperate to hold on, a need to bring herself close to her as physically possible. Chloe freeing a hand to gently caress her face, an instant of tenderness before their lips met in hunger.

She touched the patch of concealer on her neck, remembering the bruise Chloe's lips had left on her. A bit of graffiti announcing "Chloe Price was here."

Her lips suddenly parted and she gasped. It was a short desperate breath, just like the one when they'd taken that photo; when Chloe's other hand slipped inward, fingers suddenly brushing against her, finding just the right spot at just the right time.

The creak of a door down the hall snapped Juliet back to reality. This was insane, she had to get off before she really got off. She'd been incredibly lucky no one had seen her so far. Belatedly, she pushed herself off the washing machine, and did her best to assume a standing position, her face flushed, her breath short, legs weak. Then an instant later, someone did appear. Ever-so-slightly taller than her, with blue hair and combat boots, and the most gloriously strong, defined body in between, clad in a tight shirt and jean shorts. Juliet felt her jaw practically hit the floor.

"Juliet!" Chloe called out, extending her arms to offer a warm hug. Juliet barely managed to stifle a moan as those arms encircled her, bodies pressing together in a tight embrace.

"So, how are things going with your boyfriend. Last I heard, your plan was a success? You're looking..." Chloe paused for a moment to look her over carefully, and concern suddenly flashed across her face. "...hella flushed and kind of out of it. Are you all right?"

Juliet responded with a feeble nod, her cheeks scarlet.

"I just had a touch of asthma." She lied. She didn't have any such condition. The concern it engendered in Chloe's face made her feel guilty. The way Chloe's strong arms instantly moved to support her made her feel much more. "I took my blue inhaler so I should be fine in a moment. And he's taking me out on a proper date to make up for everything, starting with a steak dinner at an expensive restaurant."

Juliet's flush intensified. The inhaler asthmatics took to stop an attack was blue, right? It was sad and pathetic, but at that moment, that tiny detail seemed more important to her than the night she'd forced Zachery to impeccably plan.

"That's great. With all the shit going on, it's good to hear that everything actually worked out perfectly for someone." Chloe remarked, entirely oblivious. "Do you mind if I hide out in here with you? I've got a rent-a-cop looking for me one floor up."

Juliet shook her head, wondering if this chance encounter was going to prove the highlight of her day. Chloe seemed to live such an incredible life, showing up where she wasn't supposed to, saving people from villains, hiding from the authorities, probably seducing every woman she met.

"What about you?" Juliet asked. "Any non-fabricated romance on the horizon?" Describing the moment they'd shared as 'fabricated' hurt, even though it was the truth.
"Actually, um, yeah. Kind of. Maybe." The confirmation hurt even more. And the dreamy gaze she got as she said it was just ridiculous, worse than the one Juliet had adopted with the assistance of the spin cycle. It sent Juliet's mind reeling. She tried to picture someone magnificent enough to reduce "The Price" to a warm gooey mess. She failed miserably. They'd practically have to be beyond human. Beautiful beyond belief and strong beyond imagination. A demigod. Extraordinarily talented in the bedroom too, they'd have to be to keep up with Chloe.

"I knew her a long time ago." Chloe explained fondly, "Looking back, I hella crushed on her even then, though I was way too young to realise. Always trying to drag her off to do some crazy, exciting shit together. She always tried to protect me, rescue me when I did something stupid, which was a lot. Then five years later, she suddenly appeared in my life again when I thought I was fucked, and did the exact same thing, when the stakes were turned up to eleven."

Juliet could hardly believe this. Someone who rescued Chloe Price? What sort of situation would Chloe Price need rescuing from? And how ridiculously strong would a person need to be to handle a situation that even Chloe Fucking Price couldn't?

"But I'm still here, and it's all thanks to my badass saviour, Max Caulfield."

Oh, Max Caulfield.

Juliet dropped her article draft as her brain imploded.

Max Caulfield. That short, mousy, shy girl from down her dorm hall. The one she'd stupidly bullied when she was angry about Victoria. She was Chloe Price's personal crush and... and hero? There were only two possibilities that came into Juliet's mind: Max was a being with powers transcending reality, space and time, who treated them all as puppets; gave them the illusion of control while strings of fate tethered them all to her hand. Strings she occasionally tugged on to further her own inscrutable purposes. Or Chloe just had a major thing for short, shy girls. Yeah, that was definitely it. And by 'saved' she probably meant she leant her some bus fare or gas money or something. Though she had said it was high stakes. Maybe she'd have been late for something important but for said gas money?

Eventually, Juliet realised she'd been so engrossed in ruminating on the implausibility of "Max Caulfield: hero", that she still hadn't picked up her story draft. She began to bend over to do so. It wasn't there. She looked back at Chloe. Her eyes ran down her wonderfully muscled arms and located the document in question. It was in her hands; Chloe had picked it up for her while she'd spaced out, and she was reading it! Juliet's brain felt at risk of another meltdown. It was supposed to be published anonymously. It was supposed to be spell-checked. It definitely wasn't supposed to be read by its subject! She felt like drowning herself in a lake that was being subjected to dynamite fishing.

"Is this for the school newspaper?" Chloe asked, idly running her tongue along her lip. Some of the descriptions contained within were rather vivid.

Juliet nodded feebly again, her face crimson. The way she was feeling, she really could have done with that inhaler. She noticed Chloe's deep blue eyes seemed fixed on one part, one paragraph in particular. She could guess which one. Finally Chloe's gaze shifted, moving up from the page to meet her own eyes, fixing her with a stern piercing glare. She felt helpless. She was about to be called a deviant pervert, who'd distorted the truth to make herself seem some innocent heroine, and defamed Chloe as some ridiculous female Casanova. She wanted to look away but she couldn't. All she could do was brace for the inevitable.

"Could you send me a copy when you're done?"
Her cheeks didn't get any less crimson, but Juliet suddenly found herself a lot more comfortable in the situation. She saw a wicked smile spread over Chloe's face, and almost felt the urge to gently elbow her for messing her around like that. Not that she'd ever go through with it. She couldn't imagine a soul brave enough to dig her elbow into Chloe Price's side. Instead she settled for managing a slightly indignant look as she answered Chloe.

"Of corsh."

Chloe beamed. She shouldn't have teased her quite so badly, but Juliet really did have the most adorable lisp when she got flustered. And she decided not to correct the one little outright error she'd noticed – her mistaking Warren Graham for a girl. The story somehow seemed better when keeping his role to a minimum.

Max stood by her dorm room window, admiring the overly expensive video camera and tripod Victoria had brought in. She was alone: Chloe was busy hiding from security, and hopefully not toying with some poor innocent girl's heart in the process. Victoria was taking a shower. She took a final look through the video camera's viewfinder, adjusting the tripod mount slightly. Victoria had declared the alignment perfect before she departed, focused directly on the Tobanga totem pole that stood just outside the Prescott Dorm's courtyard. That gave Max a burning desire to check it herself, and maybe tweak it just slightly. She wasn't sure if the desire was born of the current mixed feelings she had toward Victoria, the anger she felt at her complicity in the distribution of Kate's Video. Or whether she just enjoyed finding fault with something Victoria declared perfect, and perhaps putting her own touch on it. Though artistically framing a surveillance video seemed a little over-the-top. Whatever the case, the camera had enough memory to record all morning, so there was a good chance of catching anyone who suddenly had the urge to walk over and snoop around the Tobanga and in the bushes by it. Now she had to generate that urge. She took the phone with the stolen simcard and began to type a message.

Zero: We had to stash a delivery in the bush near the Tobanga last night. You should find it hidden in a red plastic bag. Retrieve it and hide it in your room. Do not contact anyone until contacted again.

She addressed the message to contact 'six' on the phone, whom they concluded was the least intelligent member of the Prescott-Jefferson cabal, based on their replying to a do not reply message with 'OK'. Of course, they'd find nothing by the Tobanga. The growing frustration and annoyance, as they searched around desperately, would only serve to make them appear even more obvious, just in case multiple people decided to randomly pay the totem pole a visit this morning.

That left one thing on future Max's chores list. The most important thing: enact Victoria's plan, a social media gambit to convince everyone they had to skip town on Friday or risk being killed by a tornado. That meant coordinating with Victoria. And that meant trying to carry on civilly with her, knowing what she'd done to Kate.

She watched Victoria return from the showers, slightly dishevelled yet enviably attractive. Victoria had exchanged that short satin gown for a more modest fluffy bathrobe, though the way it was loosely fastened made it clear there was nothing underneath. Max cursed under her breath as she watched a water droplet succumb to gravity, tracing a path down the side of the statuesque Blonde's neck before vanishing from view. Her thoughts were a shambles regarding her dorm neighbour. Victoria's involvement in Kate's bullying disgusted Max. It had given life to a raw bitterness, that would fester somewhere beneath her surface unless she confronted her about it. Victoria had even turned out to be the original author of Kate's video, capturing her staggering around doped up for a cheap laugh.
At the same time Max had seen another side to Victoria. A frightened girl behind the veneer of arrogance and superiority; someone caught in a situation that defied belief and barely able to cope. She wanted to beat the shit out of her, just like she did with any other bully. She also wanted to protect her, pull her tight against herself, shield her with her new-found powers and make her feel safe. She'd actually done so last night, and it had felt so good, so right, so intoxicating. That only complicated her thoughts further.

Putting her tangled mess of feelings aside for the moment, they had to get along. Max's future-self had said so. Aside from that it was obvious they all had skills that complemented each other: Victoria was viciously pragmatic, possessing both the common sense and knowledge that the idealistic and artsy Max, and the secretly quite smart yet questionably educated and impulsive Chloe seemed to lack. Her innate ability to state what she considered obvious had already saved everyone, just by pointing out they should direct their efforts into getting the people out of the way of the tornado Max had prophesied.

Max also found herself wondering if she wasn't destined to do worse, become worse that anything Victoria had done. Her future self had manipulated them both, engineering a scenario that put Victoria's life in jeopardy just to win her loyalty. If Max couldn't look Victoria in the eye, how long would it be before she couldn't look herself in the mirror? Victoria felt Max's eyes watching, tracking her, suddenly judgemental. She felt obliged to say something.

"By the time I got to the shower, the hot water was all used up." Her normally honeyed voice seemed uncharacteristically tart. Somehow that made Max feel a little better. Maybe karma did exist, though one cold shower hardly made up for bullying Kate.

"Victoria I've-

"Max if you're going to talk to me, step inside. I have to change and I'd like to close what's left of the door so the whole dorm doesn't see me do so."

Max cursed under her breath at how quickly that changed the dynamic of the situation. Alone in a room with Victoria, trying to chastise her while she casually offered an eyeful.

"Now what were you saying?"

"I-" Max began, searching out her courage. *It's like one of those situations when you're facing a spider,* she told herself. *Admittedly a spider who fell asleep in your arms and held herself tight against you all night, so perhaps that's not the best metaphor. But still the point remains she's far more afraid of you than you are of her, thanks to your time powers.*

"I'm angry, but we need to get along and work together, so I need to tell you off. Otherwise I'll act like a passive aggressive asshole."

Max felt she'd done an admirable job, managing to construct a largely coherent and only slightly childish sounding sentence, in spite of Victoria fishing around in her underwear drawer right in front of her.

"Oh yes?" Victoria asked, intrigued by Max's aggressive posturing. She'd seen glimpses of this assertive Max before. They'd resulted in her being stung a little. But in some crazy way they left her wanting, perhaps needing to be stung again.

"You've been horrible to Kate." Max virtually spat at her, managing to maintain an air of righteous indignation as Victoria selected a black lace g-string. What was it with Victoria and always having to wear the most provocative undergarments imaginable?
"I've been horrible to a lot of people, Max." Victoria replied, holding an even tone. "I'm not a very good person. Surprise."

A lot of people hadn't stayed up all last night crying. One more might have though, but for Max comforting her. She'd been wearing black lace then too.

"Ah, so for Kate Marsh it's the most horrible day of her life, but for Victoria Chase it's just a Tuesday? You realise she was drugged, right?"

That gave Victoria some pause, and not just from the drugging revelation. She'd heard a venom from Max she'd never experienced before. At least not directed at her personally. It sounded eerily similar to the tone she'd used when discussing Nathan. She dropped the flirtatious pretence, no longer finding the situation intriguing, suddenly realising the seriousness with which Max was treating it. No, any sense of intrigue had been subsumed by something dangerously close to fear. Max's gaze hadn't reached the glare of outright hatred she had seen in Jefferson's class, where her hoodie "mysteriously" became coated in the teacher's blood. But it was definitely heading in that direction. Victoria's next response was considerably more guarded in tone.

"I thought-" she began, before her voice trailed off into a nervous silence.

"I mean, some people get like that when they take something for the first time." She finally managed to get out. "Go a little out of control."

"And some people 'get like that' when they're served spiked drinks. Did you know Nathan offered to 'help' her, and she woke up later dumped in the middle of nowhere with a hazy memory. Sound familiar?"

It did sound rather similar to what Chloe described. Except that Chloe woke up part way through and got away. Kate didn't. Linking Kate's fate with Chloe escalated feelings another notch for Max. There was true fury in her eyes now. It made Victoria suddenly feel very small, in spite of having at least three inches in height and a physical strength advantage over Max. But what did any of that matter next to the power to reverse time?

"Either way she needed help, but all you and all the other assholes did was mock her."

She felt something else as well, something other than fear. It was more subtle, but just as powerful, if not more so. The disappointed look that haunted Max's eyes, behind the fury. It gave Victoria serious pause, crippled her somehow, made her unable to fight back. Since when did Max's approval mean so much to her?

"Look Max, I'm not perfect, as much as I pretend to be sometimes. And I quietly took the video down and even replaced it with a Rickroll. I don't know what else you want me to do."

Max felt her rage boil over. She advanced, and Victoria found herself retreating automatically.

"I wanted you not to take the video in the first place." She growled. "I wanted you to try 'being the change you wanted to see', or whatever fucking platitude you've got written on your dorm room's whiteboard today. I wanted you to try being a human."

Max was inches from her, enraged and breathing heavy. Looking straight in Victoria's eyes with a searing gaze. Victoria's back touched the wall. There was no more room to back away from Max now.

"I can't take back my mistakes Max. Only you get to do that." There was a raw edge to her voice. A growing helplessness. Max suddenly remembered where she was standing. Looked around the room,
and found her eyes drawn to the deep gashes in Victoria's mattress, the torn rags that used to be
designer outfits strewn across the floor. That broken chair Chloe nearly fell off. She came to her
senses. Victoria was also a victim. She'd been betrayed and assaulted by her best friend yesterday,
then found out said best friend's Father wanted her quietly bumped off, then came back to her dorm
room, her home, to find it invaded and vandalised. She needed to be given the sensitivity that she,
and everyone else, had denied Kate. Max reached out, taking hold of Victoria's hand and squeezed it
gently.

"I just wanted to know you were sorry for it. You hide how you really feel behind a front."

"You don't need to treat me with kid gloves, I'm not that soft." Victoria insisted, looking away for a
moment to conceal the water in her eyes. "You can be remarkably scary when you want to,
Caulfield."

"Tell me about it. For a second there I almost felt like strangling you with that stupid g-string."

Max had meant that as a joke, after all Victoria had been standing dumbstruck with an exceptionally
sexy undergarment in her hand the whole time Max was chewing her out. From an outside
perspective, it had probably looked ridiculous. Victoria seemed to take it a little differently. Her lips
parted and she inhaled sharply. A faint red ring actually appeared across her bare neck. For a second
she again looked truly terrified, but in a slightly different way, both mortified and enchanted. Max bit
her lip, desperately resisting the urge to capture it on film.

"You- you really want to do that?" She asked, subconsciously rubbing her neck with her free hand.
Max rolled her eyes in response.

"No dumb ass, I care about you. You're beautiful, talented and smart; and have absolutely no reason
to be cruel to anyone."

"Oh. Of course."

And suddenly Victoria's face flicked back to her default, stern, slightly affronted expression.
Probably because her brain was too confused to know what to feel. Max had said she cared about
her, and thought she was beautiful and smart, and a 'dumb ass'. All of those things made her feel
warm inside, strangely enough even the last one. And had no interest in choking her with her own
undergarments, which was an enormous relief. Probably.

"And stop thinking I'm going to smite you with my powers just because I'm pissed. You end up like
this all the time, all cowering and pathetic-"

"Wait a minute, cowering and pathetic?" Victoria protested. Surely she wasn't that bad?

"Cowering and pathetic," Max reiterated with a certain amusement, wiggling the fingers on her right
hand, provoking the tiniest hint of another sharp inhale from Victoria. "And I have an overwhelming
urge to rush over and, um, protect you. It's really distracting."

Victoria sighed. Max could go from utterly terrifying in a way that made her heart flutter to
infuriatingly dorky in a way that made her feel like a toasted marshmallow in the blink of an eye.

"You really are a superhero, Max." She scoffed, trying not to betray the fact she sincerely believed it.
"Even wanting to save and redeem a villain."

"You're closer to the edgy token evil ally. But that sidekick job is still open, if you want to
completely renounce your wickedness."
"I thought Chloe was your sidekick."

"Maybe. I don't see why I should only have one though. I mean, is it wrong for a superhero to want two sidekicks?" Max felt her cheeks go a little red. She wasn't sure why, but it felt like she'd suggested something slightly naughty.

"I'll consider the offer." Victoria answered with a slightly indecent haste. "Now do you mind if I actually put this on?" She gestured to the undergarment in her hands.

Max gave Victoria a little space, attempting to avert her gaze in the process. She bravely failed in that endeavour, catching herself stealing glances out the corner of her eye, watching the black lace slide up Victoria's smooth thigh before disappearing beneath her gown. She was a photographer, after all. Part of her job was appreciating the human form.

"Why do you bother with the elaborate lacy underwear?" Max suddenly wondered aloud. Their frank exchange over Kate seemed to have eroded her usual timidness, just enough to give voice to the slightly more catty questions she usually thought silently.

"What, you want me to-" Victoria began, wondering if Max was suggesting she follow "Commando Chloe's" example this morning.

"No, it's just, um, everything's so lacy and provocative. I mean you always cover yourself in those sweaters anyway, dressing like a highly refined but nonetheless, um, 'older woman', so why not pick something more for comfort."

"I can't believe I'm having my fashion critiqued, and being accused of dressing conservatively by Max Caulfield. And it's lingerie Max. You're a big girl now. I hear some of your admirers even consider you a superhero. You're allowed to call it by its adult name." Victoria cut back in her honeyed tones.

"I meant-"

"Unbelievable. You're asking me why I wear sexy lingerie if I don't go around casually exposing myself to everybody? I wear them for myself Max. I like the way they make me feel. And if I meet someone really worthy, that I feel safe with, then I have something I just might consider letting them share in seeing."

Max found herself feeling strangely jealous of this hypothetical person. Though in her opinion, Victoria had a lot to share in seeing, even without the embellishment of black lace. The way she'd just slipped her dressing gown from her shoulders, for instance, and left herself bare but for her thong. The sight made Max's throat dry. Victoria was, in Max's opinion, so much more beautiful than her. Both Victoria and Chloe were really. They were like opposing ideals. One soft and sophisticated, one strong and rough. It left Max wondering why Victoria wasn't on the other side of the camera more often, as a model. She tried to pretend she wasn't watching intently as Victoria slipped on her brassiere, matching black lace again, of course; Victoria would never wear uncoordinated anything. She was brought back to reality by Victoria's tone.

"Do you mind hooking this up?" She asked, holding the bra's straps behind her.

Max took the straps in hand, tried to hook them together, willed her hands to stop shaking, then successfully hooked them together. She was infuriated with how flustered she felt.

*It's just a bra Max. You've done up your own one plenty of times. Admittedly this one seems to be built to support and display so much more, and really, really thrust it up into prominence, but that*
doesn't make fastening it any different. Well, except that the strap's wider and has more hooks. God, imagine if it was front fastening.

"Max, what do you think?" Victoria asked, turning to face Max. She struck a pose befitting a runway model, one arm strongly on placed on her hip, and shot Max a smouldering gaze.

She thought Victoria had just disproved the whole 'is the journey or the destination more important debate', as Max had found both incredible. Of course, she couldn't say that. Especially not since she was still a tad miffed.

"You look good, but you might want something a bit warmer. It gets pretty cold outside."

Victoria shot Max an annoyed pout.

"I'm still a bit angry with you." Max clarified.

"Good. You're angry face is so much more intriguing and powerful than that idiotically placid 'lets be friends' smile, or than tragically earnest frown you usually sport, and I still need that photo of you today."

Max smirked. Victoria was wrapping complements in insults. Possibly her most sincere mode of endearment. Victoria meanwhile reflected that she'd, if anything, undersold how impressive 'righteously indignant Max' could be. If she'd been a third party, the burst of fury that showed in Max's eyes as she spoke about Kate would have been perfect for that extra credit shot. Too bad she was the recipient of it all, and she'd been too busy cowering with her back against the wall to pick up her camera. Still, maybe she'd see it again today. Maybe someone or something else would be stupid enough to upset Max, and she'd capture it. The fierce protector hiding inside the quiet student who sat at the back of class.

"Before I forget, there's something else we really need to discuss."

"You seem to have a captive audience. At least until I finish dressing."

Victoria slipped a pair of dark stockings up her legs as she spoke. She delicately ran her finger tips along them, just to make sure they felt right. And just to make sure she kept Max's attention. The truth was she had Max as a captive audience too, and was rather enjoying it.

"We have to coordinate our social media posts, drawing everyone's attention to the risk of the tornado. We really have to sell this or lives will be at stake. Which means you have to do a perfect job. This might seem a little ironic, given what we just discussed about Kate. But you have to do your absolute best at bullying me. Do- do you think you're up to it?"

Victoria almost choked at the irony. Did she think she was up to bullying Max? Before yesterday afternoon, she'd have laughed her head off at the question. It had been her main stress-relieving activity, something she was born for. But that was before yesterday afternoon. She subtly rubbed the corner of her eye, having felt a hint of moisture lingering from minutes earlier; residue from when Max had, as she put it, 'told her off'. It had been painful.

Was it just the fear of Max's power, or the fear of losing whatever seemed to be growing between them? Could she still find it in herself to convincingly bully Max, even as an act? She pushed those doubts aside for the moment and considered, mechanically, how best to go about it.

Max's best bet was to act intolerably naive and earnest. In a completely natural fashion, in other words. It would sell her as a victim. All she really needed to do was explain she'd had a horrible dream and mention each paranormal event they'd been warned about in order of appearance.
The real problem would be how Victoria chose to respond, what path of attack would draw the interest and amusement of her followers. There was Max's body, of course. Wonderfully lithe with slight and subtle curves. "Boyish" and "malnourished" would be the obvious keywords there. Then there was Max's quiet and reserved attitude, easy enough to pass off as "shy" and "cowardly". Neither of those seemed worthy. They'd be entirely disingenuous for one thing; she knew how Max charged head first into danger to try to save people. She also knew how it had felt when Max held her last night. She couldn't call Max cowardly, and anyone who honestly considered her unattractive was a moron. She also wanted any insult she levelled to lead back to Max's dream. They couldn't drown out the original message in random insults. Everything had to reinforce that dream. A dream about a rogue eclipse and double moons. Things so unscientific that even an episode of Star Trek Voyager would want to distance itself from them.

Suddenly it all seemed so obvious. She'd just attack how ridiculous and improbable the events sounded, and Max for having the 'imagination' to dream up such absurdities. For being that fucking scientifically illiterate. That just left the original question. Did she still have it in herself to be that horrid? Victoria looked deep within herself, thinking of Max spooning up against her body, warming and comforting her, saving her life on more than one occasion. How the barbs they exchanged seemed to have their edges dulled, launched more with the intent of drawing the others attention and provoking a response, than any desire to cut deeply. After all that, did she really have it in her to publicly mock and belittle Max?

Then she remembered Max claiming to be so fucking ignorant she didn't know what "periodic" meant. Yes. Yes she just might find it within herself. It was all just an act after all, and for a very good cause.

A cold chill and a vague scent of damp tree leaves greeted Max, Victoria and Chloe as they stepped out onto the stairs of the Prescott Dormitory's main entrance, having reunited moments earlier. The ground was still damp from the sudden snow flurry late last evening and a subsequent burst of rain in the early hours of the morning. The sky was dreary, overcast in clouds which, while not presently threatening rain, blocked any warmth the morning Sun might have granted. Leaving things sodden and foreboding.

An instant later, they were momentarily blinded by a camera flash. For Max it was something of a novelty to be the one being caught on film, at least by someone other than herself. Victoria had far more negative feelings, a cold dread that ran down her spine. A glance at their photographer left her sickened. Standing before them in greasy overalls and an even more greasy haircut was Samuel the Caretaker, someone who even managed to eclipse Warren Graham on her scale of creepiness. He was allegedly trying to photograph a squirrel he'd been feeding directly in front of the dormitory. By what was surely a huge coincidence, he'd pressed the shutter exactly as Max, Chloe and Victoria had stepped out the Dormitory's front door and caught them in the frame.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Samuel didn't mean to catch some young female students in his shot. Just a squirrel trying to be happy on a sad, sad day. But damming a river of tears leaves you with a lake of despair. Samuel will delete the shot, so please don't report this. Samuel gets enough baseless accusations and demands for his arrest already."

Victoria grit her teeth in disgust, but Max suddenly stepped forward in decisive fashion.

"Do you mind if I see the shot?" She asked.

Samuel timidly held out the camera, showing the rear LCD display. In doing so, it became apparent that his hand was strangely swollen. He noticed them staring at the ballooning skin between his thumb and forefinger, and quickly offered an explanation.
"Oh Samuel keeps bees. Sometimes the little ladies don't like to give up their honey, so Samuel had to be a little forceful, and they sting back. Samuel actually has some comb honey in his shed, if you want some you could."

"God do you even listen to yourself?" Victoria cut in. "There's a reason everyone thinks you're a fucking weirdo."

Samuel instinctively flinched, half expecting a can of mace to be emptied in his face, an event which wasn't without precedent in the school. Instead Max walked the rest of the way over to him, so they could both look at the shot together on the display screen of his camera. Victoria was left fuming alongside a slightly bemused Chloe, caught between twin desires to evaluate a photo and stay as far away as possible from the 'fucking weirdo'. After an extremely tight battle, the latter desire won out. After he'd nearly caught her ensuring the roof door didn't lock properly, she didn't want anything else to do with him.

"You know, I think I talked to Samuel a couple of times before I got kicked out of here." Chloe quietly murmured.

"You think you talked to him?"

"I was high at the time, Lady V, and also drunk, so my memory's a bit fuzzy. I'm sure he said something like 'if you behave like an ass, you end up loaded with carrying heavy burdens.'"

"Yes, well Samuel's known for unloading pseudo-intellectual platitudes. He makes them vague enough to be interpreted to fit any situation. He spouted a bunch of utter shit to me earlier this morning. I wouldn't read anything deep into them."

"Just saying I ended up having to carry you around yesterday." Chloe smiled, enjoying the aggravation she'd brought to Victoria's face.

Meanwhile Samuel was busy instilling Max with some of his aforementioned pseudo-intellectual 'wisdom'.

"The squirrel looks so peaceful", Max said contemplatively as she looked at his photo. "like it has no problems at all."

"Oh, but everything has problems, little Max. Some choose to ignore them, others try to unearth them. They sometimes dig into danger, if they ignore the signs."

Samuel underscored this grand revelation by pointing at a sign on the dormitory's outer wall that said "underground power cables."

"And other dangers can only be made safe if unearthed." Max shot back.

"Sounds like you're heading for a minefield. Best be careful where you tread then, little Max."

"I've taken a few precautions." Max replied. "Sorry we got in the way of your shot. I'll let you get back to your, um, nature photography."

"Oh thank you, all of you kind, young ladies. Samuel will press delete now with young Max witnessing him doing so." He said those words rather more loudly than was necessary, and made a show of adjusting his camera's controls in an overly elaborate fashion. Max just stood still for a moment, suddenly looking slightly dumbstruck, as the greasy caretaker waddled back toward his shed.
"Max, what the hell was that about?"

"Huh, um what was what about, Victoria." Max replied, wearing an entirely honest and frankly bewildered expression. "We were off to the car park, right?"

A fresh morning breeze bit at Max's cheeks as she entered the Blackwell Academy parking lot. Fragments of shattered glass still littered the ground around Mr Jefferson's reserved car park. His expensive dark grey car was there, polished and immaculate. That made the ugly bit of cardboard duct taped across one of the rear passenger windows stick out all the more obviously; a scar born of collateral damage from the fight between Nathan and Chloe.

A need to comfort overcame Max, as she watched Chloe take in the scene, her usual cocky grin slipping, as she observed the carnage she'd wrought while in a completely calm state of mind. She looked down at the tiny cuboids of shattered safety glass yet to be removed, perhaps really appreciating for the first time that she'd shattered them using a human head. Things turned to near agony when she looked at the completely blank wall of the car park, that would have been splattered with Nathan's grey matter but for Max's intervention.

Max gently wrapped her arm around Chloe's back, and felt her relax slightly. She directed her away from the broken glass, away from the wall, and back toward the car Victoria was leading them to. She couldn't help look over her shoulder though, let her own gaze linger on the tiny glass fragments, many of which still wore a slight red tinge from where they'd nipped at Nathan's face. Max was still shocked by how brutally effective Chloe could be at taking apart a person. She had rendered Nathan virtually insensate after a couple of blows; she could have probably just tapped him and he'd have keeled over. Instead she unleashed her anger on him, furious at being drugged, her being shot and Victoria's head being crushed but for Max's power. The speed at which she'd moved, and the strength she had were incredible. She'd always been athletic and a little crazy, but seeing what she could do, it was like she'd spent years dedicating herself to becoming a human wrecking ball.

Ahead of them, they saw Victoria Chase standing at the driver's side door of a sleek Mercedes convertible, leaning slightly on the edge of the windscreen, coveting her luxurious car. Chloe whistled at the sight of the vehicle. It eclipsed virtually everything else in the parking lot; only Mr Jefferson's car could really compete with it, but Victoria's still had all its windows. Max had more practical concerns. It was a two seater.

"How are we going to handle the transport? Max asked.

"I'll drive, obviously. You two wouldn't be insured." Victoria stated, running her eyes over her two companions and contemplating the various transport permutations. "I guess I'll take Chloe to the gas station and get a can of fuel for her rusty behemoth first. Then come back for you Max. It shouldn't take long. Failing that you two will have to share the passenger seat."

"Dude, never split the party. Max will come with." Chloe interjected, smiling back at Max, wrapping an arm around her shoulder. "We'll squeeze in together somehow".

Sit in Chloe's lap in other words, like she was a child in the arms of an (extremely irresponsible) parent. Though on further reflection, Max imagined there were far worse places to sit than in the lap of Chloe Price.

As Chloe opened the passenger door, it became clear there was yet another competitor for the one available seat: It was presently occupied by a mysterious plain cardboard box. The respectful thing to do would be to leave it unopened and immediately draw it to Victoria's attention. Naturally, Chloe did no such thing. Instead she carefully lifted the lid a crack. She almost fell over in amusement. She
quickly shut it again, and pretended she hadn't seen anything. This was going to be good.

"Tori. Could you pop the trunk. There's a box in the passenger's seat."

Victoria turned cold in shock. She'd completely forgotten about leaving 'that' box in the car. It contained things she didn't even trust Taylor discovering. She looked back. Chloe was holding the box, but it was still closed. She'd apparently escaped certain doom.

The trunk popped open with a soft click. Just a little more and it'd be safe, Victoria's greatest shame would go undiscovered. Chloe very carefully placed the box in the trunk. That was awfully nice of her, treating another person's property with such care, in spite of her rough outward appearance. Then having laid it down, she made a very deliberate show of 'accidentally' knocking the box's lid off in the most dramatic way imaginable.

"I'm sorry Tori. Here let me replace- DAMN! What the hell are these? Max! Come over here quick. You've got to tell me what you think!"

Max rushed to the back of the car, noticing Victoria had gone a shade of red she'd never seen before. At least not on a person. She looked at the open box, the source of all the commotion. It seemed to contain dolls of some kind, or maybe 'figurines', all of rather nubile female characters. Their eyes occupying a full third of their heads left no doubt as to an anime origin, though their brightly coloured hair, and rather gratuitously proportioned bodies should have been enough of a give-away. That and they were lying on a bed of anime DVD cases and manga, all apparently from the same series as the dolls. Before Victoria could blink, Chloe had snatched one and was making a show of studying it intently.

"So Max, what's your considered opinion of the craftsmanship on display here."

Based on the level of anatomical detail that had been meticulously crafted into the figurines, Max imagined the characters must have just moved to some colder climate to which they were unaccustomed. Chloe tipped the figure she'd selected, complete with mini-skirt, so the crotch was on prominent display. The underwear shared a similar, if not greater singular dedication to detailing as the rest of the doll, showing enough that Max felt it was kind-of failing in its role. In a way she sort of admired the designer's focus and determination; they didn't allow secondary matters, facts such as how cloth actually worked, to get in the way of their artistic (tunnel) vision. Covering the doll with her hand revealed a faint luminescence. It seemed the doll's skin was designed to glow in the dark. And apparently so were the panties.

For the second time in as many days, Victoria felt like she might faint. Her hidden shame, a collection of "Generic Animu Agent Bluberry" limited edition figurines, and the manga, and the DVD set (with all the specials) had been discovered and laid bare before her two companions. She imagined how the three of them might be briefly introduced. Max, who has control over the flow of time and use it to undo death; Chloe, the girl the football team blamed their loss on, because she beat the shit out of two of their players before a game; Victoria, pretender to the school's crown, in reality a closet geek whose greatest treasure was a collection of highly sexualised anime dolls.

"Wowser, Victoria. I didn't realise you were into that sort of thing."

This was the single most catastrophic day in her social life. The day Max Caulfield discovered she had a collection of anime related merchandise, a state of being orders of magnitude more nerd-like than anything Max had. The day Max Caulfield could officially accuse her of being a geek.

"T-that's an incredibly rare, valuable set being held onto purely for financial reasons." Victoria stuttered.
"Sure. That's why you took them out of their original packaging."

There was a look of desperate panic on Victoria's face now. The public image she'd so carefully constructed was at risk of crashing down in front of her. Her pain didn't go unnoticed. If this happened last week, Max might have celebrated, enjoying the cruel queen of the school getting publicly taken down a peg. Now she felt very differently. She shot Chloe her 'BEHAVE' glare, carefully returned the 'collectable figurine' to the box, and replaced the lid. A further gentle nudge between Max's elbow and Chloe's side extracted the desired promise.

"It's cool queen V. We won't tell a soul."

Victoria sighed gratefully. Her status, shaken as it had been after Courtney's coup, wouldn't take another kick in the teeth. Everything was fine. The way Chloe was eyeing her with a long thin smile was kind of disturbing, though. Like she had something on the tip of her tongue and was debating whether to say it. Then in a moment of impulsiveness, Chloe leaned over to Victoria's ear and whispered.

"You can call me Bluberry-neesama, when we're in private."

Instantly two images were permanently fused in Victoria's mind, and she was hit with a different, far more insidious kind of anguish. They had the same fucking hair colour! She'd never get it out of her head now. Every time she looked at pure Bluberry, her wonderfully strong, smart, deadly idol, who captivated the hearts of basically every girl in the local high school and made them swoon, regardless of their nominal orientation or whether they were involved with someone; she'd see stupid Chloe, that idiotically strong, actually quite smart, deadly punk who captivated the hearts of- Oh God, they were basically the same character. She'd finally finished her collection of Bluberry collectables, and Chloe had effortlessly despoiled them in one fell swoop.

Victoria opened the driver's side door, crumpled into her seat, and let her head rest on the steering wheel. What the hell had she done to deserve all this? Then she thought of Kate, and everyone else she'd been horrible to. She had her answer. Fortunately, Max Caulfield had turned out to be a far nicer and more caring person than her.

On the other side of the car, Max and Chloe stood, eyeing the lone remaining seat. Max consigned herself to the inevitable.

"I suppose I'll have to sit on your knee."

"I've got a better idea. I'll sit in your lap, Max. I have to get out first to refuel the truck, so it makes sense." For a second Victoria thought Chloe must be joking. She'd look absurd sitting in Max's lap, and quite possibly crush her. But Chloe's expression made it clear she was absolutely serious, if a little dreamy.

Max took her seat, and hesitantly tapped her thigh, beckoning them to get this over with. Chloe eagerly took up the offer, and after some shuffling around eventually adopted a diagonal position, with her back pressed into the corner. She turned her head to look across at Max, and grinned like an idiot. Victoria scowled in disapproval. They looked ridiculous. Worse than the physical size disparity, was the placid stupefied look Chloe got the moment she climbed into Max's lap. It was like seeing a terrifying attack dog roll over submissively, to let its owner stroke its tummy. Which in all honestly might accurately sum up the pair's relationship.

Victoria quickly got the vehicle under way, not wanting to be associated with the ridiculous spectacle of "The Price" sitting sedately in the lap of the school's shyest student, while making googly eyes at her. She looked at them again. Completely ridiculous. It was almost like a sitting version of a bridal
carry, which Chloe was happy to verbally draw attention to, all while hooking her arm round Max's neck.

"Just think of this as practice for our wedding night! So Max, think you can carry me over the threshold like this?"

Max groaned. Chloe was messing with her again.

"You're so heavy I can barely take your weight in my lap, Chloe." She shot back. "I'd need a crane to carry you across anything."

"Max, that's no way to speak to a lady. Wait, are you serious? I'm not crushing you or anything?"

A look of actual worry spread across Chloe's face. She pushed her shoulders against the side door, and pushed down with her feet, trying to take some of her weight off Max. It was a sweet gesture, but if anything the shifting around made things less comfortable, and Max found herself wrapping her arms round her waist and pulling her back into position.

"You're making things worse Chloe. Just sit back. I can endure it."

"Endure. That's cold Max. I think you just decided you can't get enough of me."

"Lucky you're so plentiful then."

Not that Chloe was fat, quite the opposite. But muscles did tend to weigh a lot. And Chloe's were particularly well developed. She felt heavy, but it was a reassuring heavy. Somewhere in the back of Max's mind, it might have occurred to her that, having successfully pulled Chloe down, she didn't need to keep her arms wrapped around her. The rest of her head, however, didn't seem to get the message.

"Hey, I just had a great idea. I could just marry both of you. Then you could carry me across the threshold together! So, between the two of you, do you think you could handle me?"

"Probably not, but if we volunteered to, our heroic sacrifice would no doubt save countless others." Victoria answered in deadpan tone. Hopefully they'd be able to get Chloe's truck sorted, and get to the diner fast. She really needed her caffeine fix: Chloe's stupid ideas were actually starting to sound almost appealing.
The door to the two whales diner swung open. Max entered first, holding the door for Victoria as she followed. Both girls had their camera bags with them: Max with her trusty, slim (and legit ancient) shoulder-slung carry bag. Victoria's was also shoulder-slung but far more bulky: her six thousand dollar DSLR camera, all its detachable lenses, and an oversized external flash took up a lot of room. It also contained the little gift Chloe had left her yesterday, secreted away in a normally empty side pocket. Chloe herself was conspicuous in her absence, having to return to the gas station to properly refuel her truck, and was probably going to be a few minutes late.

The diner was a timeless design, its white tiled walls and worn leather seating had been witness to decades of patrons. They'd have undoubtedly been witness to decades more, but for a certain local apocalypse scheduled for Friday. On Max's left, a long counter covered almost the entire length of the diner, providing bar-style seating, a position for the till, and finally a display case of shiny polished glass, tempting potential customers with various cakes and other sweet goods contained within. On Max's right were an array of window-side booths arranged along the diner's wall, offering a clear view out across the seaside main street and railway, and the bay beyond. A decrepit jukebox sat on the far wall, belting out a selection of music that was mostly too old for even Max's retro sensibilities. The diner held an eclectic mix of tourists, truck drivers, and locals, who for one reason or another had decided to trade currency to free themselves from the enormous burden of making their own breakfast. All blissfully ignorant of the impending catastrophe. Hopefully that would change soon.

Scanning behind the counter, Max quickly located Joyce Price, Chloe's Mother. She looked worked to her limit yet still in control, ferrying order after order around with an efficiency learned from years of monotony. Years of stress were beginning to take their toll: the faint outline of wrinkles were starting to show on her face. But Max still thought Joyce a wonderfully beautiful person. She was the diner's Matriarch, projecting a presence that demanded everyone's respect, and a practised sway in her hips that seemed to steal their attention. Her face lit up the moment she spotted Max by the entrance.

"Max! You and your friend grab a booth, I'll be with you in a moment."

Max watched intently as she rushed a coffee decanter around. Thinking that even if Chloe put on a bit of weight as she aged, she'd wear it magnificently. Her gaze rose back to eye-level, where it noticed Victoria scrutinising her with a combination of amusement and mock censure.

"Does Chloe need to be worried about anything, Max?"


"No. It's just… Joyce is amazing, Victoria. She works so hard at this lame job, just to keep her family secure."

Max wasn't lying. She honestly believed every word of that. Joyce ruled. The only problem was it didn't really represent her thoughts at that instant. Not in their entirety anyway.
"That is incredibly commendable." Victoria nodded.

There was a moment of silence. Had she actually bought that?

"Nice ass too. Though you obviously don't need that pointed out. I hope I can claim to still be that hot when I'm her age."

Max hung her head. Nope. Completely busted.

The pair began to make their way to the window-side booth Joyce had indicated, located at the far end of the diner near the old jukebox. On the way, Max found her gaze returning to Joyce. This time, she made a conscious effort to keep to a respectable eye level. In doing so, she suddenly became aware of the dark rings surrounding Joyce's eyes. Semi-concealed by make-up and nowhere near as bad as Kate's, they nevertheless spoke of some sort of insomnia. Max could guess the cause: Chloe's future, and David Madsen's issues. Joyce had a lot to worry about.

She watched Joyce as she just kept on going, showing none of the exhaustion she must have felt, and wished she could somehow take all her stress away. Wave her hand and fix everything. Max sighed; even her power over time wasn't that comprehensive. At least the customers seemed polite today. In fact, the one she was serving, a rather tall lady with long auburn hair seated closest to the cash register, seemed positively effusive with praise. Especially for just getting her coffee mug topped up.

"Oh that's ever so generous a refill, and terribly needed. Last night's shift was so very distressing, and demanding, Mrs Price." She complained. Joyce seemed happy enough to listen, and not just because her customer was almost as generous with tips as with words. Besides the poor woman looked even more exhausted than Joyce, if her face was anything to go by. It displayed no expression at all, as if it had already gone to sleep. "It can be simply awful working for a man like Sean Prescott."

Joyce broke from nodding, and winced in sympathy as her customer reached for a handful of complimentary sugar satchels: a series of dark purple bruises ran along her knuckle line. "Oh goodness." The customer began, after noticing Joyce staring. "I was so warn down last night driving the limousine that I got a little careless and slammed something in the car door." That sounded awful. Still she didn't seem to feel any pain from the bruising, shamelessly pouring the content of three sugar satchels into her coffee mug without a care.

The hair on the back of Victoria's neck instantly turned to needles. There was nothing too suspicious about working for Sean Prescott, almost half the town did. The man owned a large portion of the local fishery licence, many of the farms and businesses in the area, even a couple of plantation forests. But not everyone who worked for him had that terribly familiar voice; a posh sounding English accent that was devoid of true emotion, regardless of how expressive a vocabulary she had used. Nor did all of his employees identify themselves as his personal limousine chauffeur. Victoria snatched Max by the hand, quickly dragging her over to the free booth Joyce had indicated. There was a look of ill disguised shock on her face as she gestured to the lady in question.

"The Prescott's hatchet-woman!" She hissed.

Max glared at the woman Victoria had indicated, sitting at the counter and seemingly oblivious to their presence. Grey was focused on slowly demolishing her breakfast, a large plate of macaroni and cheese. She occasionally paused from her breakfast to exchange banter with Joyce, and to shoot the occasional longing gaze at the collection of cakes across from her in the display case. She looked radically different with her hair loose and unkempt, rather than done up in a bun. Her generic jeans and plain t-shirt seemed boring as anything, below even Max's usual state of fashion, and a world away from that impeccably turned out chauffeur's uniform. Her voice was unmistakeable though, definitely the woman they'd seen with Sean Prescott yesterday. Pleasant words delivered with a posh
English accent that had the warmth of a glacier. Max gulped. Looking at her from a distance last night, she hadn't realised quite how tall she was.

"Don't stare at her!" Victoria warned; her heart was pumping like a freight train and tiny beads of sweat began breaking out on her forehead. "Don't do anything that'll get her attention."

Victoria checked that no one was watching, then cautiously unzipped the side pocket of her camera bag. Her hand shook as she reached into the normally empty compartment, where she'd stashed the revolver. She had to check, just to make sure it was there. Just in case. Her fingers wrapped around the gun's grip. Holding it didn't reassure her. Rather, she felt paralysed with indecision, like she had unwittingly stepped up to the edge of a precipice, a single footfall from doom. She found herself freezing up, glad she was no longer standing as the blood felt like it had drained from her legs, while across the room the person sent to kill them sat at the counter, sipping her coffee without a care in the world.

Her hands shook as her mind repeated it over and over: the person sent to kill you is sitting just across the room. She remembered the odd occasion while visiting Nathan, when she'd ridden in their chauffeured car. Even then, Grey had made her feel uneasy. She was quiet, with that perpetually blank, tired expression. Except once, when Sean Prescott had pulled her to one side to discuss 'overtime work'. On that one occasion, the long thin line of her lips had the slightest upward tick at the end, like a hook.

A sudden tickle ran over Victoria's hand; a brush of fingertips kissing skin, accompanied with the slightest tingle of static build-up. It soothed and relaxed and excited all at once. It made her feel almost safe, in spite of a killer sitting ten yards away. She looked up and saw Max's earnest, worried face leaning over their booth table, so very close to her. Victoria relaxed her grasp on the gun and after a moment's hesitation, she interlocked her fingers with Max's. She was instantly struck with an irrational desire to start counting her freckles again, but bravely saw it off.

"Do you think she's a danger right now?" Max quietly asked, gently shifting their hands away from the camera bag, the gun, and letting them rest on the table, fingers still intermingled. "I can always get us out of here with my power if you really think she's going to try something."

The touch of Max's hand and sound of her voice were the antithesis of the gun she'd grasped, calming her rather than further agitating. Ironic, since the power within Max's hand was greater than any firearm. Victoria found this relief fleeting, soon displaced by annoyance at her own stupidity. There were too many witnesses in the diner for Ms Grey to try anything. There was even a uniformed policeman enjoying breakfast a few seats away, while his partner waited in the patrol car outside!

"No." Victoria finally whispered. "No, it's fine." Her one final spike of nervousness was defeated after confirming Joyce maintained constant custody of the coffee pot. There was no chance of getting poisoned either. "This is too public, there's too many people here for her to try anything." She conceded.

She wondered if Max had already figured out as much. Had she realised that Grey wouldn't risk anything in front of so many witnesses? And if so, was she holding off directly spelling it out to let Victoria salvage some dignity? Were their positions reversed, Victoria would have delighted in savagely critiquing a friend's foolishness. But Max was so much kinder than her. From her doe eyes to the fragile little hands warming hers. Max was a kind, generous person. And also somehow able to invade and dominate her mind. Victoria felt like she could almost block out the existence of the Prescott's hired gun, as long as she had Max near her. Not completely though; her ears pricked as she heard Grey rip the top off yet another sugar satchel.
"What the hell is she doing in the diner, anyway?" Victoria asked, having gotten her thoughts about Max under control. Mostly. She'd never be completely free of them while they'd joined hands, but just couldn't bring herself to let go.

"Eating breakfast apparently." Max replied. They both flinched at a sudden scream of metal grazing the ceramic plate below, as Grey stabbed an innocent piece of macaroni with her fork. Max shrugged. "Even murderers eat breakfast."

Victoria chanced another glance at Grey. She definitely looked like she was innocently enjoying breakfast, completely oblivious to their presence. But that's exactly the front a good hit-person would want to portray, wasn't it?

"Ah, there they are. Two lovely young ladies."

The sound of Joyce's voice and the sight of her approach had an immediate affect on the girls. The pair's hands, which had been so warm and comfortable and calmingly intermingled, immediately flew apart. They returned to their respective sides of the table in the blink of an eye, in a manner Max felt not unlike an automatically retracting power cord found in many vacuum cleaner models. She chided herself for her cowardice. There was nothing wrong with two people holding hands, was there?

"Hi Joyce." She quickly replied. "You still look just like you did five years ago."

"You mean still stuck in the same dead-end job?" Joyce asked sardonically.

Both Victoria and Max spoke at the same instant.

"She meant you're still pretty."

"I meant you're still pretty."

"Nice save girls, especially in stereo. So, you must be Max's new friend... Victoria?"

Victoria had met Joyce previously, of course; in a town as small as Arcadia Bay, it was almost inevitable for someone to have patronised the town's seaside (and only) diner. Victoria recalled she had visited a number of times with Taylor and Courtney in tow, and probably behaved in a more than slightly aloof and entitled manner, perhaps even rude. Add to that the drama with the joint at the Price household yesterday, and she'd undoubtedly made a poor first impression. The slight frown and dubious tone Joyce used was proof of that, especially since she'd been almost doting on Max moments earlier. Victoria decided to front-foot the whole issue and try to make amends.

"Victoria Chase." She confirmed. "And I'm so sorry about yesterday."

Joyce sighed.

"I understand it's only natural for people on the cusp of adulthood to push boundaries, and experiment a little. But you have to understand David's position. His job at Blackwell is literally to be the Mr Clean nobody likes. Having any drugs, even a doobie reported in his residence could cost him his job."

"I know. It was incredibly insensitive of me. I know it's not an excuse, but I was just so totally anxious. Max and I had witnessed a good friend of mine suddenly going crazy. He'd taken much more than 'a doobie', and was even waving a gun around talking to himself at one stage. We tried to quietly warn the Principal, but this guy, Nathan, he found out it was us. He came after us and..."
Victoria paused. When she'd started speaking, she'd intended to ham it up a little. Really oversell the danger she'd been in and how lucky she was to have Chloe intervene. She'd definitely started that way. When she got to the part about Nathan, she found she didn't need to. Choking over that memory came naturally to her. Something of that must have shown through, as Joyce's sceptical gaze softened, and she looked at her with genuine concern.

"I was so lucky there was someone there to save me. Chloe rushed in and um..."

"She was her usual self?" Joyce asked, her voice thick with sarcasm. "How many windows got broken this time?"

"Just the one." Max added helpfully.

"What?" Joyce hung her head. "Oh Chloe. And here I was thinking I'd just exaggerated for effect."

"I'll personally pay for any property damage, it's the least I can do." Victoria generously offered. "Though I don't think it'll come to that. The school will want to keep this as quiet as possible, they'll probably reimburse the damaged party themselves behind closed doors."

Not to mention, if Max, Chloe, and Victoria had their way, the "damaged party" would end up in jail by the end of the week.

"So anyway," Joyce began, finding herself wanting to change the subject. She didn't like the idea of a school girl, even a ridiculously wealthy one like Victoria, paying damages for Chloe. At the same time, she worried about how paying the repair bill herself would stretch the already tight Price family budget. "What are you girls having?"

"I think I'll have the Belgian Waffle-" Max began.

"Bacon omelet for Max." Victoria abruptly cut her off. Max was about to protest, but Victoria was having none of it.

"Max, you know you have certain issues that have been giving you dizzy spells and blood noses. You clearly need an increased protein and iron intake!"

Well that did kind of make sense. But the Belgian Waffles looked so good.

"And you Victoria?"

"The Bel-

"She'll have the bacon omelet too." Max returned the favour, taking some solace in managing to deprive Victoria of her chance for waffles as well. "You fainted yesterday and have been looking pale a few time since. It's clear you need protein and iron too."

"So cute the way you two bicker and worry about each other's nutrition. Like an old married couple." Joyce observed, leaving both Max and Victoria profoundly disturbed.

"Chloe will be around in a few minutes. Should we order for her too? " Max asked, while trying to digest the idea of becoming Victoria's wife. Then again, she'd already pushed her into the Vortex club. What was next, having to wear Cashmere sweaters and skirts concealing kinky underwear?

"She always has a large serving of eggs and bacon, when she can generate enough sympathy to get a free breakfast. Weekdays in other words."
"How-" Victoria began, before giving up. The implausibility of Chloe's figure: those long arms, dense with muscle, broad shoulders leading to a lean defined core. Slender yet powerful legs. All of it somehow being sustained on plates of greasy, fatty bacon, day after day. It felt stupid enough to give her a migraine, if not a seizure. She resigned herself to the idea that some things in the universe just didn't make sense; other things, like the differences between peoples' metabolism, just weren't fair.

"Joyce, that lady you were just talking to, at the counter..." Max began cautiously.

"Hm? Oh you mean Daphne."

Bemused glances shot between Victoria and Max. Somehow "Daphne" didn't seem like the appropriate name for a murderer. Then again, names did tend to get assigned before a person decided on their vocation.

"Daphne Grey, quite the character. Apparently Sean Prescott makes her work night shifts when he doesn't need a driver, doing various odd jobs, 'cleaning up after him' or some such. She occasionally staggers in here afterwards, always looking and sounding exhausted. Almost like she's haunted."

Haunted might not have been too far off the mark. She probably had seen more than a few dead people.

"Very polite though. She was just telling me how worried she was about that daughter of mine. Wondering if she was still hanging around the same crowd or had gotten any new friends. I mentioned that there were a couple I hoped would be a good influence on her."

Max and Victoria slinked back into their seats. It was bad enough that Joyce was trying to guilt them into being a good influence on Chloe, but it also sounded like Grey had been pumping her for information about them.

At that moment, the doors swung open, and Chloe Price walked in. She'd exchanged her Rachel Amber sized jeans shorts for her own pair of snugger fitting long jeans. Similarly, her trademark worn leather jacket was back. Max sighed. She could never get enough of Chloe's attitude, the air of confidence she projected. She was cool kept warm in a beanie.

Victoria fought off a growing urge to follow suit, and began composing a text message. Chloe needed to be warned about Daphne Grey's presence, or she might walk right into her.

"I still can't believe you swiped her from me, man." Justin droned, his voice slowed and slurred by self medication. His eyes were bloodshot and half-closed, forming narrow slits, and he was wearing the dumbest grin imaginable, which seemed to stand in stark contrast to his apparent pining over a lost chance at love.

"Don't go back on a deal. I got you baked as hell this morning to say sorry, the best green Frank had, his firebud." Justin's friend Trevor shot back. The pair were occupying the booth closest to the exit to the two whales diner, where they were considering what to order for breakfast. "At least it better be better than the 'mid-shelf' stuff he normally hawks. He charged more than twice as much for it. Then you were dumb enough to take that 'shroom dust as well. You're real lucky I was there to drive you."

"Because I'd be a risk driving myself?" Justin asked.

"Because you couldn't find the car's ignition yourself." Trevor replied.

"Oh that's right." Justin's mouth slowly tried to work its way into a smile, before his brain finally
realised he already was smiling. Still, he was feeling a little short changed by the ground psilocybin mushroom. Aside from the odd halo around the lights, he wasn't really hallucinating that much as of yet.

"Yer such a good friend." He continued, dreamily. "And you basically struck out, so it was a good deal too. Why aren't we eating anything yet?"

"I didn't strike out. The Blackwell guards caught us and I got thrown out. Though that does make things awkward. And we aren't eating because we haven't ordered. Because you've been staring at the menu's cover for the past ten minutes."

Justin's eyes slowly tracked down to the menu, still in his hands, still unopened.

"I can't help it man. Its got whales on it. Two of them. And just below it the title says 'Two Whales' diner. It's so deep and meaningful." His mind idled for an indeterminate period, before remembering the first part to Trevor's last reply. "Shouldn't you call her up? Since you stole her from me."

"At times like these women need a moment, and don't like to be hounded." Trevor replied sagely. "Shit was awkward enough for me, bunch of maglites and moustaches suddenly up in my face, then getting dragged out of the girl's dorm by the collar. They read you the riot act on the way back to the boys dorm, you know. How there's at least three separate school regulations they can have you suspended for breaking. Then one of them slaps a pamphlet in your hands entitled 'being responsible' on the way out. How do you think it's affecting her?"

"I don't know man, I don't think they do any of that to the girl in that situation though. It was in the girl's dorm, so she had a right to be there. Besides, Dana's got a pretty mature attitude. She'd probably appreciate a call. It's not like you'd be bothering her ten times in the space of a few hours like some weirdo stalker." Justin replied, in what was probably the first astute thing he'd said since he'd wound the windows in their car up and set the air intake to recirculate.

Suddenly, Trevor saw the Diner's main door swing open. Cool incarnate strode in, clad in her trademark worn leather jacket and beanie.

"It's Price." Trevor announced, a slight smirk suddenly spreading across his face. "I think I remember someone calling her a poser yesterday. Think she's heard about that and come to make them 'pay the Price'?"

"Don't joke about that man. It's not funny." Justin retorted, staring blankly.

"No honestly she's right behind you."

"If you think I'm going to fall for that-"

Justin’s slurred speech was cut off as Chloe's fist breezed past his nose, on its way to fist bump Trevor's. The mushroom he'd taken finally seemed to be taking effect in earnest; her fist's passage, and in fact every move Chloe made seemed to leave a rainbow wake in the air. Justin watched entranced, as her fist recoiled back into its starting position, this time lining him up. He stared at it, momentarily caught between wondering how many teeth he was going to lose, and the fascinating discovery that Chloe Price wore blue nail polish that matched her hair colour. Another profound wonder of the universe revealed.

"What, no love?" Chloe replied, slightly insulted.

Justin finally realised what was expected of him. He brought his own fist up to reciprocate the greeting, extended it, and very slowly, carefully brought it to Chloe's, much to her amusement.
"Damn Justin, the way you're baked you could stick candles in your nose, and people would sing happy birthday."

"W-what are you doing here?" Justin asked, grateful that the lethargic fog his brain was trapped in was partially concealing the worry he felt.

"Her Mom works here, man, relax."

"You mean Joyce? Shit, you mean I've been checking out The Price's Mom this whole time?"

Chloe grit her teeth behind a closed mouth, but decided it was in everyone's interest if she pretended she hadn't heard that. Justin and Trevor were good people on the whole, but they were occasionally subject to bouts of grossness. Not at all like her Max.

"Anyway I've got a public service announcement for you. Hella fine cheerleader seeks unworthy skater. Ability to perform a treflip not necessary. She's been waiting for a call all morning."

"Damn, really?" Justin asked, eagerly groping for his phone. Trevor flicked his hat off triggering a slurred utterance of "don't slap me, bitch."

"It's a message for me, foetus." Trevor shot back.

A vibration in her jacket pocket informed Chloe that she'd just received a text message. She reached into her pocket for her phone while starting to back away from the table.

Justin, meanwhile, zoned out again for a moment. He couldn't really help it. The whole rainbow radiation thing that seemed to kick in whenever Chloe started moving was pretty overwhelming. Strangely enough, it seemed unique to Chloe; none of the other diner patrons were leaking the entire visible spectra. Then for a second, his eyes were drawn to her necklace. He turned back to Trevor, eager to share another moment of clarity.

"Holy shit I just realised something. Price has three bullets on her necklace. Do you think that means something too? Like some deep, cosmic message about her fate or the state of the universe?" He asked, face full of wonder.

Trevor rolled his eyes.

"I think it means I need to buy some firebud and 'shrooms for myself." He replied, trying to keep his nerves under control as he dialled Dana Ward's number.

Stepping back from her chat with Trevor and Justin, Chloe's attention was completely consumed with checking the message she'd just received. A sudden blur of motion caught in her peripheral vision. She realised quickly, but all too late, that she'd stepped into someone's path and was about to collide with them. As was the case in the Blackwell staircase, an attractive lady quickly ended up in a pair of exceptionally strong arms. However this time it was Chloe who ended up being held, and not gently. She felt a shot of pain, as she was unceremoniously grasped along her upper arms by what felt like two pairs of metal jaws. Whoever this person was, they had an exceptionally strong grip, and no qualms about unleashing it unchecked. She immediately looked straight at her assailant. The first thing she noticed were a pair of female lips, with pale, understated lipstick applied. Normally a sight Chloe might not find so objectionable. The fact that they were above her eye level was more than a little alarming. Not only was this lady ridiculously strong, but she had at least half a foot of height on her. She felt the blood drain from her face and her heart began thumping like a jackhammer; Chloe suddenly had a pretty good idea of who she'd just stumbled into. She tilted her head further upward, and her fears were confirmed: she was greeted by a cold, blank stare, framed by auburn hair and a
face that was almost expressionless. Expressionless except for those long thin lips, the corners of which formed a slightly upturned smile.

"Mrs Price, this is your daughter isn't it." The woman suddenly called out across the diner, her grip somehow getting even tighter. Joyce looked up momentarily from the coffee mug she'd been filling, to answer in the affirmative, completely oblivious to anything untoward in progress. Max and Victoria looked on in shock. Chloe Price had just quite literally run into Daphne Grey.

"Goodness, what a roguishly handsome one. She reminds me of myself, when I was fourteen. Well I must be off. You never know what life has in store for you around the corner, so you have to always enjoy the present, and all those other silly platitudes."

Chloe stared blankly, as Grey released her and walked nonchalantly out the door. She'd just had a run-in with the Prescott's assassin. Fuck. She'd been strong and fast and bigger than her too. She felt like a different kind of danger to Nathan. He'd been an out of control idiot, irrational and therefore difficult to predict, but no match for her in a straight-up fight. This Grey woman was the opposite. In control and prepared to bide her time, and probably far more capable when she finally chose her moment to act.

A second later Chloe snapped back to the outside world, greeted by the jukebox changing track to some country number she found exceptionally grating, along with Joyce exclaiming that "if Daphne used to be just like Chloe, that must have been one hell of a finishing school."

Chloe looked down at the phone still in her hand. She belatedly checked it for the message she'd been distracted by.

Victoria: Watch out, the Prescott's pet psycho bitch is in the diner.

Double fuck.

She looked up again. Max and Victoria had rushed to her side, concern etched across their faces. To be fair, you could engender concern from Max by doing almost anything, but it was always welcome. Victoria, on the other hand was far harder to get sympathy from. It felt kind of nice to have both of them worry about her.

"You just ran into the Prescott's hired killer." Victoria exclaimed.

"Oh really, I hadn't noticed." Chloe grumbled. A dull ache pervaded her arms, though it felt nowhere near as bad as the idea she'd been taken by surprise and basically been at Grey's mercy. Her mind was filled with the myriad of ways Grey could have killed or incapacitated her in that moment, had the assassin not cared about making a scene. She pulled her left arm out of its jacket sleeve, and pulled back her t-shirt sleeve to inspect the damage. The beginnings of a series of deep purple bruises were present, marking the points at which Grey's fingers had sunk into her. She really did have a hella strong grip.

"Evil Mary Poppins had a grip like a fucking crab." Chloe replied bitterly, flexing her arm a bit. It didn't really relieve the pain, but it did cause Max's eyes to be uncontrollably drawn for just an instant every time she pumped her bicep, and that somehow made her feel a little better.

"Should I wipe the whole incident from time?" Max asked.

"I don't see that it would do much good." Victoria said. "All that happened is she grabbed Chloe and
felt her big muscles. But everyone knows that Chloe's brutish enough to terrorise the school's football team, so she didn't really learn anything new."

"Only two of the football team", Chloe replied defensively, "and one at a time." As if that didn't already border on the absurd. The first, of course, had been that punt returner who'd tried to drug Taylor's drink. Probably the smallest guy on the team. The second had been one of the big linesmen who'd taken exception to 'some girl' throwing his teammate through a window into a rosebush, and confronted Chloe during a bus ride. There had been a sign on the bus's emergency exit declaring 'in emergency, break glass and exit vehicle here'. His fate was sealed the moment Chloe had read that, and she was now unofficially banned from public transport in Arcadia Bay. Combined, the two incidents had spawned the local legend known as "The Price".

Shaking her head at Chloe's recollection of her past exploits, Victoria turned to glance at Grey's vacated seat. Joyce, ever on the move, was in the process of removing the dirty dishes, and wiping the bench down for the next customer. She turned to look at the display case further down the counter, and saw her reflection in the impeccably cleaned and glossy glass surface, alongside Max and Chloe's. On a whim she walked over to study the reflections more closely, and decided her make-up could use a touch up: she hadn't done a very good job embellishing her short and slightly pursed looking lips this morning. Normally it wouldn't be such a problem, but she was accompanying Max and her perfect voluminous pair, that were always grabbing attention with the way they oscillated between earnest worry and awkward smiles. If she didn't fix herself up, the contrast Max provided would be incredibly unkind to her. Worse, she felt, than that between her own Mercedes and Chloe's ridiculous truck.

The thought of Max's lips drew Victoria's attention to reflections of Max and Chloe, also showing in the glass. Absent-mindedly, she ran her hand down the side of the case, over their reflections. She looked back at her own reflection and noticed it was smiling. She didn't often smile. She'd smirk at something she found amusing, usually another's misfortune. Then again, she hadn't really had friends like either Max or Chloe before. She'd had suckups, most of whom wanted to ingratiate themselves to her to further their own social position. Taylor was probably the only exception, a completely sincere lapdog. Someone who'd write "I am a slave" on the whiteboard outside her dorm room because Victoria told her to. In hindsight she felt almost bad about that: Max's sense of earnest morality must have been rubbing off on her.

She checked her own phone. Two messages from Taylor. Both expressing concern for her. Damn Max and her contagious morality.

Sweet-T: Must have missed you this morning. Shoot me a reply telling me you're all right. After your room got wrecked, I feel totally paranoid. If I don't hear from you soon, you'll see missing posters of yourself up alongside Rachel's.

Sweet-T: Victoria, you wouldn't believe how that evil backstabber Courtney's been acting. She's basically trying to out-you you. You should have seen her face when I told her it was totally derivative. Um, you aren't locked up in some weirdo's basement are you? Just checking.

Feeling a little guilty, Victoria quickly typed out a response.

Victoria: Sorry Sweet-T, early start to the day. I've found someone who can give me a few extra tips on self defence. Since that fucking lunatic broke into my room, it pays to be prepared.

Strictly speaking, she was being quite truthful, though she didn't want to elaborate further
considering Taylor's tendency to gossip. Both the fact that the town's resident delinquent was the one teaching her, and that the defence practice was going to involve guns, were not details fit for the school's general consumption.

She looked again at their reflections in the booth. Actually, come to think of it, a fair portion of the front of the diner was visible, reflected in the glass. The magnificent view of the bay outside the diner windows. And the booths along side them. She suddenly turned cold, a thought occurring to her. She stepped back to Grey's seat and looked straight at the display case. The reflection of the booth they'd occupied was still clearly visible from the new angle, and she'd seen Grey frequently turning slightly to look at it.

"That bitch was watching us. Watching our reflections the whole time."

Max quickly wandered over. Chloe belatedly joined her, dragging her feet, still upset with being caught unaware. It was true. From Grey's seat, someone could turn and pretend to be perusing the cake selection, or just glance sideways without moving her head at all, and she'd have a slightly distorted but still fairly clear view of them sitting at the booth.

"I definitely shouldn't rewind time then. She might notice us suddenly change position and start to realise one of us has weird powers. The truth is so weird I doubt anyone would completely figure it out, but we don't want them having even a clue about my power."

"To be honest we've been incredibly lucky so far." Victoria added. "Nobody's really been around or paying attention when Max pulls out her time magic. Or if they do see something out of the corner of their eye, they'll probably assume their mind's playing tricks on them. But unless we're careful, someone's going to be looking straight at her and notice eventually."

"Twice."

"What was that Chloe?"

"It's just- Nothing. Fuck, that music's pissing me off."

She began walking with singular intent toward the jukebox.

"Careful." Victoria warned, starting to walk back to their booth. She didn't intend to leave her prized camera unattended any longer than needed. "The last time I tried to play a song on that relic, it ate my money."

"It's OK lady V, I got this. You've just got to have the right touch. Treat it like a lady."

Victoria watched sceptically as she slid back into her seat. Max joined her, taking her old position opposite. Chloe's voice still carried a gruff undertone, deeply annoyed with herself. It was difficult to imagine her doing anything with finesse while in that state. On the other hand Chloe was apparently in here almost every morning, mooching a free breakfast. Perhaps she'd learnt some elegant sleight of hand to force the jukebox's cooperation. The pair watched as Chloe took her hand, and gently, sensuously, ran it along the curve of the Jukebox. For some reason both Max and Victoria felt their lips quiver slightly when she did so. Then Chloe punched the coin slot hard with her fist, which had a somewhat negative impact of their jaw rigidity. Like most things in the universe, The jukebox quickly surrendered to Chloe's overwhelming strength, and the closest thing it had to punk rock immediately began playing.

"What sort of lady did you treat like that!"

"The one that just grabbed me, or the one who gave me this fucking parking citation." Chloe replied,
slapping a ticket on the diner table. "My truck actually breaks down and they still issue one. Gestapo."

Apparently Chloe held parking attendants and murderers with equal contempt. She probably wasn't alone in that though.

"Whatever. I need to visit the privy and check my make-up. You two watch my camera. Remember it's worth more than your truck."

"Yes Sir!" Chloe replied, mock saluting.

Chloe slid into the same side of their booth as Max, facing the diner's entrance. If that psycho woman came back, she'd at least see her coming this time, and be ready. Plus she was sitting alongside Max, so two birds with one stone. She found herself drumming her feet against the floor: the sudden appearance of that bitch, and the fact she'd gotten so close to her, actually put her hands on her and caught her, had really wound her up. Not to the same extent as Nathan, there'd been no gun rammed in her gut. But she still had too much pent-up energy. Her fight-or-flight response had been triggered and she was ready to do something. Clobber the stuffing out of someone! Maybe throw them through a window, or just run for it! Maybe even sink into the warm embrace the girl next to her was offering. Wait, what was that last option?

Max didn't even give Chloe the time to make what should have been an incredibly easy choice, instead almost pulling her out of her seat. They were drawn against each other, and Max felt the thump of Chloe's heart hammering out an expeditious beat. Max held her tighter, wanting to reassure and calm her. She found herself partially successful: Chloe definitely seemed a lot happier, and less ready to punch the jukebox again. But her heart rate still seemed a bit fast. Then again so did Max's. That particular problem didn't start to remedy until they broke apart.

"So, want to tell me what this 'twice' stuff was about?" Max finally asked.

"It's just, I've been taken by surprise twice this week. First was Nathan, and I nearly got killed. I would have been killed except for your mad power. You'd think I'd have learnt a lesson after that. Nope. I literally walk into someone even more dangerous, and get saved only by the fact they don't want witnesses. Though it's more like three times now. You just managed to ambush me as well."

"Thanks for grouping me in with a couple of psychos." Max mock complained.

"Well no, I guess I didn't mind when you spontaneously did it. Just a little surprising. Maybe you should lunge at me more so I get used to it!"

Max repressed a strong urge to take Chloe up on that suggestion, feeling words might be better in the long term.

"Chloe, did you feel safe when you walked into the diner?"

"Yeah. Of course. It's where my Mom works, and I've been in here every day. I don't expect female Hannibal Lector to be sitting at the counter, chatting with my Mom while she pours her a fucking coffee."

"That's one way of looking at it. The other one is that your instincts were actually good, that you were safe in here. There were too many witnesses in here, so the evil lady couldn't try anything beyond being a bit rough when she caught you, and probably only did that much because you backed into her path at the last instant. Everything worked out fine and we didn't need to rewind time."
"Well that's um. Yeah I suppose. Still wish I'd noticed her though. I always wanted to be your bodyguard, Max. But I can't even spot a known threat."

That was a common thread of the imaginary adventures they had in their childhood. Max was some intrepid newspaper photographer, prepared to go where no one else dared to get the shot – a gang headquarters, a drug cartel mansion, a war zone, even a political convention. And Chloe was always there to keep her safe. It was amazing how Chloe had clinged to that idea into adulthood. In fact, the way her body was, it was almost like she'd trained herself to achieve it.

"Believe it or not, I just had a similar chat with Tori. She walked right past her, and only noticed when that "practically perfect in every way" voice started praising the diner's coffee refill policy. Hold on, look, Grey's leaving now."

Max pointed to the exit of the two whale's carpark through the diner window. A white sedan was pulling out, a tall figure with auburn hair in the driver's seat.

"Registration TDOTJKL". Chloe replied, squinting at the license plates as the car drove off down the main road.

"We actually came out better than she did. She still doesn't know we're on to her, while we know what she looks like when she isn't dressed as some chauffeur, and we know what her personal car looks like. And I don't think Daphne Grey is really a Hannibal Lector. Not independent enough, and she doesn't eat her victims for breakfast."

"What does she eat then?" Chloe asked.

Max shrugged her shoulders.

"Macaroni and cheese, apparently."

Chloe slumped back into her seat, finally starting to relax. She stretched her left arm along the top of the seat back, behind Max, and left it draped there, in a familiar and mildly possessive manner. Her face resurrected her trademark impish expression. The one she brought out when she was about to do or say something a bit ridiculous. Max braced herself, unsure of what was about to follow.

"So Max," she began, leaning a little close and grinning from ear to ear. "You and Kate seemed really close. When she was in trouble, you were the one she asked for. You're not secretly some sort of player are you? I hope you don't toy with my pure and fragile heart, then leave me for her or Victoria."

Whatever Max might have been expecting Chloe to come up with, this wasn't it. Her mouth hung open for a moment though no voice emerged, as she tried to both formulate a response and work out where Chloe was going with this line of questioning. She achieved the former but not the latter.

"Chloe, Kate is a girl with strong religious background, who runs the local abstinence support group. The only thing anyone's likely to play with her is ludo. And didn't you start joking about marrying both of us in the car?"

"Yeah. OK. Maybe. But ignoring all that for a moment, and considering only Kate and Victoria, which of them would you… you know."

Max reached for her coffee. With the direction Chloe was probing she found herself wishing it was of an Irish variety.
"I mean Kate's got that quiet elegance..." Chloe nonchalantly noted, as Max took a particularly large sip from her mug.

"...But I bet Victoria fucks like a tiger."

Max nearly spat her coffee all over the table, but contented herself on choking on it for a minute.

"You're unbelievable." She finally yelled, as a smile invaded her face. "Though remember how much trouble we got into playing that fan translation of 'Tales of Phantasia'."

"Your Dad is such a tightass, Max. He walked in just as that one line happened to be on the screen and demanded we delete the game."

"We were just lucky that yours was such a pushover, or we'd never have defeated Dahos."

And then Max's smile seemed to vaporise, as she noticed Chloe's forlorn look the moment she brought up William.

"Oh god Chloe, I'm so sorry."

"It's OK Max. It's been, what, five whole years. It's not like the memory of what happened has completely dominated my life since then."

The ensuing silence was deafening, and Max was sorely tempted to use her power. They'd only been reunited a day, but Chloe felt so important to her, she couldn't handle seeing her hurt. She'd been so awkward and insensitive that she'd dredged up possibly the one thing that could bring "The Price" down, and laid it at her feet. The memory of her father. And she'd done so while smiling. She decided to leave her time power as a fall-back option, instead trying to resurrect her courage and carry on.

"In hindsight", she began, a little shaky. "We probably shouldn't have left the line 'Arche fucks like a tiger' on the screen for ten whole minutes, while staring in awe."

"Yeah." Chloe replied, willing some of her own smile to return. "Yeah, but it was kind of an amazing experience. To be that young, and see that word used in that context, rather than just as an insult."

Chloe sighed, looking back at her trusty first mate. If you knew Max, it was ridiculously easy to tell how she was feeling. Her face was incredibly expressive. It had instantly broken out in earnest worry when she'd first upset Chloe. Now that expression was melting back into a smile. Chloe realised the reason: she was no longer willing her own smile on her face. It was there of its own accord.

"Mint has that quiet elegance, but I bet Arche fucks like a tiger!" Chloe pronounced again, just a little too loudly, drawing a few awkward glares from the nearby patrons, and driving one Mother two booths down from them to cover her young son's ears. "How could we not stop to appreciate that!"

"I'm just confused about one thing though." Max almost whispered, hoping her own lack of volume would rein in Chloe's. "If Victoria is, um, 'like a tiger', where exactly do you fit in this scale. Some sort of Jackhammer or other industrial grade machine? Because if you peg Victoria at 'tiger', I don't think you could be anything natural."

"I'm just confused about one thing though." Max almost whispered, hoping her own lack of volume would rein in Chloe's. "If Victoria is, um, 'like a tiger', where exactly do you fit in this scale. Some sort of Jackhammer or other industrial grade machine? Because if you peg Victoria at 'tiger', I don't think you could be anything natural."

"In other words you think I'm a literal sex machine, Max? I'm flattered." Chloe grinned. "But what makes you think I'm not a pillow princess? Lying sweetly on my back, my beautiful innocent face staring up, overwhelmed, as you work your magic on my meek helpless form and carry me to heaven."
Chloe actually felt a little hurt when Max started outright laughing. Yes she was a bit muscley, but surely her trusty First Mate knew she had the heart of a maiden?

"Sorry, you lost me at innocent. Meek and helpless was a step too far. So far you've pretty much seduced the Quarterback's girlfriend, then actually sent him a picture of her enraptured in your arms. And you were flirting shamelessly with the head cheerleader this morning. And that's in the space of under 24 hours since I first saw you."

OK fine, admittedly Chloe had some game, and experience. But she'd said she had the heart of a maiden, not a body part that was permanently affected by love's physical expression. Besides the stuff with Juliet was for a very good cause. It (somehow) saved her relationship with Zachery. Come to think of it, she'd saved (or at least assisted) the nascent relationship between Dana and Trevor moments ago. Perhaps Juliet's little piece of creative writing wasn't completely wrong when it suggested she was 'Cupid in combat boots'.

"And I think we already established it would take both Victoria and myself to carry you through a doorway, let alone 'to heaven'." That brought another grin.

"Just being back with you is pretty close to heaven, Max. And just between the two of us, I kind-of do feel a little meek when I'm around you."

"Because of my powers?" Max asked.

"Because of your smile." Chloe answered. And her delivery was so smooth Max didn't even elbow her in the ribs this time.

Victoria Chase returned from the rest room with a scowl affixed to her lips, having found two new things to be annoyed about. She'd noticed the first thing on trying to check her make-up: Some idiot had defaced the bathroom mirror, scratching an entirely nonsensical "Twin Peaks" reference into it. The second thing related to social media and a certain head cheerleader with, in Victoria's opinion, a penchant for clothing choices that bordered on indecent exposure. She marched out of the bathroom, grinding her teeth and radiating anger. She readied herself to spew a litany of complaints at Max and Chloe. They were her new friends now. Part of the deal in that was listening to her observations on the world's stupidity, and Victoria was an extremely observant person in that regard.

"Max, Chloe. You wouldn't believe-"

Her words caught in her throat as she noticed a strange mood between her companions. There was a pervading feeling between Max and Chloe that spanned melancholy, nostalgia and intimacy. Each staring wistfully at the other. She'd seen Max occasionally go like this in class, though she'd never seen her manage to entrap someone else in her spell before. It was actually rather intriguing. She quietly reached for her bag, extracted her oversized camera, and destructively captured it with a click. Well, fair was fair; Max had interrupted a moment between her and Chloe earlier today.

"OK. What did I miss?" Victoria asked, her rage momentarily slacked at the twin joys of getting a good photo, and taking revenge in kind for Max's earlier photo ambush.

"We were just discussing Tales of Phantasia." Max said, voice still dripping in a melancholy born of wistful recollection.

Victoria let out a huff. Honestly, it felt like Max could get nostalgic and emotional over just about anything. Still, it wasn't like she was completely ignorant of that particular game. In fact she may have had a collection of Mint and Arche figurines hidden in another nondescript looking cardboard
box somewhere.

"Such a shame it's so widely known for that horrid super nintendo translation. It mangles everything with gratuitous vulgarity, the sort of thing only someone with the mind of a boy at the dawn of pubescence could possibly enjoy. The later translation on Playstation was objectively superior."

That should have been a safe opinion to share, but for some reason both Max and Chloe looked strangely hurt. As if she'd taken their childhood and trampled all over it.

"I kind-of liked how they made it unambiguous that Arche enjoyed her sex dream." Max eventually replied, with Chloe nodding very affirmatively in support. "The way it was originally written, it sounds like she's dreaming of the main character forcing themselves on her. It's honestly a bit creepy."

"Wonderful. The translators managed to make it less gender-problematic by reducing the cast to a pack of crass imbeciles."

An alert suddenly sounded on Victoria's phone. She cast her eyes down at it, and her rage reasserted itself, her expression verging on homicidal.

"Tori, what the hell is the matter?"

"Dana and I are having a 'disagreement' on social media." Victoria growled back, her fury further inflamed by having just re-skimmed their entire 'conversation'. Her fingers danced across the phone's screen, formulating a response to the latest affront Dana had posted.

"What about?"

"You! And your stupid dream that you didn't actually have."

Max grabbed her own phone and checked Victoria's facebook, feeling the welcome intrusion of Chloe leaning in close and spying over her shoulder. Everything seemed to begin with the message she had left, according to their master plan.

Max Caulfield:
I had the most incredibly weird dream yesterday, so real it's kind of been haunting me. It was set here, in Arcadia Bay, and I kept waking up to all these creepy supernatural events. One after another, day after day. It started off fairly tame: a freak snowfall. Then things got insane – an unscheduled eclipse, then a mass whale beaching, then two moons appearing. Finally, there was a storm which spawned the most enormous tornado and utterly destroyed the town! And to make matters worse, in the nastiest coincidence imaginable, it actually did snow yesterday evening! I'm kind of freaked out.

Then of course, came Victoria's 'officially sanctioned' bullying response.

Victoria Maribeth Chase:
I wouldn't worry too much Max. Your dream, like most things generated by your imagination, is facile and completely scientifically illiterate. Freak eclipses are completely impossible, unless you somehow teleport the moon around, which I'm sure would royally fuck with the tides and probably either violate momentum conservation or send the moon careering off in the wrong direction. And if you somehow found or created a second moon and suddenly stuck it in orbit, between the inevitable changes in orbits and tidal forces, we'd have a lot more to worry about than a single measly tornado. Oh, were these supposed to be in order of increasing weirdness and improbability? If so you should have put either the whales beaching first or the snowfall, then the 'huge' tornado. Then
the teleporting moon and finally the 'bonus moon'. Honestly, it's a good thing your subconscious isn't writing speculative fiction. I'd have thrown the story down in disgust and walked out if I read something so idiotic.

Max flinched. Victoria hadn't held back. And this was where Dana had intervened, clearly taking umbrage with Victoria's vitriol clad critique and leaping to Max's defence.

**Dana Ward:**
*Victoria, don't be so cruel! No one can control what their subconscious feels, or puts in their dreams. I think it's wonderful that Max has the confidence to share something like that online. Honestly, I thought you and her were getting along so much better yesterday...*

Victoria had then responded in a manner that wasn't entirely in accordance with her plan. Though it did nothing to allay Dana's suspicions on how Victoria actually felt about Max, and that of course left Victoria wide open.

**Victoria Maribeth Chase:**
*I wasn't being cruel! Anyone of intelligence would feel much better after finding out the content of their nightmare was utterly impossible and could never happen in real life.*

**Dana Ward:**
*Oh, so this is just the weird way Victoria Chase expresses affection then. Obsessing over and insulting the person she cares about because she can't express her true feelings. Max, if you read this, trust me you can do a lot better than her. Speaking of which, you've got to tell me about that handsome visitor you had this morning. They were totally blushing when they mentioned your name!*  
The quality of the discourse rapidly deteriorated at this point. The topic of fashion was broached, focusing on the extent to which Dana's clothing actually performed its primary function, versus Victoria basing her own style on fashion normally popular among the post-menopausal. That immediately led to a very concise parting exchange.

**Victoria Maribeth Chase:**
*Go eat a dick, Dana.*

**Dana Ward:**
*I've been trying to find one that isn't already covered in your lipstick. ;)*

And thus Max and Chloe had a decidedly red-faced Victoria sitting opposite them in their booth.

"Victoria, if it makes you feel better, remember that we orchestrated this to spread a message about the tornado. You've basically trolled Dana and made her help spread that message, co-opting all her followers. And she's got even more followers than you."

That did make Victoria feel a little better. She was trolling Dana, and using her as a pawn for her own purposes. Still, an obnoxious number of users seemed to be on Dana's side. Even Max and Chloe seemed a little amused reading the exchange opposite her on Max's phone. Victoria's nostrils flared as she noticed a new comment being added to Dana's last post. Some imbecile calling themselves the "Noir Angel" had apparently taxed their intellectual capacity to the limit to type ":kek".

"You know, Max, aside from that special morning face shot, I haven't really seen any of your recent photographs." Chloe hurriedly interjected. That wasn't completely true, She had seen an entire wall of Max's photos in her room. But she hadn't really had a chance to take a good look at them. Besides
she had an ulterior motive; she wanted to distract Victoria and get her thinking about a topic that wouldn't cause her to storm around infuriated, or speculate too closely on the identity of the author of that last comment. Asking to see Max's photos seemed a good bet: so far they seemed to cause Victoria to dump whatever she was doing and attract the sum-total of her attention.

Max reached for some of the shots she'd taken yesterday. There were the two shots of Trevor getting nutted, of course, which Chloe laughed her ass off at. She quickly passed them to Victoria, who showed signs of cheering up, taking a certain perverse pleasure in being reminded that Dana's new maybe-boyfriend had been smashed in the groin. Then there was the shot of Alyssa's car nearly killing Trevor's friends, which she found a little more serious. Finally there were the photos Max had taken in the bathroom. Six of them. Max hesitated. That didn't seem right. There should have been four: the one of Victoria looking beautifully aggravated, one of Max's reflection in the bucket, and the two with Chloe they hadn't handed in as evidence.

"These are some crazy ass effects. Did you photoshop them while on blow?" Chloe asked, handling two of the shots.

"Probably a consequence of her stupidly shaking the polaroids. Honestly, I'm surprised you don't ruin your shots more often, Max. What're they of?"

"One of you, Tori. Looking just like you do now. Completely normal, I mean." Pissed off in other words. "And another one with the bucket and Max's reflection. They actually look kind of sick, some weird colour inversion mashed up with everything sort of distorted and dissolving."

Chloe placed the shots on the table. Victoria drew a stilted breath as she saw them.

"Max. Those were taken before you first used your powers!"

"The timeline where you were shot, Chloe, that we changed."

"So it's from a place that no longer exists. Why's it gone all acid-trippy though? Think it's getting eaten by langoliers or some other Steven King shit?"

"The idea of giant mouths eating an aborted timeline is crazy. Though maybe some twisted echo of that timeline has to remain, since the current one's been influenced by knowledge Max gained from the previous?"

Chloe turned her attention to the four unruined photos from the bathroom. A sudden pulse of anger ran through her as she saw the shot with Nathan holding her at gunpoint.

"That fuck!"

"Watch your damn language in my diner, or you'll only get one slice of bacon." Joyce shouted as she brought over the plates of food, causing Chloe to instantly droop. Victoria smirked in response: It wasn't every day she got to witness someone with an almost legendary air of badassery being chewed out by her mother.

Chloe surreptitiously covered the photos on the table with her right arm, while making a show of reaching for the salt shaker. She was used to quickly moving to hide the odd thing from her family, as well as removing wallets from rich assholes she'd met in bars. This felt more important than those cases though. She really didn't want Joyce seeing the shot of her being held at gunpoint, or the one of her picking up Nathan's gun after she'd beaten the shit out of him. Joyce eyed her suspiciously for a moment, then decided to drop the matter. Teenage girls were entitled to a few harmless secrets, after all.
"This is all so incredible." Chloe remarked as soon as Joyce left earshot, taking her left arm off the seat top behind Max, in order to pick up her cutlery. It left Max feeling a strange cold void, even though they hadn't actually been in direct contact.

"I finally reunite with Max, and she's literally superhuman; I find out that Tori's secretly quite bad-ass, and the complete bitch everyone thinks she is is just a very well rehearsed cover for her secret identity; now we're on a secret mission to save a whole town from a rogue tornado."

She impaled a large slice of bacon on the end of a fork, devouring it ravenously, before adding "I just wish Rachel was here with us. Then it'd be absolutely perfect."

Victoria immediately rolled her eyes. Both at the idea Rachel would have made the situation better, and at Chloe thinking Max travelling in time and her not being a complete bitch were on the same level.

"No really, is it far fetched to think that you two might learn to get along? You probably thought you'd never get along with Me, or Max either. And now look at you. Plus she could probably help us out. She was ridiculously good at everything she did."

It seemed incredible to Max that Chloe would describe someone as ridiculously good at everything. Chloe herself seemed to have incredible natural dexterity, aim and brute strength; if she chose to put in the effort, she was also formidably intelligent. Max tried to imagine someone better than that. She really couldn't. Then again, Max was biased: to her, the idea of anyone being better than her Chloe was unthinkable.

"There's an enormous difference between Max and Rachel." Victoria curtly responded, while carefully carving a modest chunk off her own omelet. "As much as they might look alike, Rachel and Max are both emotionally and morally polar opposites. The Rachel I remember was incredibly self-centred and duplicitous. Max can't stop thinking of how to help others. And we're doing a perfectly adequate job without her."

"People did say Rachel had a certain mirror-like quality to her." Chloe shot back. Victoria made herself busy savouring the latest bite of her breakfast, in lieu of dignifying that with a response.

"And just imagine how, once Arcadia Bay is safe, you could all set out together after this and make the world bow. The two best photographers in the school, representing the establishment, and the alternate viewpoints. Plus a model who wouldn't infuriate you, Tori, because she's actually hella smart rather than a vacuous bimbo. Imagine her at Miss World! All the other contestants would be saying how they wanted 'world peace', and she'd explain how to shift foreign policy in order to reduce conflicts around the world. To which the host would probably say 'you mean world peace'. And she'd roll her eyes and say 'yes, world peace'."

Max tried again to picture what Rachel must have been like. In spite of having seen her photo, she could only come up with some being of pure energy, walking amongst the mere mortals. More than the description, anyone who could make Chloe so gushing with praise had to be amazing beyond belief. For Victoria, her thoughts were somewhat different. She could definitely imagine Rachel looking all picture perfect, in a short dress stretched tight around that big bubbly ass of hers, all while explaining the political steps needed to achieve global harmony. Rachel was the consummate politician after all. The beautiful little liar. She'd definitely trapped a certain short haired, and at the time comparatively naive, blonde in her web of deceit. Then tried to suck her dry.

"And what about you, Chloe?" Max asked.

"Bodyguard, I guess."
Max knew that was her childhood fantasy, but felt she was capable of something more, something far less subservient. She was about to say something quietly supportive about having so much more to contribute, when Victoria did so instead. And naturally, Victoria did so in her typical manner.

"Completely mediocre. Don't you think you should set your ambitions a little higher than being someone else's meat shield? You easily have enough intelligence to get a university degree, and frankly with your height you'd actually have a better chance at Rachel's modelling dream than she did, if it wasn't for your-"

Her tirade was momentarily interrupted by her choking on a residual bit of omelet. She gestured at Chloe's right arm, while saving herself with a powerful cough, as well as saving her companions the trouble of getting up and performing a Heimlich manoeuvre.

"My tats?" Chloe asked, as Victoria raised a paper towel to her mouth and deposited something she'd rather not look at into it.

"I was going to say your overdeveloped muscles", Victoria replied a little horsely, her throat still sore from that choking bout. "but I suppose those too. Really though, your looks are secondary. What's more important is that you're smart, you idiot! You could be achieving a lot more than you currently are."

Max couldn't help but smirk a little. Only Victoria would call someone an idiot while praising their intelligence. And straight after managing to choke on her own breakfast.

"I had plans." Chloe insisted. "Enough to make the world bow. It's just that since Rachel disappeared, everything I, we'd planned together went to hell. Until I find her, everything else is on hold."

That seemed naively optimistic to Victoria. After all, if foul play was involved, the vast majority of young women who'd been missing for more than a day weren't found, or at least weren't found alive. Rachel had been missing six months. It was really quite obvious when you stopped to think about it, though somehow the idea hit her a little harder than she expected it to. The truth was she hadn't thought too much about Rachel's disappearance; she'd occupied a comfortable position in her mind as the target of her anger. In all probability Rachel was dead. And failing that, locked up in some sick fuck's basement, wishing she was. She looked again at Chloe, and saw in her eyes a childlike innocence completely at odds with her usual tough as nails persona.

"I'm just saying there's nothing wrong with thinking of yourself sometimes, and making plans of your own, independent of others." Victoria said, trying to soften her delivery a little.

"I actually have a completed application for Bay College in my desk, just sitting there," Chloe admitted sombrelly, then stopped to take an deep breath. When she spoke again it was with her normal boundless enthusiasm, and laced with a suggestive under current. "But those are long term plans. In the short term, I've got plenty for us to do. For example, I was going to show you my secret place, to teach you both things you probably shouldn't know."

And suddenly she was back to the transparent innuendo. It was a little difficult to tell how much of it was driven by actual desire, and how much of it was just a defence mechanism. Throwing out corny lines to ensure the discussion was driven away from the more serious things she didn't want to face. Like planning a future that didn't involve seeing Rachel again.

"So, time to book?" Chloe asked. She and Victoria had finished both their plates of food. Max still had a quarter of her bacon omelet left, but felt completely stuffed. She pushed the plate toward Chloe, and its content was gone in seconds.
With the last plate emptied, the three rose to depart. An instant later, Max's phone began to ring.

"Come on, you've got classes in the afternoon, and before that you both need to begin Chloe's illicit education. We've got places to go, and people to do."

Max was about to send the call to voice mail, when a strange feeling of cold dread crept over her. She checked the caller ID. It was Kate Marsh.

She looked back at Chloe, so enthusiastic to get going, and Victoria who had her arms folded impatiently, then back at the phone. She knew exactly what she had to do.

"This might be important, so I'll take the call while we walk out."

And with that, she started toward the exit, while simultaneously bringing her phone to her ear. In the moment before Kate's sweet, and slightly pained voice came across the speaker, Max found herself thinking that, while there were undoubtedly difficult choices ahead, it was occasionally both possible and completely reasonable to choose both options.

Chapter End Notes

In hindsight, the decision whether or not to take Kate's phone call might have been the first completely inane "forced choices" in the original game. There's no reason why Max couldn't walk out of the diner while taking it, stopping Chloe from getting chewed out by her Mother and keeping everyone happy. Or maybe the second inane choice, after the option to take photo/intervene when David Madsen bullies Kate, since she could have snapped the photo then marched up to him and chewed him out. Perhaps directly threatening him with said photo.

Anyway this fic has somehow become the antithesis of the original game, with Max dodging most of the binary choices the game tried to force on her and even ending up on a path to get two girlfriends at once. It started with me just deciding to mock some of the things I didn't like in the original game. Apparently the things I didn't like were actually the game's core message and concept lol. I felt the original message they were trying to push – that you shouldn't dwell over decisions you've made in the past and redo them was pretty silly. The main reason you shouldn't do that is you don't have the facility to undo your decisions. But Max does. Hence they have to inject a contrived external constraint, the tornado, to try to validate their theme. But inserting a transparent author fiat proves nothing, except that no fictional character can evade their questionably conceived script.

I wasn't sure how to write Grey here. She's an original character, which kind of worries me. I'd rather write the characters from the original game than make up new ones and insert them. The problem was Sean Prescott needed someone to do his dirty work for him, so her presence was needed. I also liked the idea of a lady villain, since all the major threats from the original game were dudes. In one variation, I actually had Grey grapple Chloe into a proper restraining hold, and be more overt in revealing what she was up to. But that felt 'unprofessional' for a professional hit-person, that she'd be
tipping her hand a little too much and maybe even risking arrest. In the end you got a nasty mirroring of what Chloe did to Dana, which would look to everyone else like she’d just caught a person stumbling into her, and wouldn’t tip her target off beyond thinking "she's a bit strong", rather than "she has a rather comprehensive knowledge of submission holds".

I wrote Justin's drug-stupor a bit over the top here, especially as far as an experienced drug user goes. I kind-of have an issue with people obsessing over the three bullets on Chloe's necklace, representing the three times she'll be killed (or three of the greater number of times she'll be killed, based on player choice), as "deep", so I started writing him as a bit of a stereotypical parody stoner expressing that point of view. I tried to justify it by saying he'd not only taken stronger weed than he's used to, but a magic mushroom as well (probably not a wise combination in hindsight, the risk of weed anxiety + hallucinations might not be pleasant). Anyway he apparently he hallucinates rainbows radiating off Chloe (and strangely none of the other people in the diner). Could that be another deep insight into the universe? Maybe he was just seeing the same thing as the reader?

We also have the second worst binary choice in the game discussed here: Waffle/Omelet. Could have been worse though. Just imagine if Life is Strange was a Sierra Adventure Game. You'd probably find Max dying near the end of the game, lacking the strength to escape Jefferson if she picked Waffles, since she opted for carbs instead of muscle-building protein.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Be forewarned that there's a reasonably graphic bit of violence somewhere in this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Nervousness was slathered across Max Caulfield's face as she hung up her phone. Kate's news had been less than stellar, but what really hurt was the tone with which it had been delivered. Flat and sombre, she had sounded like someone who'd forgotten they were alive, just going through the motions on automatic. The one point her voice had lifted was at the end of the call, when Max had promised to meet her before afternoon classes. It seemed she had two reasons to make sure she got back to school on time: meeting up with Kate, as well as whatever her future self was worried about.

Max's thoughts were interrupted by the soft intrusion of Victoria's hand, the statuesque blonde gently prompting her to get in to Chloe's truck, now that she'd finished her phone call. Clambering in, she realised she'd let Victoria manoeuvre her so she could claim the coveted right passenger seat, with proper safety belt. That was OK, being relegated to the centre seat had advantages of it's own. Namely having Victoria on one side of her and Chloe on the other. Yesterday the same position had been a headache; she'd had to act as mediator, afraid they'd turn on each other. Now, only one day later and it seemed they were getting on swimmingly. Having them both on either side of her like this made her feel more than a little giddy.

"Back in this fucking death trap." Victoria immediately complained. "And Chloe's left that pair of oversized denim shorts lying about on my seat. Completely slovenly."

Well mostly swimmingly. Still, small bumps on the road made for an exciting journey, right?

"Damn Tori, it's like we're married already." Chloe shot back, leaping into the drivers seat with her typical boundless energy. She glanced at Max sitting awkwardly between them, and another shot of energy sparked through her. An impulse to show off, impress her Max. And there was such a perfect target just two seats over that she could gently provoke. A target who, to be honest, was doing exactly the same thing, attempting to impress and provoke her by immediately complaining. She turned back to Victoria, and her eyes suddenly narrowed into an expression equal parts suave and mischievous. "You really want to lick me into shape don't you Tori?"

Victoria flushed slightly. Chloe might have been a goof, but she was more handsome than she had any right to be, prone to moments of incredible cool. And that look she'd just given her was one such moment; it left her struggling to suppress a shiver. She dwelt on Chloe's double entendre just a moment too long, cursing as her mind conjured a frustratingly vivid image. A thought of exploring that taut body with her lips, of how she might feel and taste. Of caressing the scratches she'd accidentally left this morning, and perhaps leaving more. She glanced at Max sitting between them, and managed to pull herself together. She couldn't just give in to Chloe, nor could she let her provocations go unchallenged; not when she had Max as an audience.

"I'd have to do something about your bad taste first." Victoria retorted as Chloe backed them out of the parking lot. She puffed herself up, countering Chloe's cool with her refined elegance and arrogance. Her own face suddenly a picture of sultry superiority that made it difficult for Chloe to
keep her eyes on the road.

Max felt herself sinking into her seat, trapped between them. Chloe and Victoria's antics reminded her of a nature documentary, with birds dancing, singing, displaying their plumage, in one case even walking on water; all in a desperate attempt to attract a mate. It left Max unsure whether to reconsider her earlier thoughts about being stuck between them, or redouble them.

"It is strange that you feel like that but still choose to ride with us, lady V. You could always follow my behind in your flash-as-fuck car instead. Personally, I think you just can't get enough of me."

"You're assuming I'm not here for Max." Victoria snapped back.

A knowing, insinuating smile broke out across Chloe's face.

"As someone I can talk shop about photography with." Victoria quickly elaborated. "Her powers also mean it's safer to be as close to her as possible. It's not like-"

"See Max, I told you you were a player. Listen to that desperate attempt at rationalisation. You've got Tori completely on tap."

"From what I've seen, you're the one desperate to slake her thirst." Victoria sniped in response, voice thick with implication.

"That's a good point." Chloe immediately conceded, making Victoria seethe. What was the point of trading insult and innuendo with someone who either immediately accepted and owned, or joked about them? And which was she really doing now?

"So Max," Chloe continued completely unabashed, "if you could order either of us in a bar, who would you choose to drink?"

"I'd probably just mix you both together, along with half a pack of aspirin to deal with the inevitable headache." Max sighed in response.

Both Victoria and Chloe were silent for a moment; it was clear who'd won their little exchange, and it wasn't either of them.

"Mixing Drugs and Alcohol." Chloe eventually swooned. "Max you are literally my dream-FUCK!"

A sudden heat engulfed Max's cheeks. They had known each other for ever as children, and definitely felt something whenever the other was near. But shouldn't romance, chocolates, maybe dinner and a movie precede talk that explicit? Then she looked out the windscreen, and saw what had provoked Chloe's sudden outburst. The main coast-side road was closed; prominently displayed warning signs explained that a landslip had occurred overnight, blocking the roadway with earth and several felled trees.

"Idiotic plantation forestry." Victoria grumbled. "The bush in the parks, and native reserve land around Arcadia Bay both have a diverse range of flora, but the commercial forests are completely pine. They have an incredibly feeble root system, so smothering the hillside with them has encouraged subsidence. Almost every time we get a downpour there's a fucking landslide and a few trees and rocks fall over. It's actually rather dangerous."

Another problem caused by Sean Prescott, in other words. The proud owner of the majority of Arcadia Bay's forestry industry.

"Chloe, if we're going somewhere past the roadblock, we can always take the road inland past
Blackwell, around the top of 'Prescott's Coastal Pine Plantation' and rejoin the coast road near the lighthouse." Max suggested.

Chloe groaned. That was a huge detour, which effectively amounted to driving in a big rectangle instead of a straight line. Still, once you got past Blackwell Academy, you were out of the town and onto country roads. And that meant almost zero traffic and a sixty mile an hour speed limit, so it shouldn't take that long. As long as you didn't get stuck behind a logging truck or someone towing a caravan.

"Prescott's Coastal Pine Plantation." Chloe repeated while performing a u-turn. "That fuck's got his tendrils wrapped around just about everything in Arcadia Bay, hasn't he?"

"As I told Max earlier, no one's bigger than the Prescott family in Arcadia Bay. Though their investment pattern always struck me as unusual. They've sunk a disproportionate amount of their wealth into assets in the Bay area. They could be making more money more safely if they diversified into shares in larger nationwide and multinational companies. It's almost like he wants to buy up the whole of Arcadia Bay and-"

"Zzzzz. We better hit the open road soon, I don't know if I can take hearing about how irresponsibly Sean Prescott throws around his millions."

"Just be careful when you get out of the town limits. Sixty miles an hour in this rust bucket is a terrifying concept." Victoria replied, feeling a little affronted at Chloe's reaction. She was sure their were plenty of people who'd find her well thought out critique on the disposition of the Prescott financial empire a scintillating topic for discussion. It would definitely have been welcomed amongst any of her rich acquaintances.

"Don't worry Tori. I'm an incredibly safe driver. Besides, we've got Max. She can rewind time if there's a problem."

"Assuming we aren't killed or knocked out instantly by the crash."

Chloe's hands tightened on the wheel and her brow furrowed in anguish. Max saw the look, placed a supportive hand on her shoulder, and shot Victoria a reproachful glance. Non-verbally explaining that there were some topics she should just leave off limits.

"There won't be a crash." Chloe insisted again, the slightest hint of desperation in her voice. "I'm a very safe driver."

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"I did always want to be Lara Croft."

"Chloe. You basically are Lara Croft."

A slight shudder ran through Chloe's truck as it ate up the road. Chloe seemed happier; slewing the discussion topic onto a shapely video game character had worked wonders, distracting her from her traffic accident anxiety.

"No way Max", Chloe replied. "Victoria's the closest, but even she doesn't measure up to-"

"She meant you can shoot a gun really well, and beat the shit out of anything that gets in your way you dolt." Victoria answered. She, on the other hand, felt slightly nauseous. She'd gone joyriding along this same stretch of road several times with the rest of the Vortex club, at night and in significantly worse conditions. But a brand-new luxury Mercedes was designed to be whisper quiet and provide a smooth, and comfortable driving experience, even at excess speed. It made you think
you were going slower than you were. Chloe's truck conveyed a certain honesty in the way its frame started to vibrate, the engine got unsettlingly loud, and a cool draft suddenly started circulating around their feet, probably from air blown through some rust hole. It told you in no uncertain terms that you were going hella fast, and a crash at this speed would have horrific consequences.

"Oh. Right." Chloe said quickly, reducing speed as she took a corner. She was glad she had: their worst fears were about to be realised. Emerging from behind a screen of trees was an excessively large logging truck, taking up more than it's fair share of the road, probably a couple of inches off needing a wide load sign and escort. As things were it limped along at two thirds of the speed limit, which naturally meant so did the beat-up pickup truck stuck behind it.

Victoria sighed in relief. Chloe's truck wasn't nearly as rickety at forty miles an hour as it was at sixty. She regarded her apparent saviour, the logging vehicle ahead of them. It was big, with an open semi-trailer which had strong metal bars occasionally spaced along its sides to prevent it's cargo from rolling off. It was presently not carrying anything, presumably heading for some logging camp to load up. Victoria imagined it the kind of truck Optimus Prime's woodsman cousin might be, then immediately felt angry at having slipped into her geek mode. She then decided that, given her company, she could relax her public persona just a little. After all they had saved each others lives, were plotting the downfall of a criminal organisation together, and more importantly they knew about her anime figurines. Some modicum of trust and familiarity could be expected.

"If anything, you're kind of like the new Lara from the reboot." Max suggested.

"Yeah but I preferred classic politically incorrect Lara. She was so fucking hot and badass. Besides, if I was new Lara, I wouldn't have needed your help to rip Nathan a new one in the bathroom. I could have just ducked into one of the stalls after being shot and waited five seconds for my regenerating health to kick in. Then rush back out and stick him with a climbing axe! I mean, the girl takes a rebar through the kidney like it's nothing at the start of the game, pulls it out and keeps going. I go down from a single shot to the gut. A nine millimetre bullet too. Everyone thinks those are pussy rounds. You're not supposed to die unless the bullet's calibre is in inches and starts with a four or higher. Then you get insta-gibbed. Ask any internet forum on guns."

"This is real life, not some basement dweller's interpretation thereof or a video game." Victoria said. "You can't expect to regenerate a bullet wound, or deflect bullets with your abdominal muscles or whatever, in spite of how unreasonably strong and defined they look."

She shivered slightly, willing her eyes not to linger on Chloe's shirt, tight against her midriff. She felt a flush of warmth as she recalled in some detail what was beneath. Well fair was fair. Chloe had just been commenting on her chest. Meanwhile Max still sat between them, feeling a little invisible.

"So how's your quest for the perfect Max photo going? You looked fairly happy with the shot you nabbed of us in the diner."

"I was, but..." Victoria threw her hands up in frustration. "Look, the photo's of Max being nostalgic and melancholy. That's like getting a photo of water looking wet. No matter how visually evocative and technically flawless it is, it's not revealing anything non-obvious about her."

She pulled her camera from her bag to re-examine the shot on its rear display. In really was a perfect moment, a couple of old friends reminiscing on what was, and probably dreaming of what could be, if the way they tenderly held each other's hands was any indication. It left Victoria feeling a little hollow, wondering how she'd have turned out if she'd had a childhood friendship like that. The feelings it invoked made it all the more frustrating that the shot was off-topic. No, she'd have to put it with all the others, in her private Max collection.
"In fact, the only thing non-obvious about the shot is seeing 'The Price' sharing in those emotions, the nostalgia, the sentimentality, the vulnerability. It's so different from your usual fare of beating someone senseless and/or seducing their girlfriend. But the assignment is supposed to be about her, not you."

That actually stung Chloe a little. Was it really such a revelation that there was more to her than being the goddess of sex and violence?

"You missed a great moment when Max was talking to Kate on the phone then, Tori. About half way through there was an instant where she looked hella fierce."

Victoria slumped. She'd been too busy surreptitiously manoeuvring herself to get the right side passenger seat. How idiotic. She could have had her extra credit secured for the cost of being sandwiched awkwardly between Max and Chloe. And in hindsight that might have even been a price she'd enjoy paying.

"I wasn't looking that angry." Max interjected, mercifully preventing Victoria's mind from running away from her again. "Was I?"

"Your face was practically dripping with righteous indignation Maximus. It screamed 'if those assholes fuck with my crew, I'll rip them and anything else that tries to stop me in half. Even space and time.' Want to let us in on what that was all about? Did Kate tell you they'd put up the price of Polaroid film or something?"

"No. It's just the police were being complete dick heads."

A sentiment Chloe could definitely get behind, but she felt they needed more information.

"Some idiot told Kate that there was little they could do. That she'd waited too long and any evidence of Nathan drugging her 'or whatever else he may have done' would be out of her system by now. The way Kate talked about it, it sounded like they were basically sweeping everything under the carpet."

"The Prescotts probably have half the department on their payroll." Victoria said flatly. "You'd practically have to bring them a murder with a body and a smoking gun, or they'd go through the motions and whitewash everything."

"If the local bacon aren't going to do their jobs, we'll just have to collect the evidence ourselves. Then we can really get them-"

"By sending everything to the FBI?" Victoria suggested, cutting off Chloe mid-tirade to inject some sensibility.

"Well yeah, of course." Chloe said quickly, her cheeks slightly red. "What else would an intelligent person do if they had zero confidence in the local police? Go out and take them down themselves, vigilante style? Come on."

"Did Kate tell you anything else that might be helpful?"

"Not on the phone." Max replied. "But there was something this morning. Kate remembered something about the person who handed her the drugged drinks. She got them in the Vortex Club VIP section."

"So they were either a caterer or one of the Vortex members." Victoria deduced. Anything else?
"She got her drinks directly from someone behind the bar, and their skin was, um, too melanin-endowed to be Nathan."

Well that led to a slightly awkward pause.

"No, that's perfect!" Chloe announced. "Less than snow white skin in the inner sanctum of the school's foremost WASP institution! That's got to narrow down the suspects."

Victoria bristled. It actually did narrow the suspects down. Drastically so when combined with them being seen behind the bar, but she didn't like the implication. The Vortex club wasn't discriminatory. It welcomed and judged people based on only their character. It even explicitly said so in their constitution! But they had to get their members from the Blackwell student population, which didn't seem to be that diverse to begin with. Perhaps that was understandable to some extent, being fed by a small rural town in decline, combined with ridiculously wealthy "honours students," like Nathan Prescott and herself. Nonetheless she was sure the Vortex Club had far broader than expected representation for a non-mandatory extracurricular group within a private preparatory school in a small backwater town. She mentally counted the number of qualifiers she'd just used in that statement. Oh boy.

"It actually narrows it down to one person." Victoria finally conceded, much to her chagrin. Chloe's expression was appropriately priceless.

"Only because a regular Vortex Club member wouldn't have the clout to push their way behind the bar." She added defensively. "They'd have to be in the Vortex Club committee to pull that off, or they'd get ejected by the bouncers. And it couldn't have been the catering people we hired either. They weren't exactly 'diverse'."

"Hayden Jones?" Max asked. "He's normally really relaxed and easygoing, but he did side with Courtney and Nathan against you, when you took over as Chair."

"I met him a few times when Rachel dragged me along to some Vortex parties." Chloe added. "Seemed totally chill; he actually complemented my throwing arm after that thing with the window. Complete player though, and the guy definitely knows where to score drugs."

"I'll defer to your expertise in those areas. I do find the idea of him needing to drug girls difficult though, he always seemed to have a harem of bimbos accompany him everywhere." Victoria cut back.

"I'm just saying he could probably get his hands on roofies or whatever it is Kate was drugged with, Lady V."

"Maybe he'll fall into one of the traps we've set, and we'll know for sure?" Max suggested.

"Maybe. Though I can't see Hayden being 'six'. He's just not that idiotic."

Chloe sighed in relief as the logging truck finally turned off the road into a roadside logging camp. A large advertising board stood near the turn off, announcing the camp was owned by 'Prescott Industries: the heart of Arcadia Bay'. It was accompanied by an image of Sean Prescott posed as some sort of quasi-messianic figure, heavily airbrushed to conceal the fat in his face and wrinkles on his brow, reaching down from on high. Apparently he was supposed to be offering the 'charity' of low-wage employment to the township or some such. Feeling a slight bout of nausea brought on by the advertisement, Chloe put her foot down, glad to be getting the abomination out of sight as quickly as she could safely go. Victoria felt her own nausea return as they leapt back into high gear and Chloe's truck began shuddering in earnest once more, not quite badly enough to indicate the
vehicle was going to fall apart but just hinting at the possibility it might. Max just hoped they didn't run into another logging vehicle again on the way back. Her future self had been quite insistent that Chloe get them back to school on time, and she really wanted to check in with Kate in person.

Chloe's Truck glided sedately to a halt outside 'American Rust'. Arcadia Bay's foremost (and only) junk yard. Normally a ten minute drive out of town along the coastal road, the roundabout route they'd had to take had put the travel time closer to thirty. The carcasses of deceased vehicles lay strewn about in piles: cars mostly, but also small recreational and fishing boats, even a school bus. Chloe was grateful the dump held only dead of a mechanical variety. She doubted Victoria's refined sensibilities could cope if the scent of actual death was allowed to pervade the place.

"You've brought us to an old junk yard?" Victoria asked, her voice dripping with incredulity. "Let me guess, you're taking your truck to visit its family?"

"Stop dissing the truck, Victoria. At least it can carry three people, unlike certain 'luxury vehicles'. It's also had a bunch of cash spent on repairs. Internally it's actually in hella good condition."

She reached into the back of her truck and hefted a wooden crate filled with beer bottles. For a moment Max and Victoria thought they were about to get incredibly drunk, though a closer inspection revealed the bottles were all lid-less and empty.

"Targets I prepared earlier." She elaborated.

The sight of the crate left Max and Victoria wondering just how much Chloe drank and how many rounds she intended to fire. Still, in some ways it was kind of nice: she'd risked her liver to prepare all this for them. It would have been a real pain if Chloe had made them scour the junk yard all morning for things to use as targets.

"Rachel and I used to hang out around here all the time", she continued, "so I know there's no one around, and that makes this the perfect place to practice shooting the pistol I leant you. Can't have you accidentally shooting yourself or anything."

Victoria sneered. Shoot herself? As if anyone would be that stupid.

"You might want to wear these as well", Chloe said, passing out several pairs of safety glasses. "I know you were really worried about ricochets from your letters Max, so I thought I'd grab a few extra precautions just to be on the safe side." She added with a wink.

Max hadn't actually been that worried until she heard Chloe mentioned the word ricochet. In that instant, an irrational fear began burrowing into Max's mind. A feeling that somehow this was all incredibly dangerous. To be fair, they were handling a firearm, though it felt deeper than that. Like there was something plotting here, something powerful twisting the whims of fate to suit its own ends.

Chloe saw the concern in Max's face and decided a practical demonstration was in order. "You don't need to worry as long as you're careful Max. For example, take that wrecked car up there with the old school chrome bumper." She gestured to the wrecked chassis of a car sitting atop a pile of assorted junk, and the fear gnawing at Max suddenly exploded into terror.

"I set up an ad-hock shooting gallery beneath it last time I was here." Chloe continued and Max breathed a sigh of relief. She wasn't sure what had come over her, but for an instant she imagined Chloe taking a shot at the chromed steel, still suspiciously shiny in this place of decay, and the round bouncing straight off it and flying back at them. Oblivious to these strangely specific fears, Chloe
took six of the bottles from the crate and set them on her 'shooting gallery', which turned out to be a couple of planks of wood balanced between an old steel barrel and a small wooden bookcase.

Swinging out the gun's cylinder, Chloe checked the revolver was loaded. Then in her typical, one-handed 'it shouldn't work but it does' aiming method, she took aim at the bottle from roughly 15 yards away.

"The neck", She announced, before a loud bang had green glass from the thin part of the bottle flying everywhere, extracting a quiet gasp from Max and leaving the bottle's jagged base sitting on the board.

"Your turn Tori." Chloe said, proffering the firearm. Victoria glanced nervously at the shooting gallery, more than slightly intimidated by the act she had to follow.

She took the gun in hand gingerly, unnerved by the feeling of power it gave. To wound or kill with the squeeze of a finger. Chloe seemed to handle it so effortlessly, and to be honest could take someone apart with her bare hands almost as quickly as shooting them. Then there was Max, who possessed a power that was in some ways as far beyond a pistol as an atomic weapon, and she still wielded it with an almost childlike attitude. Perhaps in some ways that was preferable, though. The number of ways she could destructively use that power if she thought about it begged belief. Sure, Victoria had earned a bunch of Taekwondo belts from what she now thought of as a "Mc-Dojang" in her childhood, but next to her two companions they almost faded into insignificance. Perhaps this would go some small way to rectifying that. Though the idea of doing so by lining someone up and pulling the trigger terrified her.

Victoria took aim, trying her best to mimic the way Chloe had shot. For an instant, Max was almost sure she saw a white flash fly by in her peripheral vision, and the nervousness, the fear something was about to happen returned. She was about to yell for them to stop, but it was too late. The gun fired. Max gulped in horror as the gun kicked back in Victoria's hand. The shot went high, and an ominous pang rang out from the chrome bumper as the shot ricocheted wildly. Her eyes grew wide and she drew a sharp desperate breath, as Chloe stumbled back a step then seemed to crumple.

Then Chloe knelt down and threw the thing she'd just tripped on, a discarded can of spray paint, over her shoulder in annoyance.

"Victoria what the hell are you doing? You're holding it like a moron."

"I was holding it the same way you did." Victoria protested, causing Chloe to slump slightly in response.

"Oh. Right. Yeah don't do that. You're more a regulation, two hands, look down the sights girl, than a one handed instinctive shooter."

In other words, she lacked Chloe's talent, and had to do things the easy way. Well fine. A moment later both girls noticed Max almost white with horror. On seeing her first mate in trouble, Chloe immediately rushed to console her.

"Wow Max. You look like you've seen a ghost. I mean I guess yesterday you actually did. But it's like you've seen something hella scary. Right now, and not yesterday."

"It's just, the gun. For some reason, I thought for certain the bullet was going to fly back and hit one of us."

"Come on Max, bullets don't ricochet like that. Especially not when fired at a surface on an angle to
you. For impact with a hella massive object, angle of incidence equals the angle of reflection."

Though still in shock, Max managed to eye Chloe suspiciously, something Victoria joined in. First chemistry and now physics?

"What, you've never run short of money and had to hustle someone at pool to score weed and beer?"

In hindsight, probably not the best explanation: Max had never taken drugs or alcohol before, and Victoria was unlikely to have ever been short of money.

"You need to know the direction the ball will take when it hits the table edge." She elaborated.

Oh, well that explained everything. Chloe would happily abandon her rebellious punk drop-out image in an instant and indulge in an intellectual pursuit if it helped her get either high or drunk.

"Strictly speaking that only holds for an elastic collision Max." Victoria chimed in, feeling the need to display her science knowledge too. She couldn't compete with Chloe in raw physical strength, but she did have a rather broad knowledge base as attested to by her GPA, and a desire to show it off. Maybe Max had been right yesterday. Perhaps she was a Hermione Granger. In a certain light, she liked to think her face did resemble Emma Watson's.

"Though the effect shouldn't deviate that much. The force applied to the bullet, and hence change in direction of travel, will be in a direction along the surface normal."

Max suddenly remembered why she hated science, and took the least challenging compulsory option in that field. Still she thought she got the just of what her two closet-nerds were trying to explain. She looked back at the old wreck of a car. It was on an almost 45 degree angle to them, so the bullets were bound to deflect off to one side rather than straight back. She'd been stupid, Chloe was never in danger, she'd been protected by the laws of physics. Possibly the only laws that held any sway on Arcadia's foremost bad ass. No one could break that particular branch of legislation. Well, no one except her, and maybe that ghost she'd seen the previous day. Obviously it didn't obey conventional physics either.

"Back to the task at hand." Chloe said gesturing at the firing range.

Victoria grasped the gun with both hands this time, raised it, looked directly down the sights, and missed the bottle by a couple of inches.

"That's actually not bad Victoria. If you were shooting at a person instead of a bottle at that distance you'd have easily hit them."

Victoria didn't care about sympathetic comments. She wanted to win. Her next shot was perfectly lined up horizontally but too high. She huffed in frustration.

"You're very close," Chloe whispered in a slightly suggestive tone, while slipping behind her. "Here let me help you."

Victoria felt Chloe's body gently press against her back, as she cupped her hands with her own and slightly adjusted her aim. Victoria tensed for a moment at the sudden contact, then found herself relaxing; there was no point fighting someone like Chloe, but she'd started to learn that surrender had it's own rewards. She found herself leaning back slightly to maximise them. Taking a slow breath, she marvelled at how, thanks to sharing those shower supplies, they more or less had the same scent.

"That's good, you were far too tense before. It was making your hands shake slightly. Don't go too limp though, you need a strong enough grip to keep the gun under control and aimed."
No wonder Chloe was so good at shooting then, Victoria thought. She had a perfect grip, one that made you melt in her hands.

"Down a touch more. Yes, there."

Chloe's voice made Victoria feel slightly numb. A smile finally graced her face as the bottle shattered.

"I've lost count of how many times I've said that in the bedroom." Chloe whispered directly into Victoria's ear.

Needless to say, Victoria's shot at the next bottle was a clean miss.

"We were moving furniture at the time." She clarified, to both her amusement and Victoria's annoyance. "And we had to put the dresser down gently. Anyway that's six rounds, time to reload."

Victoria handed over the pistol, a despondent look on her face. "Come on Tori, getting a hit and a couple of very close misses against bottles that small is way better than most people do shooting for the first time."

Of course, Chloe neglected to mention she'd gotten four out of six hits during her first attempt at shooting, and that was using her admittedly idiotic one handed technique, completely ignoring step dork's instructions to aim the gun in a regulation manner.

Victoria watched as Chloe swung out the cylinder and ejected the spent bullet casings into a bag before reloading. She seemed to be going the extra mile to hide their shooting activities. Chloe herself felt she might have been acting pedantically, but the last thing she wanted was someone discovering casings in the same calibre as David's gun, the same day as David reported it stolen, and matching that up with the three of them having been sighted in the junk yard.

Several reloads later, and Victoria actually managed to hit all six bottles without missing, no mean feat for someone who'd never actually fired a gun up until then.

"Nice Tori! Want a real challenge?"

Glass shards, the result of Victoria's ever improving marksmanship, crunched under Chloe's combat boots as she walked back to the wooden plank and put up a single bottle.

"That's it? Victoria asked. Do I step back further away or-"

"Nope. You've just got to start with your gun lowered, and hit it within four seconds."

A time constraint. Still four seconds sounded fairly easy.

"I want you to imagine it's that Grey woman lining you up with her own gun, and if you don't land a round fast, you're dead."

And suddenly it became so much more difficult. She found herself almost overwhelmed with images of that horrible lady popping up out of nowhere, physically at least a match for Chloe but without any sense of morality, hesitation or remorse. Ever so politely explaining that she was going to kill her. That she should try not to get her blood everywhere because it would be an awful mess to clean up.

Victoria's finger desperately squeezed the trigger over and over again as fast as she could. She fired the first three shots in rapid succession, and hit nothing. She'd actually still been bringing the gun up
when she fired the first round, which might have been a smart move against a full sized person – the chance to hit them in the leg might make them collapse and stop them from lining you up. Against the small bottle it was a waste of ammunition. How much longer did she have? A second, maybe two? She'd have almost said that time had slowed down, but she actually knew how that felt thanks to Max. There was a lot more eerie red lighting for one thing. She decided she'd just line the last shot up properly, and not bother about the time limit. She'd probably already blown the chance to pass Chloe's test. The least she could do was console herself by blowing away the damn bottle.

The sound of shattering glass brought her that brief moment of comfort. Then Chloe was carefully taking the gun from her, and "safely" pocketing it. Then grabbing her and hoisting her up into the air cheering.

"I knew you were a bad ass Tori. You got it in three and a half seconds. Though if you'd done that whole Zen aiming thing from the start that you seemed to at the end, you'd have probably hit it in one and a half, including the time it took you to bring the gun up!"

Figuratively overwhelmed by Chloe's praise, and rather more literally overwhelmed by the display of raw strength, Victoria said the first thing that came into her head.

"Careful, do you know how much this fucking outfit costs?"

Needless to say, she still had a way to go when facing sudden physical displays of affection.

Next it was Max's turn. She felt apprehensive, she hated guns, and she still had that horrible fear of the bullets turning against her. Flying straight back at herself or Chloe or Victoria. Her anxiety showed on her face as clearly as her freckles.

"Max. This'll be fine." Chloe said, smiling reassuringly. "We'll just follow the rules of gun safety, and nothing bad will happen. You remember the rules right? You were really insistent about them in one of the letters you sent me. Stepdork was a bit shocked when I quoted them to his hick ass, when he hesitated over teaching me to shoot."

"Of course." Max quickly replied, her mind spinning. She'd heard this before, Chloe mention that they'd had some communication over the five years she'd been in Seattle. The only problem was, she'd never sent any. She'd been too shy, too caught up in William's death, too anything. It was a huge regret, Chloe must have been going through far worse than she was, and she'd been so caught up in her own neuroses that she hadn't been there for her best friend. She'd sulked in the corner, while a state away, Chloe went through practically enough emotional trauma to become batman. She took another look at Chloe, lean yet bristling with muscle, and as far as Max knew, able to beat the shit out of anything. She corrected herself: Chloe actually was a working class female batman, or at least as close to that as someone could reasonably get. An anxious look on her face belied the worry she felt for her.

"I know it's stupid, but do you mind going through those gun rules again. Having the gun in my hand – it just makes me feel a little paranoid."

"No problem Max", Chloe smiled. "Treat the gun like it's loaded, even if you think you've fired every round; always point it in a safe direction, not at a person. Except Nathan Prescott, but he isn't really a person. And keep your finger out of the trigger guard until you're ready to shoot."

That didn't seem so hard. She took the gun from Chloe. It felt heavy and awkward in her hands. She didn't even know how she was supposed to grip it.

"Do you mind showing me how to hold it, like you did for Tori. Don't you dare lift me though, my
Chloe shuddered. "Like she'd done for Tori". Being completely honest with herself, she'd kind of ended up holding "Tori" a little too closely. She couldn't help it. The way Victoria would initially act indignant and in charge, then go all limp the moment she got her arms round her was irresistible. Sort of like a kitten being lifted by the scruff of its neck. But with Max, something entirely different happened.

"Come on Chloe," Max's expression seemed to plead, "I'm counting on you here."

What choice did the Captain have when their First Mate was in trouble?

Chloe moved in behind Max, in much the same way as she had with Victoria. Just a little more hesitant, and more careful. She had to bend her knees slightly to match Max's height, and perhaps that slight physical discomfort was translating into something mental as well. She couldn't think of any other reason she'd suddenly lose her nerve. Well, except that it was Max.

"So the dominant hand directly holds the grip and pulls the trigger when you're ready to shoot." Chloe said, carefully wrapping Max's hand around the gun. And desperately trying not to think of how soft Max's skin was as her hand traced over it.

It was a slightly unusual situation for Chloe, to grab Max's hand in this manner. Usually, it had been Max who initiated the grabbing. Most recently to offer her comfort, though in the past it had been more on occasions where Chloe had done something incredibly stupid and Max needed to drag her away quickly, lest they be caught. Quite a lot of the time, in other words. That led her to associate Max's grasp with safety, and she'd always accept it. Always follow where it took her. "And the other hand wraps around over the top of your first hand." She concluded, trying to keep the nervousness out of her voice.

A single gunshot rang out and Victoria turned her nose up in annoyance. Max hit her bottle on the first attempt.

"Looks like we're dealing with a bad ass here." Chloe pronounced, but proudly rather than with the sarcasm usually associated with the statement. Max turned her head down and blushed a little, while Victoria fumed silently. Of course Max just had to fluke a direct hit on her first attempt and show her up. Max had to show her up at everything. Photography, shooting, and having wonderful voluminous lips. Of course, Victoria was conveniently ignoring the fact that she actually had better grades than Max in all her subjects, including photography, and that Max could list at least as many body parts of Victoria's that she was envious of as well.

More than that, Victoria found herself feeling slightly envious at how Chloe had used the term 'bad ass' to describe Max. That's how Chloe obnoxiously kept describing her, both last night and this morning! She didn't like the idea of her obnoxiously describing others in the same way. Even if Max, with actual superpowers and the will to use them to save everyone, was most definitely a bad ass in her estimation. Not that she could ever tell her that.

Max gave her usual shy, 'I'm undeserving of the praise, honestly' smile, and then nursed a mild headache when Victoria and Chloe weren't looking. The truth was she had actually rewound until she scored a hit. Four times in total. As she'd said earlier, she was still a bit miffed about Tori. It was petty, and probably an abuse of her power. Then there was the headache. But it was completely worth it, just to see that beautiful frown spread across Victoria's beautiful face.

Then suddenly the headache became worse a thousand-fold, and she felt like she'd been stripped bare and dropped in a slurry of ice. Images of that enormous tornado bore into her skull, interspersed
with what she assumed was still reality, Victoria pointing at something, shouting. She couldn't make out the words. The noise from the tornado was too loud. Craning her head in the direction Victoria desperately seemed to be gesturing toward, Max saw a pair of animal eyes inches away, boring into her with raw hatred. It was the same semi-transparent deer that had attacked them yesterday. The world seemed to explode in a flash of white, and Max fell into darkness.

Max came to feeling surprisingly safe, considering she'd been knocked out by a ghost, and for the second time in as many days. Perhaps the gentle caress of a hand on her forehead had something to do with that. She opened a pair of groggy eyes and found herself looking up at a roughly constructed cinder block room. It was littered with keepsakes. Little things, some of which were in character with Chloe, like a dart board and pilfered street signs, and the graffiti that covered its walls. Others seemed far too classically feminine: make-up compacts containing eye-shadow and blusher. On one wall was a drawing of a beautiful long haired girl with an impressively sized ass. On another was the tally of dart games won by 'Chloe' versus 'Rachel'. Strangely enough, Chloe Price, with her ridiculously good coordination and instincts, was being badly beaten. Victoria was pacing around, large camera bag still on her shoulder, pretending to be engrossed in inspecting the room's content and not deeply concerned with the state of Max's being. She looked away indignantly when their eyes met, then back to her when Max was focusing on something else. Then there was Chloe. She was looking down at her, cradling Max's head in her lap, and enormously relieved that she'd regained consciousness. She looked, well, actually awful. Her face was pale and she somehow seemed exhausted. Max imagined she didn't look much better herself. In that instant none of that mattered though; when Max turned to look straight back at Chloe, and their eyes met, both of them felt perfect.

"You're in my secret place", she smiled giddily, "or pretty close to it."

Max felt a little too drowsy to be bothered elbowing Chloe this time. She settled for giving her a mildly reproachful glance, knowing that Chloe and her could read each others facial expressions well enough to figure it out.

"Dude, I mean the hideout Rachel and I used to hang out in. Fuck. What is it with you two."

"The ability to detect transparent, and frankly childish innuendo?" Victoria suggested.

"What happened?" Max asked, trying to stand. She was dizzy, but managed to get upright unaided. In hindsight, she felt it might have been better to keep her head in Chloe's lap a while longer, though she wasn't completely sure those feelings related to her being dizzy. Victoria rushed over, acutely aware of the dangers of suddenly trying to stand when feeling out of it.

"Chloe shoved her hand through the ghost." She explained, trying to look casually indifferent to Max's brave attempt at staying vertical, while also remaining ready to catch her at an instant's notice should she fall. "It went completely crazy, like it had been struck with a hot branding iron, jumped about face and ran for the hills."

"You punched out a ghost?" Max asked, wondering if she was still out cold and dreaming.

"Well it is consistent with her character." Victoria scoffed.

"It wasn't that pleasant an experience for me either. Kind of like getting tasered, only combined with cold water shock and getting your ribcage kicked in."

No wonder Chloe looked awful. That sounded like a cocktail for cardiac arrest. And she must have carried her all the way back to her hideout too, in spite of having just gone through that. The thought
of it, of just how much Chloe seemed prepared to go through and do for her, made Max swoon a little. Which in turn made Victoria jump forward and grab her, believing she was about to fall.

"Of course Chloe would know what it was like being tasered." A new voice began. Rough and deeply toned.

Chloe immediately jumped to her feet, eyeing up the situation. The exits to the room, the fact that the revolver was still lying on the table next to one of Rachel's old make-up compacts.

"Chloe gets up to all kinds of trouble, from run-ins with the police, to taking her friends out in the middle of nowhere to play with guns, to owing people money." The voice continued. Max craned her head, noticing a tall figure stepping into view at the room's main entrance. It was a man, clad in a leather jacket, with obviously strong arms concealed beneath it. Short blonde hair was scruffy and uncombed, with tattoos visible on his neck. He also seemed to consider wearing a cut-throat razor as a necklace to be the height of men's fashion. A particularly strange choice considering he wasn't completely clean-shaven, instead sporting a goatee and moustache. Though to be fair he still needed to tidy up the sides of his face. Or perhaps he had another use for the blade?

"How long have I been waiting with no repayments, Chloe?" He demanded.

"Six months Frank." Chloe replied flatly, trying to conceal her shock at his sudden unannounced arrival. Perhaps Step Dork had been right about her turning down her music. If she had better hearing, she might have noticed Frank sneaking up on them. Now Arcadia Bay's resident drug dealer was sharing the same small room as Chloe and her friends. A room that was supposed to belong only to herself and to Rachel.

"Yes, six months. And I'm getting tired of waiting. You think I don't need the money myself? You think all the money I charge goes straight into my pocket, that I don't have to pay other people? Well, they've started to ask me, so I need to ask you. Where's the fucking money?"

"How much are we talking about?" Victoria suddenly asked, barging into the conversation.

"Three grand. In cash."

"I'll give you one in cash by the end of today, if you drop the rest." She said flatly.

"Oh, aren't you the little negotiator. No dice, Miss Fancy Cat."

"You don't have a very good grasp of business, do you?" Victoria crowed dismissively. "You agreed to a bad loan. It's doubtful Chloe will ever pay it off. You'd be much better off taking the guaranteed payment of a lesser amount, and putting the time you'd otherwise spend chasing Chloe into other moneymaking enterprises."

"Other moneymaking enterprises." Frank scoffed. "It's called selling drugs. You know that's what I do, Fancy Cat. You and your rich Vortex friends buy a ton of them from me. For which I am rather grateful. And I'm sure your offer makes perfect business sense to someone like yourself, who's used to fancy above board deals. See the only problem is this: I forgive a debt, word gets around that people can get away without paying me. Then everyone starts reneging. It's bad for fucking business, so I'm going to have to insist on a full payment."

Frank had gotten a little too close to Victoria and the still dazed Max, and Chloe didn't like it. She knew he always carried a blade on him, the blinding gleam of its edge etched in her mind as he'd threatened to etch her face, her eye with it. Chloe wasn't going to let that happen again, not to herself and definitely not to someone dear to her.
"Stay away from them, man." Chloe shouted, trying to ignore the lethargy in her arm she'd punched the ghost with, interspersing herself and pushing the other two back out of harm's way.

"Ahh here we go. 'The Price' in all her faux dangerous posturing. You're probably wondering why she isn't fully living up to her reputation right now. Just grabbing me and throwing me head-first through a window? Could it be because she knows she can't beat me, because I taught her every fucking thing she knows about fighting?"

Chloe grit her teeth. That was true to a point. Frank had probably taught her a third of what she knew about fighting. They actually used to be 'almost friends' before they had a falling out over the issue of 'loan repayments'. Back then, he'd showed her some of the dirtier, nastier things that David had tried to exclude from teaching her, as well as things you only really learnt in bare-knuckled street fights. Rumour was he'd actually beaten people to death with his bare hands. He was also stronger than her, by virtue of sheer size, and she was still woozy from her encounter with that ghost thing. She might still have a chance at beating him hand-to-hand, but she wasn't confident. And of course there was no hand-to-hand against Frank. He always had his blade.

She looked around the hideout. There was little space to move around. Normally the best strategy in dealing with a knife armed assailant was to control the distance between you and them. You were perfectly safe so long as you kept out of range. Especially if you had a nine millimeter semi-automatic on you. With the small room littered with artefacts from Chloe and Rachel's past, and four people, that became almost impossible, making the knife all the more deadly. She could always leg it, of course, she could probably outright escape him, and both her and Victoria could definitely keep away from him long enough to get the gun out. The problem was Max: she was still semi-out of it. There was a chance Frank would turn on her or use her as a hostage, and Chloe couldn't risk that. She'd never abandon Max.

Chloe looked desperately for the revolver. It had been laying on the table next to Max. It wasn't there now. Either Victoria or Max had to have grabbed it. Good, the last thing she wanted was Frank getting hold of the gun, or his seeing it provoking a desperate scramble for the weapon between the four of them. Of course, she still had Nathan's gun, but if she tried to pull it, Frank would go for her automatically, and try to close the distance before she could bring it to bear. It'd be him or her in a deadly struggle. To some extent that might actually eliminate some of Frank's advantages, as he'd have to forgo any finesses and technique with the knife and focus on either landing a crippling blow in the first strike, or getting into a grapple and seizing Chloe's gun hand. Anything else would give Chloe the chance to pull the gun and end things instantly.

Then suddenly, Chloe's very rational train of thought was short circuited. Chloe saw the bracelet Frank was wearing. One of Rachel Amber's hand-made bracelets.

"That's Rachel's Bracelet! Where the fuck did you get that bracelet?!!"

Now it was Frank's turn to feel a little unnerved. Chloe in this state was impulsive enough to just go for it, and wasn't undeserving of her reputation. Worse, he'd heard gunshots on the way in. He knew at least one of the three had to have a gun. If it was Chloe, then he'd really have to try to kill her. If she drew and had time to bring the gun up, he'd be dead. She was far too good a shot. It wasn't clear he'd be able to get her before she got the gun out either. They were close, because of Chloe jumping in front to protect Max and Victoria. Unlike last time though, Chloe knew what to expect and was keeping herself guarded, and between him and the other girls. There'd be no surprising her with the knife this time or using one of the weaker ones as leverage. Worse, if one of the others had a gun, and he went for Chloe, they'd have all the time in the world to gun him down.

In hindsight he'd been ridiculously stupid, charging in to threaten three people when they were
potentially all armed, and one was arguably the most dangerous woman in town. Well, second most dangerous. There was that crazy bitch who did the Prescott's dirty work.

He curled his left hand into a fist, feeling the fleshy stump where his little finger used to be, feeling it uselessly trying to follow his three remaining fingers, and relived the agony that crazy woman inflicted on him. What he'd brought on himself really. He should have known not to mess with the Prescotts, but Frank had always been susceptible to his rage overcoming good sense. He looked down at Rachel's bracelet then the stump of his little finger. That rage had cost him a lot already. Perhaps it was about to cost him even more. Perhaps it was about to bring him and Rachel back together.

Then someone flinched and it all happened in an instant. There was an understated snap as Frank's switch-blade extended in the blink of an eye. He rushed Chloe. Chloe pulled the semi-automatic from the back of her trousers. She wasn't quite fast enough. Frank had initially lined up her midsection, but switched the attack to a diagonal thrust at her carotid artery at the last instant. Chloe desperately deflected the blow with her right arm, and the knife bit deep, carving into her jacket and the flesh beneath it. Then, twisting the embedded blade into a slashing motion, he tore a vicious wound in Chloe's arm. Frank brought the knife back in a fluid motion for another attack, but at the range he'd been forced to charge into, Chloe managed to catch his arm mid-slash.

Victoria brought her revolver up. Praying Chloe wasn't going to stray into her sights, she squeezed the trigger. There was a metallic click as the hammer fell. They'd fired all six rounds practising, and been too distracted with Max fainting to reload! Now Chloe was seconds from death. Frank had got too close and grabbed hold of her gun arm, preventing her from bringing the gun up at him. Chloe returned the favour, desperately clinging to his knife arm. But she'd been weakened by that damn ghost, and Frank had badly cut into the arm she was trying to fend him off with. It seemed there was no way she could keep the knife at bay. No way she could bring the gun up at him either. This had been a bad fight from the start. Getting surprised by Frank and pulled into a knife fight while she was weakened, and in a cramped space where she couldn't easily dodge or step out of range while she brought her gun to bear. Now she was moments away from being stabbed to death, and Frank turning his attention, his knife on Max and Victoria.

Victoria desperately tried to intervene. Hoping her belt-factory Taekwondo lessons were good for something, she launched a kick right at Frank's knee joint. There was a decidedly unhealthy sounding click on impact, and Frank stumbled back a step. In a perfect world, Frank's entire weight would have been on the target leg, bracing it such that a strong kick was almost certain to destroy the joint. However it seemed Frank had the majority of his weight on the other foot at the time, so Victoria's target had some range of motion left in it, reducing a crippling blow to something that just hurt like fuck and caused a momentary stumble. A stumble which resulted in Frank losing control of Chloe's left hand.

Chloe immediately shot him in the foot. Twice. Then another two times in the leg. He winced in pain, and stumbled backward, leaving a bloody streak, a piece of his shoe and one of his toes behind. As a final indignity, Chloe kicked the table into his 'good' leg, sending several of the last artefacts of Rachel's existence flying around the room. Thrown off balance again, Frank transferred his weight back to the injured leg and immediately collapsed, howling in agony.

Max gasped in horror at the violence in front of her, any lingering lethargy from her previous attack banished by a shot of adrenaline from what she'd just witnessed, and the aftermath she was witnessing now: Chloe breathing hard laboured breaths. Rivers of scarlet flowing down her arm from that horrid gaping wound and dribbling everywhere, while Victoria tried to staunch the bleeding by applying pressure to the wound. Frank on the ground, moaning. His face white with pain. Blood pooling beneath his foot and leg. The bloody stump of a toe protruding from a hole shot in his shoe.
And the rest of the toe, semi pulverised, lying detached next to him.

She couldn't accept this reality, so she brought up her hand and wiped it from existence. Time began to flow backward, but she realised quickly that something was very wrong. The headaches started far too early. She'd barely rewound time a minute, around the time she'd woken up, and she couldn't carry on. Perhaps she had to consciously experience a time in order to rewind over it. Or perhaps that ghost had crippled her powers.

She looked around. Chloe and Victoria were back to their relaxed positions in the hideout, and Chloe's arm was no longer terribly wounded. They weren't looking entirely relaxed though. Max suddenly realised that from their perspective, she must have teleported out of Chloe's lap and materialised right by the exit. She wasted no time, desperately reaching for the revolver and fumbling the cylinder with shaking hands, intent on reloading it, on being ready for Frank. She'd just seen her Chloe stabbed, and there was no way she was going to let them end up in a position where that could happen a second time.

"Chloe! Frank's going to show up in just over a minute." She called out, her pitch unsteady. "There's a big fight. You get stabbed and he gets shot."

"Frank Bowers the dealer?" Victoria asked.

"He's kind-of pissed because I owe him three grand." Chloe replied, drawing the semiautomatic, trying to remain cool while the memory of his knife held an inch from her eye came back to her.

"Hurry, we need to-"

"Use this time to escape before he gets here, instead of provoking a confrontation where someone might end up dead?" Victoria suggested.

Max froze, feeling the smooth wood of the revolver's grip in her hand. What exactly had she been planning to do? Point a gun at Frank the moment he showed up, and punch a hole through him if he wouldn't back down? She wondered how much extra credit Victoria would have gotten if she'd taken a shot of her now. Seeing Chloe, her Chloe, hurt had put her in such a state that she'd have done almost anything. Her thoughts lingered on yesterday, where she remembered Chloe trying a similar gambit on Nathan. He'd lashed out and been shot dead as a result. Her power gave her a chance to fix that. Now she'd almost risked making the same mistake herself.

"Yeah, fucking stupid idea." She conceded.

Chloe tucked her pistol back in her jeans. Her warm arm encircled Max and guided her to the main entrance of her hideout's main entrance. "Tori's right. We should just bail instead of risking a fight." She smiled. "Though the idea you'd pull a gun on someone to protect me? Hellamazaballs. Max, it makes me feel things it shouldn't."

"He's coming from the junkyard side." Max replied helpfully, causing Chloe to immediately pivot them both about face.

There was a second exit to Chloe's hideout. It led almost directly to a railway line, used primarily to transport lumber from plantation forests north of Arcadia Bay, to a mill south. In the past, trains had stopped in Arcadia Bay as well. Now they shot straight past it, another sign of "progress". The popularisation of the automobile coupled with local economic decline meant there was no longer enough demand to warrant a passenger service.

"Let's book." Chloe insisted, as though she'd always intended to use the railway side exit. Max
followed, and Victoria brought up the rear, pausing for a moment to glare at a disturbingly out of place bit of writing, sitting on a shelf in the corner. Someone with particularly bad handwriting had scribbled "I WANT TO DIE" in block capitals on a sheet of paper.

"Come on Tori! We can follow the track along the edge of the junkyard, then circle back around back to my truck."

"Unless he's slashed the tyres." Max grumbled. With the way things were going so far today, she felt something else was bound to go wrong.

"That'd be incredibly stupid of him." Victoria answered, deciding to pocket the sheet before leaving.

"Depriving Chloe of her transport makes it even less likely she'd find a means to repay him. On the other hand we've established Frank has awful business sense."

"If that fucker does that I'm hot-wiring his RV and taking it." Chloe snarled as the trio broke into a dash parallel with the railway lines.

They set an unsteady pace. Chloe leading with effortless strides, though a little uncomfortable in the upper body. Victoria, weighed down by her oversized camera bag, huffed a little but was determined to keep up. She managed to stay close enough to Chloe to hear a mutter of "Stupid lack of support. Fuck you, boobs." Clearly, no matter how "hella pert and perky" you were, proper fitting undergarments were desirable when running for your life. Max, meanwhile, was lagging behind with an awkward waddle. She really wasn't the type for physical exertion.

Chloe looked back. They'd put a good distance between themselves and her hideout, and there was no sign of Frank pursuing – he was probably still sneaking up on Chloe's hideout, hoping to catch them unawares. Arcadia Bay's water tower lay up ahead, another relic older than most of the wrecks in the adjacent junkyard. Unlike them, it was still maintained and in use, pressurising the local water supply. It was another sign of the stagnant nature of the town: there had been little need to upgrade the utilities in decades.

A moment later Max was keeling over, grasping at her head as the temperature seemed to plummet. Looking up, dread overcame her as she saw the hooves of that demonic animal, back to torment them again. It hovered an inch from the ground, tiny icicles forming on the gravel beneath them. Their eyes met, and she felt like she'd been run through by a lance of pure cold. Then, her sight was gone. Replaced with visions of the tornado due on Friday; rubble and bodies and the deafening wind.

Without a second thought, Chloe rushed across the tracks to Max's aid. There was a decidedly ominous metallic clank, and she fell flat on her face. Her foot had been snagged in something. She looked back at it. By the most awful stroke of luck imaginable, the automated points had switched the moment Chloe had stepped onto the branching track, and her boot had been caught in the mechanism, wedged tight between the point blade and fixed portions of the track.

"Chloe are you-" Victoria began to ask.

"I'm fine", Chloe replied nursing her slightly grazed forearms. "Help Max".

Easier said than done. Victoria thought. How did you stop a fucking ghost? The first time it had been startled by noise. A loose stone landing behind it making it turn tail, just like a real animal. Chloe shoving her hand through it seemed to have caused more of a significant effect though, making it writhe in agony before retreating. The only problem with that approach was that it seemed to be mutual, Chloe having been exposed to an agony apparently resembling the fusion of freezing cold
and electrocution. There seemed no choice though. Victoria grit her teeth and started toward the ghost, but the sound of loose gravel underfoot drew the thing's attention before she could get within arm's length. Its gaze turned on her and she crumpled. A familiar cold pain began creeping from her extremities, in spite of the sun almost being at its zenith. In a last, desperate attempt, she threw a loose bit of gravel at the ghost, hoping to scare it off again. It glared contemptuously at the point of impact, and in response the creeping pain turned to agony. It was a feeling so cold that it burned, but from inside her, like her bones had been dipped in liquid nitrogen.

There was a white flash from the corner of her eye. The grip of cold death lifted almost instantly, and the ghost deer turned tail once more, rushing toward the wilderness. Victoria cast her head around, searching for her saviour. She saw nothing whatsoever. She did feel something though, something probably unrelated to her rescue. A slight vibration ran along the tracks, soon joined by a faint roar from the distance. It sounded suspiciously like a rapidly approaching train, and both Max and Chloe were stuck on the track. Max unconscious, and Chloe with her foot jammed in the points.

Victoria seized hold of the manual lever for the points, and attempted to throw it, to release Chloe's foot. It was no use: the automatic switcher steadfastly resisted any attempt to move the lever.

"Get Max!" Chloe desperately yelled, trying to yank her foot loose to no effect.

Victoria rushed to Max. She seemed to be just starting to come around. She took hold of her in the bridal carry Chloe had used, and nearly threw her back out. "Lift with your legs Tori", she told herself, marvelling at how Chloe managed to carry Max (and her) so effortlessly.

"Victoria?" Max asked confused, still more than a little out of it. "I wish you were as nice as you smell."

"We can't all be Max Caulfield." She replied. "Chloe's trapped on the train track. Use your power."

Max stretched out her arm. Again, something was wrong. She brought time back about a minute, then the headaches returned, but an order of magnitude worse than anything she'd had before. Then blood began to ooze from her nose and run down her face, and she felt ten times worse again.

"That ghost! It must have done something to my powers. I can't rewind far enough!"

Victoria looked around, desperate for something, anything, to help them. She spied a small building on the hill to the side of the tracks, occasionally used by people inspecting the water tower. Perhaps it had some tools to extricate Chloe?

"Victoria I think I can walk." Max said, still in the arms of an increasingly red-faced Victoria.

Just as well, Victoria's back was about to give out. They both rushed to the building. Unfortunately it was locked, and whomever last used it was smart enough not to leave a convenient item around to facilitate a break-in. At that moment, Max saw Victoria's rather expensive looking camera bag still across her shoulder, weighing her down with all that pricey equipment, and a slightly devious smile spread across the smaller girl's face.

"Victoria I think I can walk." Max said, still in the arms of an increasingly red-faced Victoria.

The look of pain and shock Victoria displayed as Max took her bag, laden with the most expensive photography equipment Victoria could find, all those fragile precision lenses, and used them as a blunt instrument to smash a window was truly beautiful. Of course, Max wasn't going to be that cruel. Not permanently anyway. Besides, the train was getting too close, she needed to rewind again to give them the time to save Chloe. Climbing through the now broken window, she rewound time to before the window had been broken and as far as she could before then, which turned out to be another thirty seconds. A burning pain erupted in her skull, and her arm felt different: flat, weak and
normal. Stretching her hand out confirmed her powers had completely forsaken her. Perhaps they'd return in time, but for now she was regular Max Caulfield.

For once legitimately able to claim a lack of time to spare, Max rushed over and unbolted the door. She might have normally enjoyed the look of awed terror on Victoria’s face, incompletely masked behind her façade of superior indifference, as Max displayed another feat of apparent teleportation. At that instant though, she was completely focused on saving Chloe.

"I don't think I can rewind again Tori", Max groaned, trying desperately to keep going in spite of the pain. "We have to help Chloe. Now."

The pair desperately ferreted around the draws in the office, grabbing every loose tool that might help: Max returned armed with wire cutters and a crowbar, hoping to somehow disable the automatic points. Victoria came back carrying an axe, and headed straight for Chloe. A look of desperation clung to her face.

"Max's powers aren't working. She can't reverse time to before your foot gets caught."

A pause held for just a second. A complete silence but for the rumble of the oncoming train.

"I thought, maybe, if we couldn't, I mean if there was no other way then-"

There was another moment of silence as Chloe looked at the slightly rusty axe in Victoria's hand, then at her foot. She looked as terrified as she had when Nathan had got the jump on her with his pistol. It felt wrong. Since they'd intervened in the girl's rest room, Chloe had been their near-invincible champion. She shouldn't be defeated by anything, let alone a piece of transport infrastructure.

"I'll leave it here as a last resort then." Victoria said, realising both their hands were shaking. Praying there was some other option, Victoria rushed to see if she could assist Max. She'd levered the points' automatic control box open with her crowbar. She and Victoria peered inside in desperation. This shouldn't be that difficult. If it was like the movies, there'd be three or less wires, and everyone knew you always cut the red one! Instead they found a printed circuit board containing a chip and the supporting electronic components, attached to a literal spaghetti of wires. She reflected that reality was sometimes annoyingly complicated. Still if they knocked out power to the control board, perhaps the manual points lever would unlock?

Max chanced cutting the thickest wire, since it was red, like in the movies. She gasped and dropped the wire cutters, feeling a flash of heat as sparks flew and the content of the box started smouldering. It seemed she was infinitely fortunate the wire cutters had an insulating handle.

"In hindsight it may have been best to avoid the thicker wires." Victoria needlessly stated. "Resistance is inversely proportional to wire area, so the thick wires are almost certainly carrying large currents. That was probably the circuit that provides power to the signal lights or provides the actual power to the track switcher."

Victoria's speculation seemed to be right. The signal's traffic light had been extinguished. Unfortunately, the manual lever was still resolutely locked in place.

The roar of the train was now almost deafening. Its engineer had noticed there was some poor fool on the tracks. Screams of warning sounded from the train's horn, while a screech rang out from the train wheels as the engineer desperately applied the brake. It was of little use. When each carriage averaged in the tens of tons without cargo, and the train was loaded to capacity with logs for the local
saw mill, stopping suddenly was physically impossible. Virtually anything caught in front of a train still at speed would end up pulverised. It seemed Chloe had been wrong when speaking with Kate, there were some problems she couldn't handle with her fists. Though with a total mass of several thousand tons, Chloe was a little out of her weight class.

Suddenly, Max spied a wooden reel wrapped with a spool of thick metal cable. It was sitting atop a small hill near the shack Max had just looted, conveniently in exactly the right position to fall on the points lever if someone were to remove the small wooden wedges preventing it from rolling, and gave it a shove. Relief overcame her. Something that heavy might have a chance of breaking the automated mechanism and throwing the points. She and Victoria removed the wedges, then with a supreme effort, they shoved the reel, sending it careering down the hill. It hit the lever with a mighty crack. Max looked to the track. It hadn't switched. On the other hand the lever, apparently made of rather old and partially rotted wood, had snapped clean in two.

Collision was only seconds away now. Victoria looked away, not wanting to see the inevitable. Max raised her hand, but her powers were still completely out of action. She turned to Victoria, and the look she gave her would haunt Blackwell's ex-queen bee forever. It was a desperate plea that said "you're one of the smartest people in the school Tori. You keep telling everyone as much. Why can't you do something, figure something out." Then they heard the train blast past them in a cacophony of noise, over which there was an abruptly terminated scream of 'hella fuck this!'

They both gingerly looked back toward place Chloe had been standing moments earlier, braced to see some grim smear of blood and viscera and broken limbs. For what seemed like eternity, the train obscured their vision, blowing passed them with screeching brakes and blaring horn. Finally it was gone and they saw her. Alive and decidedly un-pulverised. She'd been standing on the far side of the track the whole time, blocked from view by the train.

Max rejoiced, immediately rushing to her. Victoria was about to follow suit in a marginally more dignified manner, until she noticed Chloe seemed to be hopping on one foot. Holding that axe Victoria had left 'as a last resort' in one hand. And her combat boot in another. There was a pained, shocked look on Chloe's face too. Victoria quickly looked away as her stomach tied itself in a knot. She felt her eyes begin to water as she heard Max's soft voice tenderly address her oldest friend. Reassuring her that it was all over, that she'd escaped the train and everything would be fine. Everyone knew 'The Price' was a bit crazy, but to actually-

"Wowser Chloe, you've got your toenails painted the same colour as your fingernails."

Now that sounded like an incredibly tasteless observation to make to someone who'd had to amputate her own foot with a rusty hand axe. Just for an instant, Victoria's brain conjured an image of Max scooping the severed foot out of the boot, holding the gory thing up to Chloe's hand to compare nail polish.

Cursing her imagination, Victoria willed herself to look up and saw Chloe hopping on one foot, looking completely out of it, pale and bewildered. Max was by her side, helping her keep her balance, running her hand down the larger girl's back, reassuring her with a gentle caress. Victoria sighed in relief as she looked down at Chloe's feet: she really did have blue nail polish on her toenails. And said toenails, along with the rest of her foot, were still very much attached to her leg.

"At the last minute I realised I could try unlacing my boot and slipping my foot out." Chloe explained. There was none of her usual enthusiasm, her boundless energy. It was a stark contrast to the hella bad ass front she normally rocked; she didn't even sport a well-deserved cheeky smile, in spite of having outsmarted death at the last moment. It wasn't hard to empathise with her though. Getting trapped on a railway track and having to watch helplessly as a train rumbles toward her from
the distance; watching as her friends flail about trying to save her; watching them fail miserably. The point that had really hurt though was seeing them turn their heads away when they ran out of time. Not because of the feeling of abandonment, but the relief that they wouldn't see what was about to happen to her. And the realisation that came with that, of what was about to happen to her.

Max brought her free hand up to cradle her own head, still ringing from the ghost attacks. But as vicious as those were, at least they'd been over in seconds, and the drama with the train which followed left Max and Victoria little time to dwell on things. Chloe had been stuck on the track for a couple of minutes, with nothing to do but stand there thinking about her imminent demise. Her means of escape sounded stupidly simplistic, though it seemed to make sense. The points couldn't have actually been holding her that tightly, otherwise her foot would have been outright crushed.

"Once my foot was out of the boot-" Chloe continued

"Your boot could squeeze enough that you could just yank it free and save it too." Max finished for her.

Something still bothered Victoria though, a point she didn't hesitate to give voice to.

"Why the fuck are you hopping!?"

Chloe shrugged.

"There's a bunch of loose gravel and thistles on the ground and I think I got a prickle in my foot. It's kind of painful. Actually, can you hold these, I need to pull it out."

Victoria stood there, frankly a little stunned as Chloe's boot and hand axe were thrust at her, and watched as Chloe awkwardly leaned over to extract something from the sole of her foot. So after all that effort: attempts at disabling the points' electronics, and throwing the switch using an inordinate application of force, even the possibility of sacrificing a limb, and the solution was just to take her boot off? If only every seemingly insurmountable problem had an easy solution like that staring you in the face.

"Wait", Chloe said, the slightest hint of her smile returning. "You didn't think that I'd-"

"D-Don't be stupid. I was just worried you'd stepped on a rusty nail or something." Victoria quickly snapped at them. She looked down for a moment, and tried to pretend her hands weren't still shaking, that there wasn't water in her eyes. She doubted she was fooling anyone, so sighing deeply she decided to change tack. She surrendered to what she really wanted. In her typically imperious manner of course.

"Unbelievable. I obviously need reassuring, so hurry up and violate my personal space, like you've been doing all morning." She commanded.

Max and Chloe exchanged a brief glance, and an instant later Victoria found herself the semi-willing victim of Chloe's strong arms, pulled tight into a three-way embrace along with Max. They relaxed as the warmth from their bodies permeated one another, the feel of gentle arms wrapped around their contrasting forms: muscular and soft, tall and short. Their scents: rose perfume, worn leather and no-frills body soap, became evermore familiar and reassuring. It was a momentary refuge from the reality they'd just faced, along with a reminder that other parts of reality weren't quite so bad as the bit they'd just gone through.

"We should probably get going. In case that ghost comes back again, Frank shows up or something even worse happens." Max said.
It was a good point, but none of them could quite bring themselves to release each other. They compromised, walking down the railway track three abreast; Chloe in the middle, a strong arm wrapped around Max and Victoria as they flanked her.

"Max, remind me what the hell it is people find romantic about railroads?" She sighed, exhausted, but glad to still be alive.

"Kerouac described it as the romance of travel and movement." Max responded. "The sound of the train whistle at night." She extended her free hand up to her shoulder where Chloe's lay, to intermingle her fingers.

"That's some grade-A material Max. You drop that at the right moment in a wistful mysterious tone, act like some tortured artist, and you're practically guaranteed to melt hearts and get some."

"I look up at blue sky of perfect lost purity and feel the warp of wood of old America beneath me." Victoria added, soulfully.

"Now that's just the verbal equivalent of waving your panties under someone's nose Tori, after you've worn them." Chloe replied as her boots tapped a gentle rhythm on successive track sleepers. "Of course travel and movement isn't quite so romantic when it's several thousand tons racing toward you and the whistle is screaming 'get out of the damn way'."

They continued in silence for a while, as their path circumnavigating the junk yard's perimeter finally led them away from the train track and back to Chloe's truck. It was a chance to enjoy the birdsong from the nearby forest, the feel of their arms supporting one another, and the way the cool autumn breeze brushed their cheeks. It left them in no doubt they were still alive, a welcome reminder after they nearly weren't.

"I was actually very close to using that axe." Chloe finally admitted, gripping Max and Victoria a touch more tightly for support. "Fuck. How stupid would that have been? To try cutting off my leg when I could just unlace my boot."

"You figured out another way in the end Chloe, that's more than either of us did. You saved yourself, like a proper hero." Max beamed back, making Chloe blush a little. She found her thoughts on death, the ghosts and the train suddenly diminished, almost banished; it seemed almost impossible for her to remain gloomy with Max next to her, fixing her with that modest smile of hers that could melt glaciers, and whispering that she thought Chloe was a "proper hero".

"And even if you did cut your leg off, it wouldn't have been all bad." Victoria added. "You'd be able to legitimately park in those disabled spaces."

Chapter End Notes

The change in Chloe's footwear to lace-up combat boots turned out to be a critical plot point after all. Surprise.

Chloe's comments about Lara Croft are based on the original life is strange game. At one stage in that, you hear Max recall a moment in her youth with Chloe, where Chloe explains she wants to be Lara Croft. Since that's in the past, she must be referencing old school Lara, since the tomb raider reboot came out in 2013, the same year the game-proper is set.
In the original game, Max's powers start cutting out and she has random visions of the tornado at unfortunate times. No real satisfactory explanation is given for this, and why it only seems to happen on Tuesday (it's slightly implied it may be linked with exhaustion, but it seems more likely to be linked with plot convenience). In this fic, it seems the ghost deer (allegedly either Max's spirit animal or Rachel Amber's spirit animal, or Rachel Amber herself in the original game, they never elaborate) is causing it. And is out to kill them. What could cause someone's own spirit animal to go mad and try to kill them?

It turns out Frank may have given Chloe a tip or two on fighting, explaining how she learned some of the things David refused to teach her. Frank's rumoured to have beaten people to death in the original game, and been involved in a gang running underground dog fights.

I'll admit I found it difficult trying to think of a credible way Frank could appear and pose a threat to the girls. In the original game he's stupid enough to approach them armed only with a knife when he knows they've got a gun, and is saved only because the gun was unloaded at the time (where was my edgy rewind option where Max asks Chloe to reload the gun, dontnod?). In short Frank is a bit of a moron. I tried to play with the circumstances to make him more dangerous here: Max's condition makes Chloe unable to retreat, and having the fight in a tightly enclosed space makes it more difficult to stay out of knife range.

The car bumper in the junkyard really is on the wrong angle for bullets to bounce back at Chloe in the game. They should have glanced off to Chloe's far left.

The line Victoria quotes after Chloe brings up railways being romantic is from Kerouac's "October in the Railroad Earth".

I liked the idea that Chloe should manage to save herself, at least once. In the original game she almost always felt like the victim, completely reliant on Max in so many moments, and then she ultimately put her life in Max's hands.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Readers take care, there's a part near the start of this explaining why Frank can only count to nine on his hands. It's a little dark, since, you know, he used to be able to count to ten.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The soft sensation of hand-woven material was a small comfort to Frank Bowers, as it slipped between the three remaining fingers on his left hand. His plan to confront Chloe in her hideout had been less than successful. As had been his search of the rest of the junk yard. Somehow they must have known he was on to them, all he'd found was an old bracelet of Rachel's, sitting on a small table improvised from a wooden reel. It was a lot like the bracelet Rachel had given him, except smaller. A plastic 'R' letter had been incorporated into it. And inseparably linked with it was another identical bracelet, this one with a 'C'. How appropriate, Chloe's bracelet clung to Rachel as desperately as Chloe had in person. He felt a spike of jealousy as he remembered. Always tugging at her arm when the three of them were hanging out, pulling her away from him. In the end, she seemed to have abandoned both of them. Still, some bonds were not so easily severed, those born out of necessity. Like the one between Chloe and her means of transportation. All he really needed to do was wait by her truck, and catch her when she returned.

There was a buzz from Frank's left jacket pocket. He reached inside and extracted his phone. He felt a sudden shot of pain run through his little finger, the finger he no longer had, as he read the text message, and the identity of its sender.

Two (LIMY PSYCHO): If I might have a moment of your time. I know there is a matter of some petty cash between you and one of the girls that arrived on that truck. You will let them get into their vehicle and carry on their merry way or I will be paying you another visit.

Frank practically jumped about face, half convinced he'd find the Prescott's assassin standing behind him, peering over his shoulder. He saw nothing, the place looked deserted. He looked back at his three fingered hand and noticed it was shaking. He remembered a boast he'd often made. That "he wasn't afraid of anyone except his maker." That woman had shown him how wrong, how hollow those words had been.

He recalled the moment that precipitated all of it. An instant of anger when he'd backhanded Nathan across the face. To be fair, the little bastard had really deserved it. Nathan had shown up high in the middle of the night, ranting incoherently about death, ghosts and some stupid school photography project, and nearly brought the cops down on them. It was blind luck that the pursuing police had been far enough back not to notice Nathan drive down to the beach, and instead continued down the coastal highway. Needless to say Frank was more than slightly put out: if the police had declared him an accomplice to whatever Nathan had gotten up to and used it as grounds to search his RV, his entire inventory would have been discovered.

Even then, Frank had realised pimp-slapping Nathan was a dumb idea; the screw up was one of his most prolific customers. What Frank did next caused more lasting damage though, grabbing the terrified kid by the scruff of the neck and showing him his blade. Telling him "he'd carve a chunk out
of him and let his dog eat it" if this ever happened again. He sighed. Nathan had been unlucky, he'd caught him at a bad time, it was a couple of weeks after Rachel had left him and he was still sore. Back then he read her parting gift, the most cliché riddled Dear John letter he'd ever seen, every night. "I'm a Leo, so I don't look back" it had said. It really only underscored the age gap, that what they had would have never worked in the long term.

Frank didn't realise the depth of his mistake though. He never stopped to think why Nathan had such a gross excess of disposable money for drugs, ridiculous even for an entitled Blackwell student, or inquire as to the kid's last name. If he had realised Nathan was an heir to the family that seemed to rule over Arcadia, that littered the town with billboards all but proclaiming the Prescott family the town's saviours, he might have tried harder to keep his rage in check. He might also have kept all his digits.

Things came to a head the following night. A continuous assault of insect chirps had serenaded the darkness, their call punctuated by the rustling of leaves with each gust of wind. As usual, Frank's RV had been parked by the beach; he'd left his slightly mildewy sanctuary to relieve himself behind the trees that seemed to border just about everything in Arcadia Bay; their swaying branches cast barely perceivable shadows that danced in the pale moonlight. The shadows seemed to jump out when in the peripheral vision, but blended into the background when focused on, giving the unnerving impression of something lurking, just out of sight.

Frank found himself gripping the baseball bat he habitually carried after dark a little tighter. It might have been a momentary bout of anxiety from his last joint, but something seemed off that night. Besides, it wasn't paranoia if you actually did have people who wanted you dead, and Frank's old gang weren't too pleased with him after he suffered a crisis of conscience over the dog fighting ring they were running. He'd rescued his current dog, Pompidou, from that ring. Moments later, the police swarmed the place on an "anonymous tip," and those who managed to evade arrest came to the conclusion that the two events might be related. There was always a risk a few of Frank's old friends would track him down one day, looking for revenge, but Frank calmed himself with the knowledge that they weren't the sort for subtlety. They were the kind to ride straight up to the diner in a pack of Motorcycles while he was having breakfast and demand a knife fight, not stalk him for hours in the night, waiting for the perfect moment to stick a knife in his back.

A series of incoherent curses rang out as Frank was startled by a sudden buzzing. He immediately spun around, confronting the shadows that surrounded him with his bat raised. A moment later he realised it was just his phone, set to vibrate. He allowed himself to relax, tucked his bat under his arm and fished his phone out of his jacket pocket. The words "unknown caller" glowed on the screen, along with a mobile number he didn't recognise. He brought the phone to his ear and hit answer.

"Frank Bowers?" A male voice asked, gruff yet sophisticated in tone. "I understand there was something of an incident yesterday."

"Who the fuck is this?" Frank demanded. "Is this another pig attempt to get me to admit something? If so, it's even worse than the last one."

"You misunderstand, Mr Bowers. I'm not trying to implicate you for a crime." The voice responded. "I'm the reason there's been no further attempts to implicate you to date. And I'm most displeased with the state you seem to have put my son in. I honestly believe you can be of great benefit to me in the future, but prior to that, I feel an example needs to be made."

The call abruptly ended. Frank glanced around in the darkness, the dim silhouette of trees illuminated only by the moon and a couple of distant lamp posts back at the beach-side street. He became aware of two things. Firstly, the chirp of insects from the bush had gone oddly silent. Second, that under the
pale illumination of the moon, he seemed to have obtained a second shadow.

He spun around, slightly lethargic from having recently partaken in his own product. He felt a sudden discomfort in his leg, something akin to getting jabbed with a pair of needles. A figure stood behind him, completely silent. A disturbingly tall woman, her face pale and gaunt. The slightest hint of a smile broke across her face as Frank's leg exploded into a strange combination of numbness and agony. He unceremoniously slumped head-first onto the ground, but that didn't prevent Grey from pulling the trigger on her Taser several more times, each tug putting fifty thousand volts across the needles he was stuck with. He looked up, his legs deaf to his brain's demands to get up; he couldn't run and he couldn't protect himself. He watched helplessly as Grey pocketed the Taser and reached for the baseball bat he had dropped.

Half a minute later, and Frank's world was one of pain. Dull pain, punctuated by sharp pain when he tried to move. Several of his ribs were probably cracked; Grey had been relentless with his bat. Somewhere along the line, she'd probably also broken his nose; it just wouldn't stop oozing blood down his face. He blinked, trying to clear his eyes: a few trickles of red had run backwards over his face and was starting to pool around them, giving everything a sickly red haze.

Frank finally clambered back to his feet, which had, at last, decided to start obeying commands again. He was surprised in that Grey let him instead of pressing an attack. She also hadn't done anything to his head beyond the broken nose; that bat connecting even once might have well laid him out. That led to a realisation that was almost as painful as his injuries: he was being toyed with. He pulled his knife in an instant and tried to keep facing Grey as she circled him, a predator regarding a wounded animal, just out of range, studying him for the moment of weakness that might let her end everything.

Then she stepped forward. She didn't take another proper swing at him with the bat, deciding his battered and barely conscious form wasn't worth the effort. Dripping contempt, she instead used the bat as a blunt spear. She drove the end of it into his already battered ribcage, delighting in the cracking noise and the way Frank's desperate breaths suddenly became laboured; the muted groan as he doubled over in agony was music to her ears.

Frank stared up, vision blurred and head spinning, barely able to breath let alone move now. He watched the monster stand over him. Her eyes reminded him of a cat's, upon noticing something small and pathetic crawling along the ground nearby. Something it could toy with for its own amusement. There was a definite smile on her face now, her lips a long shallow crescent bathed in the light of a full moon. She stepped on the arm he held the knife with. He gripped it tightly, refusing to surrender it. It was a last act of defiance, ultimately futile. In his current state, he was weak enough that she could rip it out of his fingers, or just continue beating him until he went completely unconscious. Instead he heard a series of diminishing thuds as she discarded the baseball bat and it bounced against the hard beach-side road. There was a second quieter thud as she discarded the Taser's wire cartridge, exposing a pair of bare electrodes, and an arc of miniature lightning that jumped between them each time she pulled the trigger.

He felt the electrodes touch his wrist and knew what was about to happen. His fist clamped even more tightly for an instant, then went limp amidst a burning pain, the harsh click of electrical arcing, and the smell of ozone. She took his knife in hand, feeling its balance and taking in how well the edge had been sharpened. She nodded approvingly, then slowly, carefully, ran the edge of the blade down his left arm, the one untouched by electricity. Brushing it with such a light touch it almost felt like a feather. All the way down his arm, down his hand. She didn't stop until she reached the second knuckle of his little finger. She looked him straight in the eyes as she pushed down slowly, taking her time to slice through him, savouring his reaction. Taking a piece of him with his own blade.
He remembered hearing himself scream. She just stood there smiling, waiting to see if he'd be able to get himself under control. Whether he could endure this final addition to his pain, or pass out.

"You said something about taking a chunk from Sean Prescott's son." She finally whispered in that obnoxiously upper-class English accent, gracefully taking the severed finger in hand, displaying it to him as he shivered in agony. He tried to tell himself this wasn't happening, over and over, as he was given a view of his own protruding knuckle bone.

"Do remind me what you said you were going to do to that chunk of him you cut off?" She asked, as Frank finally slipped from consciousness.

Frank awoke in the hospital the following day, agony from the bandaged stump of his missing finger quickly making itself known in the back of his mind, along with a dull ache in his ribcage. A healthy dose of painkillers kept it from the forefront. He glanced around his new surroundings. The place was empty. He'd been given a private room, something normally reserved for the dying, and the exceedingly wealthy. A bulging plain white envelope sat on a bedside table next to him, addressed to "Mr. Frank Bowers". He reached over, feeling the pain spike as his body rolled slightly. Inside the envelope was a short letter, and alongside it and wrapped up in a cloth to conceal its shape was his switch blade. He took the letter in hand and began to read:

Mr. Frank Bowers,

Mr. Prescott has heard about your victimisation by 'gang violence', no doubt perpetrated by the group of ruffians you had a prior association with. The police appear to have reached a similar conclusion.

In his infinite generosity, Mr. Prescott has decided to pay for your medical expenses in their entirety. He is of the firm belief that, while you have a somewhat chequered past, you can make a valuable contribution to Arcadia Bay's future, post rehabilitation. I strongly urge you to consider such an effort. It is unlikely that you will find any such generosity and opportunity outside of Arcadia Bay. No doubt you will be contacted about this again at a later date.

And don't worry about your dog, it was given the very best care. I personally saw to his dietary needs. Rest assured that no matter what happens in the future, your dog will remain well fed. On a completely unrelated matter, I have enclosed one of your personal effects in this envelope. Do take good care of it. It may be needed in the future.

Kind Regards,

Daphne Grey
(On behalf of Mr Sean Prescott.)

Frank's remaining three fingers closed around the letter, crushing it into a ball, and throwing it at the rubbish bin. He cursed as it missed and fell to the ground in the corner. The implication in the note was clear. The Prescotts owned him now. They could have him beaten, they could pay for his treatment like some house pet, they could cut chunks off him with his own knife and feed them to his fucking dog. And if he attempted to quit the town, they'd stop "being generous" with him, which meant they'd make him disappear. He was theirs.

That was a little over six months ago. So far the only thing the Prescotts wanted was the provision of drugs to the hyper-entitled kids at Blackwell. Sean's only demand was Frank cut his prices and go for a "high volume" strategy. That had risks, a large customer base meant more chance of drawing police attention, but it seemed Sean Prescott had pulled some strings. On several occasions he
thought he was about to be busted, only to see the police suddenly turn about face and 'be somewhere else'. He had no clue why Sean Prescott was so obsessed with enabling the narcotic habits of art students. He really didn't care either. He just did exactly as they wanted, and both kept out of jail and kept his nine remaining fingers.

Frank stood, concealed behind a stack of crushed car chassis, watching as Chloe's truck retraced the tracks it had left in the soft dirt. His RV, which he'd left parked alongside Chloe's, had left a similar set. He suddenly became aware of a third set of tracks as well, not quite so far apart, not quite so deep, and that definitely hadn't been there when he'd arrived. The kind that would be left by a more conventional car. It seemed someone else had paid a visit while he was searching the junk yard; based on the text message he had just received, their identity was obvious.

Chloe pissed Frank off: betraying their almost-friendship with that loan, and always trying to take Rachel away from him. Perhaps even succeeding in the end; she had broken up with him a few weeks before she suddenly disappeared, but kept hanging around Chloe until she up and vanished. In spite of all that, he found himself desperately hoping he was wrong. That Chloe hadn't doubled down on her stupidity and somehow made an enemy of the Prescotts. No one deserved what they were capable of.

Chloe's truck was ravenous in its consumption of the open road, travelling at the posted speed of 60 miles per hour. The coastal road was still blocked, thanks to that landslide they'd noticed earlier in the morning, consigning them to a long rectangular path around one of Sean Prescott's forests on the way back to what passed for civilisation. In spite of that, and them having to evade Frank and deal with the ghost, they were still likely to get back to school with plenty of time before Max and Victoria's afternoon classes, so long as they kept their speed up. Doing so sent the truck's body rattling again, not so bad that you felt it was about to fall apart, but just teasing out the possibility that it might. Victoria found it no longer bothered her: there was nothing like facing definite life and death situations to numb you against more minor concerns.

Turning to her left, she regarded her two companions. Max sat sandwiched between herself and Chloe, relegated to the lap-belt position yet again. None of them were really in a talking mood. The adrenaline brought on by being accosted by what could only be described as a ghost animal, and Chloe nearly being crushed by a freight train, had long since worn off. The quiet let the three of them digest the reality of what they'd just been through.

"We were stupid not to leave immediately after the ghost's first appearance." Victoria finally said. "We should have gone straight back to your truck and left. Instead we hung around and it had another go at us."

It was slightly more complicated than that. Neither Chloe nor Victoria wanted Max bouncing around that rickety truck on a half-hour drive back to civilisation while outright unconscious and in an unknown state of stability. They'd actually been moments from calling an ambulance when she came around.

"I want to know why Max's future self didn't give us a warning," Chloe replied. "Oh, hey. You know that fucking dangerous ghost thing you ran into yesterday? The one that can cripple Max's powers, and immobilise you with a glance. It practically lives in the fucking junk yard. Don't hang around there or it'll come after you over and over."

Victoria reflected on that. She supposed it could have been something new, that Max's future self never predicted happening, or something she knew they'd be able to overcome on their own, and hence not worth the effort. She supposed that meant they shouldn't rely on Max's future self to provide a complete cheat-sheet to the week. The behaviour of the ghost was more interesting to her
at that moment. It always seemed to go for Max first, and in a different way to herself or Chloe. Bombarding her mind with visions of destruction at the hands of the giant tornado until she passed out.

"Why does fucking Bambi's Mom always go for Max?" She wondered aloud.

"My time powers, I guess," Max responded, not really wanting to think to much while she nursed her headache. "That's the only obvious difference."

"But is it after you specifically because it doesn't like your powers, or simply because it considers you the greatest threat?" Victoria asked. She mulled over the words as she spoke them. Max Caulfield as the greatest threat. If she'd heard that yesterday, she'd have laughed. Except in a photography context, then she'd have obsessed for an hour over how embarrassing it was going to be if she lost to a selfie, and then how infuriatingly enchanting Max's facial features were. But otherwise, she'd have laughed, doubly so if the line-up of other threats included "The Price". But Max's powers changed everything, literally letting her undo any injury her companions might suffer and get them out of virtually any situation. Logically, any attacker had to neutralise her first. Of course that had also turned out to be a colossal mistake, in that it attacked Max in Chloe's presence. Chloe had her own instinctive response on seeing anything try to harm Max: to rush in at blinding speed and punch its head off. It had actually worked too, after a fashion. Interposing her arm with the ghost's body had inflicted torturous pain on both of them.

"It has to have something against Max. I mean, I've been in that junk yard a ton of times with Rachel, and the weirdest thing that happened was me occasionally beating her at darts."

Chloe had assumed that would engender some sort of knowing response. Instead it was met with silence.

"Rachel was really good at darts." Chloe clarified belatedly, feeling her companions might have missed some context.

"Rachel was really good at everything except being honest." Victoria replied.

"Discussing what a deer wants." Chloe grumbled, deciding it was best to simply ignore Victoria's anti-Rachel jibe completely. "This is bullshit. It's a fucking deer. I mean it's see-through, but it's still an animal. Shouldn't it be, you know, stupid."

"A regular animal would be limited to crude associative reasoning. If it's some spirit of the land like in Native American myth, that can see the future and blast visions of it into Max's head, then who knows."

"Chloe did seem to have a very convenient accident when it came back to get me the second time." Max said.

"You think the whole thing with the train was an elaborate trap to off me?"

"It knew you'd try to beat it up again otherwise. You can add 'incorporeal entity' to the list of 'people' you've managed to terrorise."

Victoria had meant that as a compliment. Chloe's list of known destructive feats were legendary, which cultivated the image of 'The Price' that seemed to publicly define her. To Chloe though it felt like she was being reduced to some one-dimensional thing, when she at least liked to pretend there was more to her.

"That does seem to be what I'm good at." Chloe mused a little bitterly. "Dishing out beat-downs and
frightening people."

"You've never frightened me, Chloe. You're more like this indomitable force of good."

The way Max positively beamed threw her blue haired driver into a state of stupefied bliss, practically melting into her seat in response.

"Chaotic good." Victoria grumbled from the far passenger's seat, before worrying she'd let slip her power-level again. Not that it mattered with those two, they already knew about the 'collectable figurines'. They didn't even seem to hear her anyway, too busy smiling idiotically at one another and being generally adorable and perfect together. Victoria watched them and felt a rising tide of jealousy, a current of bitterness that threatened to pull her in at least two directions.

Why couldn't she be the one to charge out, punch ghosts, be the ridiculous hero and make Max feel safe? To be the one to be complemented. To take that wonderfully lithe frame into her arms and rush her to safety, see those big doe eyes of hers meet hers in gratitude and more, and definitely not throw her back out like a wimp in the process.

And why couldn't she be the one Chloe saved? Picked up in those strong arms, cradled against that magnificent body, firm all places and somehow still soft in a couple, and carried to safety. To be able to complement her and not have it come off backhanded. To utter a handful of words that could reduce the most publicly infamous person in town to such a warm gooey mess, that she could just about bathe in her.

Then she recalled some of the second part had actually happened yesterday. It didn't feel enough, somehow, and not just because she missed out on a bath of liquid Chloe. She felt, deep inside herself, that Chloe and Max would always go further for each other than for her. They had been closer than family since childhood, while she had been a source of antagonism, and only quasi-redeemed. As Max put it, "the token evil team mate" on their superhero team. That brought a certain glory, and seductiveness to the position that it didn't really deserve. She'd been a coward, who nursed her fragile sense of self by mocking those with enough courage to be themselves, and hiding behind a largely fabricated persona. Prim and perfect and vacuous, and not able to show anyone those disgraceful female figurines she so enjoyed collecting.

"Why did the ghost run for it?" Chloe asked, snapping Victoria out of her daydream. "It had us hella dead, didn't it? Max KO'd, Tori frozen in place by that freeze sight thing, and me trapped in front of the fucking train."

"There was that flash." Victoria said.

Chloe and Max looked at each other uncertain. Victoria folded her arms in frustration.

"Please tell me you saw the white flash."

"I was busy being force-fed a vision of doom and tornadoes."

"I was busy trying to pry my foot loose of the train track."

Victoria huffed and her brow furrowed above her piercing green eyes.

"There was a white flash, and the ghost fucked off. It happened just before we heard the train."

"I think I saw a white flash earlier," Max said. "Just out of the corner of my eye. When I looked in its direction it was gone though. It was just before Victoria's first attempt at shooting. Just before that bullet ricochet wildly and nearly hit us-"
"We discussed this Max, we were never in any danger." Victoria replied rolling her eyes. "Nothing short of magic could make bullets deflect like that from an angled surface."

As she finished that last sentence, she found herself hesitating slightly. Her eyes lingered on Max's right hand, and she wondered whether, in a world where Max could reverse time and they were being periodically stalked by a ghost, declaring something as "impossible short of magical intervention" wasn't tempting fate. Then again, Max's future self seemed to have fate in a headlock, and appeared to almost have it choked into submission.

She realised she wasn't the only one absent-mindedly regarding Max's extremities. Max seemed entranced with her own hand, her arm held in front of her, slowly stretching and retracting her fingers. **Wondering if her powers were going to return**, Victoria thought. She found herself wondering how they'd cope if they didn't. With everyone, everything seemingly out to get them, those powers were a lifeline. They'd even provided the kick in the pants that had forced them together. They were a terrifying shock, then a thrill. Of course Max had countless other ways and features she found enchanting, Victoria had a clandestine library of photos which spoke to that effect. It would be nice, none the less, if her powers returned. Aside from their utility in repeatedly saving them from mortal danger, she wouldn't mind being shocked and thrilled again.

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Frank slammed the front door to his RV shut and keyed the ignition, not even bothering to greet his dog, who howled once in disappointment then sat obediently when he yelled at it to shut up. Under Frank's questionable mastership, Pompidou seemed to have decided that 'shut up' and 'sit' were interchangeable. Frank sighed. He didn't have time for his dog right now, he just wanted to get as far away from the junk yard as possible. There was something that made him uneasy about that place. Uneasy and angry. On top of that, that psycho, Grey, had just cost him three grand. She may still have been loitering nearby, watching him. A test of loyalty perhaps, or looking for an excuse to indulge herself and inflict more torture if he disobeyed. Or it had nothing to do with him, and she really was going after Chloe for some reason. If that was the case, Chloe would never see that psycho coming, just the same way that he hadn't.

He thought of the blue-haired idiot, and the endless, fucking ridiculous nerve she had. Always showing up for weed, and rarely bothering to pay for it. Demanding he teach her his 'OG kung fu'. Borrowing a few of his magazines. She hadn't been so bad, almost like him at her age in fact, only smarter and with a lot more balls. She introduced him to 'her hella good friend Rachel'; that hadn't been so bad either. She'd fucking ripped him off for three grand; that made him angry. Grey ambushed him, sliced his finger off, and fed it to his pet. That put things in perspective, made Chloe look like a saint in comparison. Sure he had to make some budgetary sacrifices because of her, go without steak for his steak and beans dinner for a couple of months. That wasn't so bad, he didn't even really like the steak.

He grit his teeth as he relived the attack again. Blood oozing from the stump of his finger, and that fucking smile on Grey's face. The casual disregard Sean Prescott had shown when consigning him to mutilation. That "an example needed to be made." Impulsively, he brought out his phone, intent on texting Chloe a warning. His finger hovered over the send button. He felt his phone shake in his hand. He almost thought he was getting another call, and it was set to vibrate. Then he realised it was him, his arm shaking. Fear and sanity reasserting themselves. He thought of them dispatching Grey for another visit, and of how much of him she'd claim this time. He deleted the warning and put his phone back in his pocket, disgusted at his own cowardice.

What other choice did he have though? He asked himself. Chloe had already metaphorically cost him an arm and a leg. If he warned her, that might well become literal.
A slight tingle ran through the finger's on Max's right hand. It was barely noticeable over her throbbing headache, which had stayed with her since the two encounters with the ghostly deer, but it seemed to be building gradually. To Max it somehow reminded her of an old camera flash charging. A whine of increasing pitch and building power, but one she felt from inside herself rather than heard. She ran her finger tips along her left arm, just above the surface of her skin, and felt a tickle and the faintest hint of goosebumps break out. Reaching out with her right arm slightly, she saw a red hue engulf everything, just for a moment. Her powers were definitely returning, though rather slowly. She grimaced as her headache spiked in response to the probing of her abilities.

"Max, try leaning back if your headache's bothering you." A honeyed voice suggested, and she felt Victoria regard her with her usual stern, heated gaze.

She began groping beneath her seat for a lever to tilt it backward, without much luck. Chloe seemed about to say something, but was preempted. Instead Max felt the soft touch of hands grasp her atop her shoulders, and heard the slight jingle of an expensive gold bracelet. She went rigid in surprise as she was taken in hand and gently ushered downward and to her right.

"Just relax and put your head in my lap, Max." Victoria huffed, managing to make herself sound enormously put out, but not quite managing to suppress an intruding husky undertone. Max found her instruction did little to relax her.

Shuffling around on her backside so she was more or less on a diagonal, Max felt herself gulp as she cautiously leaned back, guided by the soft and exquisite touch of Victoria's fingers, her thumbs idly pressing into the base of her neck in small circles, providing something of a clandestine massage. Max briefly considered questioning Victoria's motives, but decided it was better to merely enjoy them. Her gaze shifting upward, she saw the truck's dilapidated ceiling come into view; like the rest of the vehicle it was caked in graffiti. Her attention was grabbed by the phrase "Just gotta let go". She'd seen it before, plastered across the wall in Chloe's room. This one seemed to have a more literal second meaning, as an arrow had been drawn next to it pointing to a handhold above Chloe's door, one side of which was broken. She found herself following the spirit of the writing, surrendering into the blonde's grasp, and allowing herself to be ushered downward.

Then Victoria entered her field of view, and Max had something far more eye-catching to look at. She intently studied that prim, strong face. As their eyes met, Victoria's veneer of superiority seemed to peel away a little, hinting at the anxious girl hiding behind it. The scared rose-scented girl she had comforted last night. Max shot her her usual, awkward, gratitude-conveying smile and took some pride in how Victoria's cheeks reddened in response, as she continued the magic work of those fingers, reversing the grasp to compensate for the smaller girl's descent into her lap.

Max leaned back further and tried her best not to stare overtly at that ridiculously expensive cashmere sweater. The way it hung off and hinted at the enviable chest she knew lay beneath it, rising magnificently with every breath. Finally there was her jaw. Max had kind of noticed it before, but from this angle it was so much more prominent: Victoria had a weirdly sharp and almost chiselled jaw outline. Some might deride it as verging on mannish, but Max rather liked it. Eccentricity gave things character while perfection was bland, besides who decided what perfection meant anyway?

She felt an odd sensation in the back of her head as it came to rest against one of Victoria's thighs, just below the skirt's hemline. Apparently so did her makeshift cushion, eyes growing wide and drawing a sharp breath in the most wonderful way. A response to being both literally and figuratively shocked.

"Max, are your powers returning?" Victoria asked, cradling Max's head in her hands, feeling the sparse blonde hairs on them stand on end as they approached it, and them grow slightly numbed as
they made contact. It was odd. She could have almost sworn that hipster's hand generated a slight sensation before, so faint it might have all been a figment of her imagination. This was different, orders of magnitude stronger, and more centred around Max's head than her hands.

"I think so." Max replied, bringing her hand up to demonstrate, and a surge of unworldly power skimmed across the exterior of her skin once more, surging between her head and her body. "When I flex my fingers and reach out, I think my powers are-

"Don't" Victoria gasped, drawing a sharp breath as pins and needles rushed through her thigh. It was an odd, sharp tingle, a little extreme but not exactly painful. She found herself infinitely grateful that Max's head wasn't resting slightly further up and over, and at the same time somehow strangely disappointed.

"Since using it is what finally made your powers cut out, they'll probably come back more quickly if you just let it rest a while. Besides-" She sighed, this was going to sound stupid no matter which way she said it. "Your head seems to be bleeding electricity."

That revelation instantly snatched Chloe's attention, as well as Max's.

"I'm not hurting you, am I?" Max inquired, immediately trying to get back up. Victoria held her down by the shoulders.

"It's barely a tickle. Nothing compared with what that ghost must have done to you."

Not to mention she was getting to mimic Chloe's earlier cradling of Max in her hands. Somehow that made her feel all warm and giddy, not that she'd ever admit it. Warm, giddy, and slightly paralysed. She noticed Chloe's expression change from something mirroring the concern Max had shown, to that annoying, knowing smile.

"Victoria, isn't Max's head-

"It's resting on a leg, not between them." Victoria snapped.

"I was going to say 'insulatable by putting something between her head and your shapely thigh.' Maybe the jean shorts you complained about being left on your seat earlier."

Victoria grit her teeth, convinced that wasn't what Chloe was originally going to say, annoyed that it was actually quite a good suggestion, and slightly befuddled at her thighs being described as shapely. She folded Rachel's old pair of jean shorts over and placed them under Max's head, feeling the tingle subside. She briefly appreciated the irony. She'd sworn she'd never let Rachel get close to her again, and yet she had her pants pressed hard against a leg.

"Did she feel this way while we were back in your sec-, hideout." Victoria asked, bitterly annoyed that she'd almost referred to that shabby junk yard building Chloe and Rachel used to hang out in as "Chloe's secret place". What was next, randomly inserting hella into sentences?

"You're asking me if I felt tingly when I had Max's head in my lap?" Chloe grinned.

Victoria shook her head, and Max sighed. Of course Chloe had to go there.

"I was zap free. No discharge of an electric variety. To be honest I'm feeling left out. There's literal sparks flying between the two of you, and I'm stuck driving."

"Then touch Max's forehead," Victoria suggested with a commanding tone.
Chloe hesitated. She was curious, and she'd gladly suffer hella pain just to be able to obnoxiously boast that sparks flew between herself and Max too. But she was driving, and she had an almost religious devotion to careful driving.

"You can drive with one hand on the wheel for a few seconds, it won't cause an accident." Victoria insisted. "Here. You keep looking at the road, and I'll guide your hand to Max's head. We need to establish if this affects other people as well as me."

After a moment, Chloe reluctantly uncoiled her hand from the wheel. Victoria took it between her own highly pedicured fingers, soft and supple thanks to countless dollars spent on trips to the beautician, and allowed herself a moment to squeeze it softly: somehow every part of the punk was wonderfully, almost unnaturally warm. Probably a result of the metabolism she needed to maintain that ridiculous body and all its muscles.

She eventually remembered what she was supposed to be doing and slowly brought Chloe's hand toward Max. There was something immensely satisfying at the look of dread anticipation on Chloe's face. Unable to look as she was busy driving, and knowing something was about to happen. She took a moment to savour it. Momentarily, and in some small, pathetic manner, she finally had 'The Price' at her mercy.

"Fuck! It's… Actually like my hand turned into a tongue and I licked a nine-volt battery."

"All in the name of science." Victoria assured them both. "Besides it was utterly insignificant next to what an attack from that fucking ghost felt like."

"Victoria Mengele Chase." Chloe muttered, trying to look upset and failing miserably as she shook the pins and needles out of her hand. And then she realised something: All the pain and stress she'd been feeling seemed to have just gone away for the moment. Displaced by simply being around her oldest friend, and her newest. Yes, there were a ton of things out to kill them, but right now she was next to Max 'time is my bitch' Caulfield and Victoria '(probably) not as much of a bitch as she pretends to be' Chase. Somehow their simple presence made things better.

Another thing to be grateful for was that they had a working vehicle to convey them. Not everyone could be so fortunate, a matter illustrated by the car they were passing at that moment, pulled over to the side of the road with the pulsating orange of its hazard lights contrasting its white paint job. She barely gave the sedan a second thought as it disappeared into the distance, struck suddenly by a random revelation she was sure her friends would appreciate.

"You know..." Chloe began, her smile teasing out the promise of something she seemed to consider equally profound and amusing. "...I think being in a life and death situation on a railway track gave me an epiphany about the trolley problem."

"What's-" Max asked, confused.

"That's a basic abstract philosophical problem dressed up in a dubious practical example, Max." Victoria immediately cut in, always desperate to display her knowledge. "Some villains with twirly moustaches have tied a bunch of attractive, helpless women up and placed them on a train track. Before reaching the women the track branches at a set of points, and the second track only has one attractive, helpless woman lying bound on it."

"Why are all the victims women, and attractive?" Max wondered aloud.

"The villain's playing on society's embedded stereotypes to maximise the emotional impact."
"I think you should tell us more about these tied up women." Chloe said as she slew them round a corner, absent-mindedly noting the logging camp and that grotesque Prescott billboard approaching. "Their clothes, figures, how this clearly repressed villain has chosen to lay the ropes about their bodies and the type of knots-"

"Look the point is you're standing at the points, with a manual switch that actually works, and have the option of switching the track. That grossly reduces the number of deaths, but gives you a knowing, personal involvement in the death. If you're feeling particularly sadistic, tell the person you're applying the test to that their lover is the one on the alternative track and see how that influences their decision."

Max felt a sudden wave of anguish wondering how she'd respond if she was ever forced to make such a choice. Chloe and Victoria in exchange for a bunch of other people's lives. She consoled herself in that such a contrived and manipulative scenario seemed almost impossible to eventuate in reality. And if it did happen, she'd just use her powers to avert it. Besides, it was far more interesting that her subconscious had chosen Chloe and Victoria together as her lovers. She felt a sudden flush of heat as she fully considered that.

"So what was your epiphany?" Victoria demanded. Knowing Chloe it was probably some stupidly obvious loophole that would raise a middle finger at the purpose of the whole thought experiment.

"It's obvious when you stop to think about it." Chloe smiled, dragging the whole thing out, mostly because it frustrated Victoria to no end, and that was beautiful. "You just- STUPID FUCK!"

Max's eyes snapped open and she lurched up out of Victoria's lap. She looked out the windscreen in disbelief. That large logging truck they'd been stuck behind earlier this morning on the way to the junk yard had just pulled out of the camp in front of them, blocking the entire roadway. Chloe stamped the brake pedal. Her heart seemed to skip a beat, and then do its very best to make up for it, thumping against the walls of her chest. Nothing was happening, they weren't stopping at all. She pumped the brake desperately with her foot. Still nothing. She threw the car into low gear and pulled the hand brake. That began to slow them, but not quickly enough. They were going to hit. They were going to die. Maybe this was some sort of poetic destiny: she'd tried so hard to be a good, safe driver, and her fate was still going to match her Father's.

Max threw up her hand, desperate to squeeze something out of her failing powers, to somehow save them all. She heard the boom of metal tearing like tissue paper. Then everything stopped, except the noise, the deafening yell of steel shearing that echoed throughout the eerie red world she'd jumped into. Her gaze was locked on Chloe, as she realised with horror that the steering column had broken free of the dashboard, propelled backward as the front of the vehicle concertinaed; it was a literal instant from punching into Chloe's ribcage with ghastly force. Something was very wrong: time wasn't reversing, nor moving forward. It was just frozen; she was trapped in a moment of horror.

Max looked back at Victoria, who'd brought her hands up to brace herself for the collision, a gape of disbelief and utter terror on her face. Then at the speedometer, which indicated the car still had the majority of its speed. There was much worse damage yet to be done in this collision. In all likelihood, the entire cabin was going to crush, killing the rest of them along with Chloe. If time resumed it's normal flow, all three of them were dead.

Max concentrated, tried harder to do whatever it was she did that made time go backwards. There was no other option, she'd succeed or they'd all die. For what seemed like an eternity, but was in reality no time at all, things just hung in the balance. Then time moved forward again, the sound of wrenching metal deafening as the world came apart around her, for one horrific instant. Then red
clouded her vision and things smashed themselves back together with equal violence. A brutal salvation set to the shriek of metal crumpling in reverse. Things became a blur, and then everything froze once more. Max stared around the red-hued scene and realised she'd probably forced time back twenty seconds. Pushing further had no effect, and it felt like someone had embedded an axe in her head. It seemed she'd exhausted her powers again. Before time began to flow around her once more, Max's eyes lingered on the car pulled over at the road side. The white sedan with vanity plates "DOTJKL", and inside, a shadowy figure watching them pass. No doubt alerting her lackey truck driver when to pull out.

"...I think being in a life and death situation on a railway track gave me an epiphany about-"

"Chloe! Victoria! Oh my DOG, It's a trap! The brakes aren't working, and a huge logging vehicle's about to pull out in front of us!"

Not exactly the words Chloe was hoping to hear. An experimental touch of the brake pedal had precious little effect. Her hands gripped the wheel tightly, suddenly haunted by visions of her Father walking out that door, a quick trip to pick up Joyce from work that he never returned from. She pushed them aside and desperately considered her options. She could throw the truck into low gear, and apply the hand brake, but that wouldn't be enough with the stopping distance available. Besides, even if she got them going slow enough to survive the crash, Grey and her stooge driving the truck might take the opportunity to finish them off, and make it look like it had happened during the accident. It didn't seem fair: this was the one area of life she'd done exactly what she was supposed to, been a complete stickler for perfect driving, and she was still moments from a crash. But that did leave one other option, do the exact opposite of what you were supposed to. She stamped the accelerator as she pulled out of the final turn before the collision and the logging camp came into view.

"Our plan's to re-enact the fast and the furious?" Max asked over a screaming engine, the old truck's body shaking like a rattle as the tachometer pushed up into the red.

"It'll be fine, Max." Chloe replied. Her face looked absolutely struck with terror, and her spine felt like it had gone completely rigid, but she somehow managed to make her words confident. "We can't stop in time, so we just have to get past this fucker before they pulls out."

The logging camp loomed up ahead. They scanned desperately for the murderous behemoth, and relief struck them in a way they hoped the logging vehicle wouldn't: When it came into view, it was only just starting to pull away from its parking space, their attempt to move ahead of schedule seemed to have worked.

"Car accidents are, in theory, incredibly easy to avoid if you have forewarning Max." Victoria lectured, trying to cover up the fact she'd nearly had an accident of her own when Max had started screaming about an imminent crash. "They require two vehicles to be in exactly the wrong place at exactly the right time, a coincidence that should be ridiculously easy to break."

That seemed to make sense. Still, there seemed something a little perverse about speeding up to avoid a crash.

Then relief turned to shock: the driver of the logging vehicle, on seeing them ahead of schedule and going far faster than expected, stamped his accelerator in response and his vehicle lurched out onto the roadway. That was the problem: this wasn't a coincidence. The driver of the truck fully intended for the crash to happen, and although caught by surprise, was prepared to try to compensate for their early arrival. Chloe grit her teeth and pulled into the lane for opposing traffic, and then the road's shoulder, sending loose gravel flying as she tried to dodge around the behemoth in front of them.
They almost made it past, before a dull thud signalled a rather rough and unsolicited kiss between Chloe's pickup and the bumper of the massive logging vehicle. There was a screech as the comparatively tiny pickup was thrown into a skid. They careened out of control, thrown sideways within the cabin by the sudden centrifugal force, watching the trees on the side of the road grow closer. Trees that were nearing maturity for harvest, their thick trunks unlikely to yield to the thin rusty steel of Chloe's truck. A head-on clash with one of them and they'd come off no better than if they'd hit the logger.

Chloe desperately threw the steering wheel around, trying to steer into the direction of the skid to restore traction. Just as a particularly large trunk loomed directly in their path, the tires bit deep into the road and steadied them, and Chloe quickly reversed the direction of the wheel, pulling them back into the centre of the road.

She slumped into her seat, breath short and heart thumping like a jack-hammer.

"God. Is there anyone else who'd like to try killing us?" Victoria asked to no one in particular. "If so, be a dear and get the fuck on with it."

"At least we know what Sean Prescott meant about trying to kill us indirectly. That was Grey's car back before the turn."

"Bitch probably put herself there to tip off the truck driver, so he'd be ready to pull out at exactly the right moment. Fuck, looks like we're going to be walking. Again." Chloe sighed, a hard edge in her voice replacing its usual humorous inflection. She began changing down gears to use the engine to slow them, as both the logging camp and the apparently murderous trucker receded into the distance.

"You can't." Victoria protested.

"You kept calling this a death-trap Victoria. Right now it is, and I am not driving without my brake pedal. Especially since Max looks exhausted from that last use of her powers."

"Future Max told you-"

"Make sure we aren't late back to school. Fuck, this is some crazy suicidal bullshit. Fine. But I'm going to drive us there at a crawl."

Another brief silence descended on the cabin, as Chloe gave her absolute focus to the road ahead, trying to coax the car safely down from engine red-line speed. Her intensity dropped in sync with the speedometer, by the time they hit 30 miles an hour, she was mostly back to her old self, still unprepared to take her eyes off the road, but wanting to dote endlessly on her smaller companion for saving them all.

"So Super Max, you saved us both again, in spite of having your powers crippled by a ghost. Are you OK?" She asked.

"I think so." Max replied, nursing her aching head as Victoria offered her a tissue to clear away the trickle of blood that ran from her nose. "Don't sell yourself short though, Chloe. That was some hellamazballs driving."

Victoria briefly cradled her head as if also in pain, apparently from Max's use and indeed bastardisation of Chloe's parlance. Max felt that was fine, she had to deal with an actual headache from her powers, so the least Victoria could do was put up with a metaphoric one.

"Yeah." Chloe smiled. "But in a way that's all down to you too. You practically begged me to do the whole defensive driving thing in your letters. You said you absolutely refused to lose me the way we
lost William, no matter what." She took a moment to pause and compose herself. "Tori do you have another one of those tissues, I think I've got something in my eye, and I'd rather not end up blinded while I'm trying to drive a truck with no brakes."

And suddenly, guilt seemed to skewer Max as surely as a spear thrust into her chest, and she fell into an internal panic. The letters again. Chloe was always talking about them, and she had never sent any, or at least never remembered sending any. They had to have been sent by her future self, subtly caressing Chloe's past in just the right way to turn her into someone a little bit incredible. Someone who could protect them from nearly anything. And Chloe seemed to think it was something Max had done in the normal course of things, and was giving her all the credit for it, because sending the odd letter to your closest friend was the absolute least any good person could do. Not curling up into a ball and blocking everything out because your best friend's Father, who was almost a second Father to you died. Completely ignoring how the person he was actually a Farther to must have felt.

"Hellooo Maxine?" A honeyed voice whispered in Max's ear. She snapped out of her daze to see Victoria leaning over her.

"It's Max. Never Maxine." She snapped back automatically.

"I remember someone saying the best way to snap someone out of a daze was to address them in a way they didn't care for. Clearly, they were right, no doubt a novel experience for them." Victoria smirked at her, her superior air in full force.

Max felt like sniping back at Victoria; the matter of Chloe's past and the letters festered in the corner of her mind. She had no idea how to deal with it, did she break the heart of someone who'd been through so much, who'd probably just faced her own personal hell in the car crash they barely averted? Or did she perpetuate a lie and live in guilt, hoping Chloe would never realise the truth. And while she was trying to think of an answer, Victoria was casually insulting her with her usual honeyed inflections. Sticking that striking, regal, elegant face of hers inches from her own. Except on further viewing there actually was genuine concern on her face, behind the disdainful window dressing. It showed in her eyes, and the slightly furrowed brow above them. The rest of her face was a perfect mask. She turned and noticed Chloe seemed similarly worried, but then she could read Chloe's feelings like a book.

"We thought you might have slipped into unconsciousness again." Chloe elaborated.

"No. I was just kind of engrossed in thinking about my future and my past."

She felt Victoria regarding her expectantly, all but demanding more information. Chloe clearly felt the same way, though couldn't take her eyes off the road. She didn't want to explain though. How could she tell Chloe that the letters she'd treasured, that seemed enormously important to her and which apparently inspired her to somehow become a local legend, were disingenuous. Inserted into the time line after the fact by her future self. Literally shaping Chloe's life to serve her own designs. She couldn't deal with this now. She needed time to think about how to break it to Chloe, if she should even break it to Chloe. For now she needed a topic her two companions would find so engrossing, that it would completely derail their current line of questioning.

"So anyway," she began, "before I rewound you two were explaining something called the trolley problem? I think Tori said it had something to do with incredibly attractive women being tied up, and train tracks?"

There was a momentary pause, an unnatural quiet as Chloe checked her rear view mirror, and felt the need to adjust it. Max looked up and saw the reflection of those deep blue eyes regard her, just for a moment as she overcompensated the adjustment. Then, an instant later, Chloe's face lit up like a
Christmas tree, or a child having woken up Christmas morning and seen the gifts sitting underneath it. Perhaps it took a moment for Max's words to fully register.

"That sounds like the best fucking moral dilemma ever." She announced, almost startling the other two with her enthusiasm. "Tori, Start at the beginning, and tell me everything."

Chloe’s truck sedately glided to a halt outside Blackwell's main entrance, retarded only by the lowest gear and hand brake. Fortunately no one else had parked curb-side; trying to thread a vehicle weighing several tons and lacking its main brakes between other parked vehicles would have been a nightmare.

As soon as they were stationary, Victoria sprung from the passenger door. She hefted her oversized camera bag onto her shoulder and began to stretch out, feeling the tension ooze out of her neck and shoulders, hoping this time it would last. She was finally free of that now confirmed death-trap, and they were more-or-less still on time: they’d arrived during lunch break, and countless students sat on the Blackwell lawn; most talking idly together, a few still enjoying plastic-packed lunches they’d purchased from the café. Their presence brought about a certain sense of security, as she doubted they’d suffer another attack with that many witnesses. Besides, after all they'd been through, it was almost impossible to imagine something else going wrong.

Turning back to the truck, she noticed Max was yet to disembark, still in the centre seat and lost in another one of those introspective moments that seemed to blight her. Victoria cleared her throat, snapping Max out of her daze, and presented a hand to help her disembark. Moments later her brow furrowed and her lip turned up in annoyance: Chloe was making the same gesture from the driver's side. They stubbornly exchanged glares, with Max stuck between them, uncertain. This seemed an incredibly trivial thing to worry about, and it was kind of a pain. It was also a pain that was kind of gratifying: she had two people competing over her.

"It's safer to exit toward the sidewalk," Victoria smirked, and Chloe sighed, closing her door and conceding.

"So, how’s that headache of yours?" Chloe asked, dashing around the truck at an almost indecent speed, but nonetheless too slow to arrive before Victoria had taken Max in hand and gently helped her disembark. She consoled herself by placing a hand on Max's forehead, a gentle touch to check if Max was still suffering that rather unique electrical issue. She found herself disappointed again: She felt only a slight tingle, that could well have been unrelated to any electrical activity.

"I think I'm feeling better." Max acknowledged. "I'm a little worried to be honest. What the hell is going on with me?"

"Something I've been wondering since I first saw you at the start of the school term," Victoria mumbled. She instantly regretted it. Why couldn't she be nice for once?

To top things off, Chloe immediately charged in, sensing a chance to make up lost ground in whatever competition they'd become locked in, consoling Max in her usual way, undeniable intelligence concealed by some of the most ignorant use of English imaginable, and seizing every laughably transparent pretext to hug and hold, something Max was complicit in reciprocating. It made Victoria frown in jealousy, even though she'd sort-of done the same thing in the car, with her "put your head in my lap" routine.

She regarded them again, this time with a more professional eye. Visually they really were the perfect odd couple: the meek, vulnerable girl lost in the embrace of a fierce brute, and the casual familiarity that was born of a friendship that had lasted most of their lives. Watching them made
Victoria desperately want to steal another photo, except as her former hero once said, it was all "too obvious". The really special moments were when they traded roles, Max revealed herself as the relentless hero and seemingly inextinguishable force of will, and Chloe hung limply off her like a dress. Catching Max in that state would be the perfect (and therefore only acceptable) answer to this damn photo assignment.

A smirk crossed her face as she imagined her triumphant moment, handing in that photo. Applying her irresistible charm to guarantee Mr Jefferson, absolutely smitten with her as always, granted the maximum extra credit. She could practically see it, him desperately stroking the characters 'A' and '+' into the record, need in the eyes behind those non-prescription glasses, so desperate that there'd literally be beads of sweat pouring from his forehead. She'd smile, lean seductively over his desk as always, a pretext to glance at the record. Then, after insuring her grade had been officially entered and signed off, she'd alert the authorities and smile as they burst in and dragged the creep off. Perhaps she'd even give herself to someone on his desk as a final insult. Someone truly worthy.

Her smirk widened and she took her weight off one leg, gently caressing her other calf with the toe of her shoe, warmth permeating her as a fantasy took shape. Lying splayed across the teacher's desk, writhing helpless in ecstasy beneath one of the two people she considered most worthy. She stifled a moan as another, even more wicked thought occurred to her.

Why only one?

Of course, the practical side of her brain just had to spoil everything, reminding her that one of the contenders hadn't reached first base yet, and the other, while sex incarnate, was hopelessly enamoured with the first.

Her fantasy ruined by practical considerations, Victoria turned her attention to the closing portion of the "reassuring speech" Chloe was giving Max. It was at least as graphic as her daydream, but in a completely different way: a vivid description of what Chloe intended to do if the ghost "dared to show its face again and fuck with any of them." It left Max smiling a little nervously and Victoria wondering if you really could make balloon animals out of a largely incorporeal being's entrails.

Dumbstruck by Chloe's (probably) hyperbolic description of vengeance via ad-hoc vivisection, Max and Victoria scanned the Blackwell lawn, hoping for something less stomach-twisting to grab their attention. They were not disappointed. The most incredible pair of legs suddenly called out to them: unnaturally long, toned and creamy in complexion, subtle definition showing as they stretched out and then went limp, over and over. Through raw force of will, they dragged their eyes higher and noticed the rest of Taylor Christensen, a few strands of her long platinum-blonde hair taking flight in the light breeze. She sat alone under a large bushy tree, her eyes downcast, pecking at a rather paltry looking salad, idly pointing and relaxing her toes as she relived a shattered childhood dream about becoming a ballerina.

"Maybe you should catch up with Taylor." Max suggested, realising this was probably the first time she'd empathised with one of Victoria's flying monkeys, on the other hand it was only yesterday she really started feeling sympathy, and other things, for Victoria herself. "She's probably your most trusted friend, and I kind of feel I've stolen you away from her. With Courtney gone rogue she probably doesn't have anyone to hang around."

Victoria looked again at Taylor, sitting alone under that tree. She seemed to be shivering slightly; those tiny shorts of hers really weren't suited to October weather in Oregon. Still, she was sure everyone appreciated the sacrifice. She looked miserable though, and not just from courting hypothermia. Max had been right, Taylor was suffering for her loyalty, an aspect to her she'd never completely appreciated before, though she had heavily relied on it. She was always too busy, bossing
people around in an endless quest to avenge the most trivial slight, and keeping the student body under her immaculate leather jackboot. Compared to what she'd been through since she followed Max into that restroom, that all seemed laughably unimportant. An idle glance from Taylor swept the grounds, and she finally registered Victoria's presence. Her eyes immediately grew wide as she smiled hopefully, cheeks a little distended as her mouth was still full of half-chewed carrot and lettuce. The way she began waving was incredibly enthusiastic, almost desperate. It was like she was a beloved pet, realising their master had returned home.

"It's unethical to neglect your slaves, Tori." Chloe agreed.

That was true, and Taylor had been a ridiculously loyal slave/friend to her. In point of fact the only one of her old guard who hadn't abandoned her. And in return she'd all but abandoned Taylor, to hangout with the resident delinquent and her mild mannered hipster friend, and swoon ridiculously over both of them. Granted it was only for a morning, but given Taylor had been ostracised by the rest of her friends, and she was dealing with her Mother about to go in for disk replacement surgery, she was probably feeling more than a little lonely right now.

"Well since you're both so keen to get rid of me, I suppose I could see how she's doing. I need to check on how that surveillance video we shot went anyway, so she might as well walk me there."

"Nice rationalisation Victoria, you wouldn't want people thinking you actually cared about others and were a decent human being." Chloe mocked gently, enjoying the conflicted annoyance that flashed across the blonde's face. "Sorry. That grumpy pout is just so fucking sexy, I kind of want to see it all the time."

"With you around, I'm sure it'll become a permanent fixture." Victoria cut back.

"Tori, wait. The camera's in my dorm room, remember. You'll need my keys." Max said, reaching into her pocket before a thought occurred. "Won't you?"

"Of course I will," Victoria replied shortly. She would too, jimmying the lock with a credit card was such a pain. Regardless, she was inwardly giddy. Max trusted her enough to lend her her dorm key.

She'd normally have left it at that, but as she turned to leave, she felt an odd sensation. A lingering need to stay close to the other two girls. She eventually realised what it was: she was seriously worried about them. She didn't want to be separated from either of them, even for a moment. It annoyed her. She was Victoria Chase; she didn't do the 'clingy emotional' thing.

"You two won't do anything stupid while I'm gone?" She asked in spite of herself.

"Victoria, who do you take us for?"

Victoria's eyes narrowed.

"Someone who's nearly been caught on both ends of a school shooting. And someone who doesn't know what the word periodic means." Her voice was harsher than she intended.

"I love you too Tori." Chloe called out, in a tone that screamed sarcasm and a look that suggested otherwise.

And then Chloe did something that made Victoria grimace. She extended her hand outward, and approached her with even more swagger than usual. Victoria's eyes immediately shot to the arm just to make sure she wasn't imagining things. It was definitely cocked at an odd angle, entirely unsuitable for a 'proper' handshake. She knew exactly what this meant: it was the opening gambit in some ridiculously convoluted series of gestures instead of the more dignified straight up and down.
Her face erupted in apparent panic, a sight that amused Chloe to no end. Awkwardly, hesitantly, she brought her own arm up to reply.

Chloe's jaw dropped in surprise: Victoria nailed the urban handshake perfectly, then pivoted and departed toward Taylor, her posture majestic and her face a picture of self-congratulation. She still felt hesitant to depart, but this seemed perfect to her as an ending note: a rival and possible love interest (or whatever they were), bested and intrigued. She reflected that she probably had Hayden to thank for this; when he had first ingratiated himself into the Vortex club, Hayden had set about giving the other 'honours students' remedial lessons in the art of the urban handshake, amused to no end as to how many times it took them all to get it right.

Of course now there was a better than average chance Hayden was involved in whatever Nathan and Jefferson had been up to. It still seemed unlikely to her. Why would he choose to involve himself in Jefferson and the Prescotts' sick extracurricular abduction group? Why would anyone for that matter? Unless he didn't choose, and it wasn't completely voluntary, she suddenly thought. They could have something on him, or any of the other mystery students involved. Still, Hayden was another 'honours student', which meant his family had considerable means. There didn't seem to be any easy avenue for coercion.

A cool sensation brought an end to Victoria's thoughts. She'd reached the shade of the tree Taylor was sitting under, and failure to stop and take in her bearings would risk Taylor going from metaphoric doormat to literal one. She looked down and saw her best friend and emergency paperweight staring back at her, fork in one hand and salad in the other.

"Sweet-T, have a free moment?" She asked.

Taylor hummed a monotone and gestured to her half-eaten lunch in response; evidently Victoria had chosen to intrude at the exact moment she'd taken another bite.

"I've always admired your ability to eat on the run, and I have a very busy schedule." She said, ignoring the way Taylor made a genuine attempt to scowl with her mouth full.

"I need to drop by the girl's dormitories, and then there's the secretarial work that backstabbing slut Courtney loaded me with for the Vortex club. Oh, and I've got some audio editing to do. You'll be a dear and keep me company, won't you?"

Taylor did her best to repress a sigh, not wanting to risk the half chewed content of her mouth being ejected all over the school grounds. Victoria was back, and offering her the chance to be her sidekick again, and that was great. Especially since everyone else in the vortex club and turned against her. On the other hand, she'd have very much liked it if Victoria had the consideration to let her finish her lunch. She realised she should have known better. Victoria was Victoria, when she had a full schedule, she just didn't think of anyone else. Brushing a strand of her long hair out of her face, Taylor snapped the plastic lid on her semi-finished lunch closed, and reached for the heavy camera bag Victoria was carrying with her free arm. It was her "privilege" as the number one slave to carry Victoria's camera. She stared blankly in disbelief as Victoria gently swatted her away.

"I think I can manage it myself, Sweet-T. Thanks for the offer though. Oh, did I interrupt your lunch? I'll buy you something much better once we get back to the main hall if you think you can wait. I'm on a fucking awful schedule."

Now this really was unusual behaviour, and it felt more than slightly unsettling. Victoria was actually being considerate, happy to carry her own things instead of using her friend as a pack mule. It left her feeling confused and idle, as if her purpose had been snatched away from her. She looked at Victoria's face and things seemed to take a further turn for the bizarre. She looked truly sympathetic,
and not in her usual "I'm so sorry you're not as good as me manner". It actually felt sincere.

"I really do appreciate you sticking by me," Victoria said quietly.

Something had definitely happened to her, it was almost like an unnatural force had her in its clutches, reshaping her to suit its whims. As they departed together, she saw Victoria briefly turn back to the school's main entrance, receiving a final goodbye wave from Max Caulfield, an innocent smile on that freckled face. Taylor watched in horror as Victoria's lower lip became an impromptu meal in response. At that moment she recalled, of all things, a book report she'd received a mediocre grade on. Its topic was an old horror story written by H.P. Lovecraft. Just for a moment, she wondered if there really were mysteries in the world that would drive you insane if you learned the truth, against which the only defence was to remain marooned on a small isle of blissful ignorance.

The moment Victoria was out of sight, Chloe's face lit up like a devil. It was a face Max knew well, one which always led them into trouble in the past. Though usually, it was trouble of the best kind.

"So, Tori's away, time for Max and Chloe to play?"

It was tempting, that grin of Chloe's was contagious. In a sense Chloe was the demon perched on Max's shoulder, dragging her off to do crazy things on impulse. She supposed in a way that made Victoria the angel, the common sense to balance out that impulsiveness, though it was incredibly disturbing to think of Victoria as an angel in any capacity.

Another glance at Chloe's sly grin and Max found herself infected with a matching smirk. It would be so, so easy just to run off and have a carefree moment, and after all the crap they'd been through that morning, she felt they both really deserved it. She managed to delay temptation, there was something, someone weighing heavily on Max's mind.

"I think I need to check in with Kate first. I said I'd meet her around this time, and you didn't hear how she sounded on the phone Chloe. It was worse than back in the dorm."

"So call her. Or text her. Then Chloe time. I mean Tori's actually surprisingly cool, and kind of sexy when she's pissed off. But I think I've had more moments alone with her than with my oldest friend, and that's a serious disturbance in the fabric of reality. We need to restore balance to the universe before it flips out and murders a bunch of innocent people!"

"You're absurd," Max replied, grinning in spite of herself, as she browsed her phone's spartan list of contact numbers. She found Kate's name and dialled. She seemed to answer almost immediately. That was a good sign, right?

"Max?" The voice on the end of the phone asked, weary and worn down. It made Max feel guilty she couldn't somehow dive through the phone, jump out the other side, and hug her. Or perhaps rush to her aid on foot. That might be more physically possible.

"I know I said I'd meet up with you, but I'm running a little late." Kate continued. "After that policeman said there was nothing they could do, I just kind of started walking. Not too far, just around town."

"That's fine Kate." Max replied. It didn't sound fine. Kate in that zombie-like state, sleep deprived and miserable, staggering around town alone. She wished they could drive back and check on her. But Chloe's truck was out of commission, and Victoria's Mercedes was still outside the two whales diner. "You'll be back for afternoon class though? I'd really like to meet up with you before then."

"I think so Max. I'm at the bus stop now. I should be back at school in twenty minutes." Kate replied
weakly, and then hung up the phone.

"So, Chloe time?" Her punk companion asked, before noticing the worry on Max's face, the guilt at feeling happy while someone she knew was suffering. It was clear she needed the sage council of someone responsible, but since no such person was available, Chloe decided to fill in.

"Look, it's hella awesome that you want to be there for Kate, but you don't need to be miserable in sympathy with her. In fact Kate needs you as infectiously cheerful as possible so you can raise her spirits. Anyway, I've thought of something productive we can do together: we've got to case the school buildings for our break-in tonight!"

"Won't people get suspicious if we start sneaking around the back of the school buildings?" Max asked, a little nervously. She'd never sneaked behind a school building before.

"Max this is a high school. There's a perfect cover for a couple of teenagers sneaking around the back of a building." Chloe sighed, grasping the top pocket of her jacket to illustrate. She squeezed gently and a pack of cigarettes peeked out. Max allowed herself a moment of semi-ironic despair. She should have realised this was going to happen the moment she started hanging around Victoria and reunited with Chloe. She was now, officially, sneaking off to have a cigarette; she was now officially on the road to becoming a bad girl. Still, lots of people experimented with worse things than a single cigarette in high school. She was sure they didn't all end up hardened criminals like drug dealers or bank robbers.

The pair walked alongside one another around the perimeter of the gym, Chloe subtly pointing out cameras that her stepfather had installed, as well as areas that would be illuminated at night, and points that would be in shadow. Then repeatedly reminding Max not to obviously gawk at them. She undoubtedly knew what she was doing, but Max was left gravely concerned: the place seemed exceptionally well canvassed, mostly from cameras attached to lamp posts surrounding the buildings rather than the buildings themselves.

"It's like every foot of the building's walls are covered."

"Step-Dork's probably especially keen on covering the outside of the gym because, unlike the main building, he can't stick cameras inside it. I mean imagine the shit-storm if someone pointed out the school was recording students in their swimsuits or worse."

The same was true for the dorms: the risk of students walking around semi-dressed meant cameras were largely restricted to the outside of the building, and couldn't cover the external windows of dorm rooms. That was part of why that 'secret' entrance to the girls' dorm they had used yesterday had gone undiscovered for so long. There was no monitoring of the external window to an out-of-service dorm room.

"Besides, not every foot's covered Max." Chloe said, pointing to a narrow space to the side of the gym, bordered by the gym's wall and a large hedge. Countless cigarette butts covered the ground there, and graffiti covered the wall. They spoke to a place the student body apparently considered free from prying eyes. Still, there weren't any entrance ways sandwiched in the small side-space, it was useless for the purposes of breaking in.

"Um, why are we ducking in here now?" Max asked as Chloe placed a hand on her back and gently pushed, guiding her behind the hedge.

"Our cover, remember. We're supposed to be looking for a quiet spot for a smoke or something. This way, we'll have a plausible story for having walked the perimeter of a building the same day it gets broken into. Just in case they bother to review the surveillance cameras that far back."
"Uh-huh. I think you're just nervous as fuck from everything that happened in the junk yard and on the road, and you want an excuse to indulge." Max teased, watching Chloe light a cigarette she'd pulled from her pocket moments earlier.

"Maybe," Chloe admitted, taking a long drag from the vice between her fingers. She exhaled slowly, sending a puff of tumbling smoke rising through the air. "Maybe this is part of a clever plan I thought up to get us alone together."

"I don't think you're that organised," Max smiled back at her.

"Maybe you motivate me. You want a drag?" She gestured to the lit cigarette, and Max watched as flakes of ash slowly fell from its tip like snow. She thought back on that time Chloe stole Joyce's wine as a child, and tried to get her to drink it. That hadn't gone so well, they'd spilled it all over the carpet, which they'd had to confess to. As far as she knew, there was still a stain there to this day. Just thinking on it made her feel hopelessly guilty.

Chloe exhaled again, and a cloud of white smoke hung in the air. Max sighed wistfully. Chloe looked incredible, like the millennial update to a noir film protagonist. Then again, that might have had less to do with the cigarette and more to do with the person holding it. Chloe could probably make dried flower arrangement look suave and dangerous. She'd wondered for years what a sip of that wine would have tasted like. And just maybe, all those life-threatening situations she seemed to be thrust into had given her a desire to experience the things she'd abstained from previously.

"Maybe just a puff. Just to see what it's like." Max said. *Smoking a cigarette behind the school gym. Was this the beginning of her descent into moral turpitude?*

Chloe proffered the half burnt cigarette. Max took it between her fingers, and the warm scent of burning tobacco slowly encompassed her. She looked nervously back at Chloe, who seemed to develop an almost knowing smile as Max experimentally placed it between her lips, then slowly, deeply inhaled; she felt herself flooded by a dry heat that laced her throat, and a slightly acrid taste against her tongue. She felt her heart race, some combination of excitement and oxygen deprivation. Mostly though, she found herself fascinated by the fact that the paper-wrapped miniaturised bonfire between her lips had been between Chloe's moments earlier. It brought back memories of sleepovers with Chloe years earlier. The inevitable revelation that Chloe had forgotten her toothbrush, and needed to borrow Max's. She'd always hated that as a child, but somehow it didn't bother her any more. Somewhere along the line, her nostalgia trip was interrupted by her body; a reminder that, yes, she'd both inhaled a massive lung-full of smoke, and stood there dreamily instead of breathing. A pair of actions that were about to combine to have some rather obvious consequences. The cigarette fell from her fingers amidst the resultant fit of coughing and wheezing.

"You really went for it first puff," Chloe remarked, trying not to smile at Max's state as she gently patted her on the back. Max felt she should have tried harder.

"That was fucking awful."

"I know," Chloe said. "Want another?"

"No," Max replied indignantly, pouting. She glared at her friend and corrupter, who backed away defensively. Then they both broke into a grin.

*This is how things are supposed to be.* Chloe thought. Her and Max back together, doing dumb shit together. Maybe they could find a place for Victoria too. They'd just have to lance her annoying sense of dignity, and everything would be amazing. Then the thought of Victoria reminded Chloe of something. A jealous barb turned chance to provoke she just couldn't turn away from.
"Hey Max. You know there was a lever right under your seat, right? Right in the middle."

"What do you mean?" Max asked, baffled at the topic and motivation for this sudden segue.

"For adjusting your seat tilt." She clarified. "You seemed comfortable enough with your makeshift arrangement though, so it didn't seem worthwhile bringing up."

Chloe took a moment to lean back against the gym wall and stretch out, deeply enjoying Max's sudden exasperation.

"Head in Tori's lap, must have been nice." She continued.

The grin on Chloe's face, her provocative inflections, both immediately told Max her friend was messing with her. Mostly. There was something a little needy in her eyes though. Max found herself rolling her own in response.

"You're unbelievable. And didn't I wake up 'in your secret place, or close to it' less than an hour ago? What are we supposed to do, go through every permutation of heads and laps. That could take forever."

"Not really, for the three of us there's only six possibilities, and you've already done two."

Max groaned. This was why her grades were only average, especially in the less creative, more pure-knowledge subjects like Math and Science. She couldn't help it; she was a photographer, not a Doctor of Philosophy.

"Honestly, I kind-of feel like a third wheel between you two," Max said. "You're both so incredibly smart and can talk about science and other nerd subjects."

She took some solace in being able to deride the areas she wasn't good at as nerd subjects, and the look of mock horror that crossed Chloe's face when she did so. There was something incredibly funny about branding someone with the reputation of Chloe Price a nerd. It was something only she would dare to do, only she could get away with, and that was completely true.

"You mean how the two of you talk about photography, and what it's like to not have been expelled from school?"

Well, she had them there. Still, Max had to make Chloe understand. It seemed incredibly important to explain to Chloe how talented and beautiful she found both her and Victoria, how she could never compare with either of them, and how perfect they looked together.

"Visually you two have a great dynamic too. It's so amazingly contrasting: you're all lean and muscled and bad ass and she's all, um, feminine. It's like you belong-"

"Dude. You're saying I'm not feminine?" Chloe interjected, putting on a slightly over the top face of faux-disappointment to try to disguise her actual disappointment. "Harsh."

"I mean curvaceous, like all the posters on your wall, and your video game hero Lara Croft. She's completely your type."

Well, yeah, she was Chloe's type. Or what she thought her type was. The moment Max walked back into her life, saving her in the process, she knew better. After some consideration she decided her type was "bad asses," a conveniently fluid classification which had no real definition beyond Max being its example par excellence.
"Max." Chloe replied, placing her hands on the smaller girl's shoulders. Their warm touch seemed to share some of her boundless energy; they made Max feel far more light-headed than that stupid cigarette. "You're your own worst enemy, always doubting yourself. Your pictures are so hellamazing I've got no fucking clue how you manage to take them with a Polaroid camera. Your mad skills intimidate the fuck out of Tori, and she's got like thousands of dollars of equipment. You just need to have the courage to take a chance. You know, put your work and maybe yourself out there. You also need to deal with the fact that you're really hot."

"I'm not-, I mean when you compare me with Tori-"

"Victoria's hot too, but she's no where near perfect Max. No one is. I mean, you might not have noticed, but her ass is bony as fuck."

Actually Max had noticed that. Victoria did have that tendency to subconsciously lean over desks in her presence, swaying her hindquarters like a pendulum in a grandfather clock. She might have been a little more generous though, and used the term tight. She'd only call it bony if Victoria had done something to piss her off. So maybe it was mostly bony after all. A good sort of bony though, one that left her curious as to just how bony it was. Maybe.

"I guess she's no Rachel Amber," Max admitted.

"She's no Max Caulfield either," Chloe remarked, glancing slyly at Max's hindquarters. Max felt a blush creep across her cheeks. She looked straight back at Chloe, who immediately looked the other way in the most unsubtle way imaginable. Honestly, Chloe was such a pathetic dork sometimes. Her pathetic dork.

"Seriously, though. Your behind is fine. Sure Rachel's was um..." Words apparently failed Chloe, as she chose to express herself by making an exaggerated hand gesture Max felt bordered on obscene. "But you've got this hella cute bubble butt that's proportionate and perfect in those snug jeans of yours. I'm sure the boys check you out all the time."

"Not fine enough to warrant a physical gesture, though." Max countered.

"A physical gesture requires a physical examination, Max. Otherwise it wouldn't be accurate."

Chloe grinned awkwardly and extended her arms toward Max, another callback to their childhood. She'd lost count of the number of time's Chloe took it upon herself to chase her, threatening some nebulously defined doom at her hands if she caught up. Chloe never did manage to catch her though. In hindsight it was a little suspicious, Chloe was always so much fitter and stronger than her, even then. Max, comparatively, waddled like a duck rather than ran, so Chloe should have been able to catch her easily enough. Being chased around, laughing like kids again didn't seem so bad. But something of Chloe's diatribe about taking chances must have resonated with her, because she decided to do something different. Grinning back at Chloe, just as she had so many times previously, Max took a small step forward.

Chloe froze instantly, and her mind went into overload. She hadn't planned what to do if Max didn't attempt escape. Max always attempted escape, back when they were younger. She stood awkwardly, her hands sticking outward at odd angles in faux-menacing posture, while Max stepped closer, easily in range of her grasp, so close she could just about feel the heat of her body. She was right there, looking upward, eyes hopeful and smiling and God, she was subconsciously wetting her lips with a slight brush of her tongue. Chloe's mind raced, trying to figure out what to do. She'd been called out. Max wasn't supposed to call her out. She'd wished forever that Max would call her out. This was bullshit. How'd she go from "The Price" to shoujo manga protagonist in two seconds? Then she looked back at the broad smile on Max's face and felt her throat go dry, and she had her answer.
"This kind-of feels like the wrong order of things." Max finally said. Seeing Chloe reduced to a confused mess, utterly paralysed with indecision and virtually panicking, tugged at her heartstrings. She needed to give her an out.

"What would the right order be Max?" Chloe replied, her blue hair contrasted by her cheeks rapidly becoming scarlet. "Dance? Dinner? A movie? A kiss?" She cringed as her voice cracked on that last item.

"I've never kissed anyone." Max admitted. "Not properly."

The closest she'd come was kissing Victoria on the cheek, after seeing Chloe do much the same thing. But while Victoria's cheek had felt soft, the repeat victim of an exorbitant skincare regime, she was certain lips would have been so much better.

"Max, eighteen and not having kissed anyone?" Chloe asked in disbelief.

Max felt she could have been a little more sensitive about it. Apparently so did Chloe, because what she said next was delivered in a far quieter tone. It was almost shy, but laced with excitement.

"We need to fix this. I, um, I dare you to kiss me. Consider it my late birthday present to you or something. Completely for your benefit." Her heart thumped, and she couldn't believe how lame she sounded. There was no way Max would go for it, but what if she did?

"Behind a school building?" Max queried. It wasn't exactly the most romantic locale.

"Why not? It's the traditional place when you go through a rebellious phase. Smoke a cigarette behind the gym. Kiss a hella fine girl behind the gym." Her voice quaked with nervous energy. She felt worse than when that fucking truck tried to crash into them. "Come on, I double-dare you, kiss me now."

Max regarded her with scepticism for a moment that stretched on forever; those wide hazel eyes gazing into her piercing blue ones in disbelief, and Chloe knew she'd made a terrible mistake. She'd overstretched; Max wasn't ready for this, or didn't want this. She probably wanted Victoria, if she wanted anyone at all; she was always talking about how 'feminine' her body was. Not the freakishly muscled punk. Blood rushed from her head, leaving it suddenly cold as she realised the extent of her fuck up. She'd been given the greatest second chance in history, literally raised from the dead by her oldest and closest friend, and reunited with her. She should have been satisfied with that, instead she'd spoiled it all. She was going to end up outcast and forever alone, maybe even co-founding a support group for people Max had rejected with that weird guy Warren. Consigned to hanging out with him for all eternity, discussing the many feminist virtues of "Beneath the valley of the ultra-vixens" and other Russ Meyer films.

Then suddenly, those hazel eyes closed, and Max was moving toward her. That kind face she thought she'd nearly lost suddenly so very close. She must have gone on tiptoes too, because she seemed taller, almost intimidating. Chloe failed to repress a shiver as slender fingers gently brushed her cheeks in passing, warmth radiating from every casual caress as they moved to cup her face. One lingered with a thumb on her cheek, brushing away a rogue tear that probably made her look like a complete wimp. The other hand travelled further, cradling the back of her head, not exactly preventing a retreat, but gently protesting against it. She felt their noses bump, and there was a kind-of awkward pause that lasted both an eternity and a second, after which Max belatedly tilted her head sideways. She barely repressed a gasp as she felt the touch of something soft as velvet; the touch of Max cautiously, experimentally pressing those wonderfully full lips against her own.

An instant later the moment seemed to shatter, and Max's eyes sprung open in disbelief. She already
knew what had happened: she'd felt Chloe slip away from her grip, stumbling backward. Being able to look her in the eye told her why. The uncertainty, the fear of loss and a need to protect what she already had, showed in those eyes. In a strange way it was almost gratifying: for all her devil may care attitude, and talk about taking chances, Chloe would never chance losing her. It was still incredibly infuriating, especially since she'd put her up to it. She was already working her idiot grin back onto her face too, probably intent on passing everything off as some stupid joke again. Max had always loved that grin, but for one brief instant she managed to hate it utterly.

Something inside Max broke; she felt haunted by visions of this happening over and over. Countless different locales, but always the same scenario. Chloe provoking, hinting and finally daring her nervously, and then backing-out at the last moment, trying to cut her losses and laugh it all off. She refused to let that happen again. Finding a second reserve of courage, Max closed the distance between them in less than a blink of an eye, managing to firmly, gently push Chloe at the exact moment she was off balance. She charged forward as Chloe stumbled backward, and Arcadia Bay's foremost delinquent found herself nearly swept off her feet, pinned against the gym wall by Max's lithe body. They held each other's gaze and felt their hearts thump in unison.

"Max-" Chloe began, half a whisper and half a moan between suddenly laboured breaths. Whatever she was planning on saying it was abruptly cut off as Max leaned toward her once more, this time catching Chloe mid sentence with her lips open and unguarded.

Max's lips pressed against Chloe's a second time, and it was so incredibly different from the first attempt. Desperation and need on both sides, the border between them blurring, melting away into something perfectly warm and indistinct. The sensation of something softer than marshmallow in her mouth, incredibly illusive, teasing and frustrating her attempts to really taste it, yet always returning to provide another chance. And the feeling of Chloe's strong hands, each finding its way to her nearest flank, slowly travelling down until they came to rest on the flair of her hips and maybe slightly further back. She pressed herself into them as they squeezed gently. In that moment it all seemed perfect; she was sure it wasn't actually perfect, it was clumsy, desperate, and at least one of the two of them probably should have swallowed their saliva before going for it, though she wasn't sure who. But somehow it just all felt right.

When they finally broke apart, it was only because Max was desperate for air. It left her reflecting that, in stark contrast to that stupid cigarette, Chloe's lips were totally worth asphyxiating herself on. Breathing deeply, she quickly wiped her face with the back of her hand, and breaking a thin strand of saliva that stubbornly hung between them. God, this felt embarrassing. There was another awkward pause, until finally they both started grinning like idiots, and fell into a warm hug that Chloe was just a little slow at reciprocating properly. It did mean taking her hands off Max's behind.

"Wowsers."

Max knew one of them was bound to say it, but she never imagined it would be Chloe, nor that she'd deliver it with so much sincerity.

"Your technique's pretty alpha Max, in a romantic poet kind of way." The punk quickly added, trying and hopelessly failing to resurrect her usual brash persona. "All gently cupping my face, just like your first crush Richard Gere does."

"Richard Gere was never my first crush." Max protested. "I just thought he was a really good kisser. His co-stars always looked so happy, I guess I wanted-"

"Oh, so you imagined yourself as him. I can see why. All those fine ladies falling at your knees, or slightly higher."
"You're such a headache. You always go like this with me. With everyone else, you literally sweep them off their feet without even trying. With me you go all stupid. You've had all that practice, and it still took you two tries to remember what to do."

"It's because you keep sweeping me off my feet first, Max. Literally that last time." Chloe replied, trying to joke while being completely truthful. It had been kind-of amazing the way Max had just gone for it, and found the perfect moment to catch her off balance. "Seriously, this is the best thing that's happened to me in fucking ages."

"You're exaggerating." Max replied. Her smile screamed out, 'tell me more' though. Something Chloe was happy to indulge. "Besides I saved your life yesterday, and today. Aren't those moments more important than a kiss?"

"I look at it this way. You may have saved my life, but thanks to what you just did, I can now die happy."

"One kiss from me is not worth dying for." Max laughed.

"I told you not to sell yourself short, Max." Chloe winked back at her. "So what's next for conquering hero Maximus? You've obviously got me completely at your mercy, so I doubt you'll have any trouble with whatever you're up against next."

Max thought about that, and the smile she'd been wearing evaporated.

"What, did I say something dumb again? Shit. Talk to me Max, what's-"

"Jefferson." She answered. "His class is next, so I've got to face him. God, how do I do that? I'm going to see him, and the fear, the anger at knowing what that monster really is will show up all over my face. How do I stop him from seeing that?"

"Brutal honesty? Or supportive pipe dream?" Chloe asked.

"Honesty." Max demanded.

"You've got no chance."

That didn't exactly fill her with confidence, though she did ask for it. The way Chloe placed her arms on her shoulders wasn't an entirely unwelcome invasion though.

"Your feelings always do show on your face Max. It's one of your most endearing features. You aren't going to be able to hide them. But you could always sell them as strong feelings of a different kind. I mean, this guy Jefferson. Kind of a self-aggrandising asshole?"

"Yes."

Max had felt that to some extent even before they'd been exposed to the truth about him. Always acting so aloof and above everyone. At the time she'd thought he'd earned that right. Now he seemed beneath contempt to her.

"And you're supposed to be handing in some photo for extra credit, that you kind-of need good marks on?"

Max nodded slowly.

"Then just pretend you're in awe of the creep's greatness and worried your photo isn't good enough."
Anxiety over handing in a photo? Max felt she just might be able to sell that. There was nothing she was more confident in than her own lack of confidence, recently found ability to shove a certain punk against the wall and have her way with her notwithstanding.

"Anyway Max, I think I've learned something incredibly important from all of this."

Max was about to retort 'that knowing was half the battle', when her jaw suddenly went slack as Chloe mimed exactly what she'd learned from all of this, her strong hands tracing the silhouette of a behind they'd just taken liberties from. It was every bit as indecent as the one she'd mimed for Rachel's, and obviously grossly exaggerated. Or at least Max desperately hoped it was.

Max felt flabbergasted, and also strangely pleased. She decided it was the perfect moment to practice Chloe's own suggestion about concealing one feeling with another, so abruptly turned about face and walked off indignantly, doing her best to mock the way Victoria strutted when personally offended. Besides, it gave her the perfect chance to extract a tissue and wipe off the back of her hand. It felt kind of gross, coated in the wet from their lips, as well as a trickle of blood from her nose that she'd prefer Chloe didn't notice. Like she'd said, Chloe could be such a headache sometimes. Completely worth a second chance though, and she'd happily bend reality to give her that chance every time.

Across the lawn, Justin sat, slumped against one of the free-standing exhibition cases that displayed Jefferson's photos. He was still high as a kite and found endless amusement in taking in the various mundane wonders of nature, such as the rustle of a tree's branches in the wind, or the odd swarming of a flock of birds. He couldn't look at the storm-water drain on the street, though. That was terrifying. His best friend Trevor stood next to him glancing around nervously, ready to quietly usher his friend away from the general area if an authority figure suddenly appeared. He watched as Justin's head snapped around, a new wonder grabbing his attention.

"She's like a fucking rainbow waterfall, man." Justin groaned, while nursing his stomach. As fun as hallucinogenic mushrooms were, they did not agree with his digestive system.

Trevor followed Justin's eye-line and saw Chloe Price appear from behind a hedge near the gymnasium. She was alongside Max Caulfield, who seemed to be leaving the area with an overly dramatic sense of purpose while trying not to smile like a million dollars.

"Give it a rest, we all heard you back in the diner. Besides, only a complete moron wouldn't realise that Price-"

"Not Price. Max. She's like the Sun. Price is more like the Moon. She glows, but she's not the source."

"I hope you're not suggesting Price is an orbiter," he quipped, then found himself squinting in disbelief. It really did seem like Max was the one leading, with 'The Price' in tow, equal parts hopeful and needy. It actually looked kind of pathetic.

"She's making the same face you did on the phone to Dana this morning." Justin shared helpfully and Trevor hung his head, realising he was hardly in a position to judge.
I think we all wished there was an underline option if you chose to rewind the Wednesday choice to kiss Chloe in the original game. Something along the lines of /really/ kiss Chloe, where Max completely sweeps her off her feet, so she can't back out of it.

Speaking of Max and kissing, the way Max kisses Chloe in the game is pretty good for a first time kiss. Gently cupping her face as she goes in and everything. It really reminded me of Richard Gere's usual fare the first time I saw it. Hence why we get Chloe mentioning it here, and Max mentioning him when she and Victoria discuss movie romances at the end of day one.

In the original game, I think there may be some drawings indicating that David planned to place surveillance cameras inside the girl's dorm. I really don't like that idea, it seems both creepy and like a lawsuit waiting to happen, so in this story, he's been far more circumspect in the choice of camera locations.
Reflections

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

There was a certain serenity amongst the halls of the Prescott dorm, with virtually all the students elsewhere, either enjoying their lunch break, or imagining how they might have enjoyed it were they not on detention. The quiet was perturbed only by the voice of Taylor Christensen, who enthusiastically relayed the enormous amount of gossip she'd accumulated within the period of one morning to Victoria: Dana Ward had 'officially' hooked up with some skater, and a betting pool had been started as to whether this boyfriend would last a week; Courtney was continuing to throw her weight around like a prize bitch as Vortex Club chair, the unsaid connotation being that most people wouldn't notice the difference between Victoria's rule and Courtney's; Juliet Watson's boyfriend (and football team quarterback) Zachery Riggins had apparently undergone a transformation, his previously wandering eyes now regarded other girls with guarded suspicion for reasons unknown. Victoria sighed. This had all seemed so important to her just a few days ago. Now with life-threatening adventure being the new norm, it was pedestrian; little more than a burden she was expected to bear to justify her position as high school royalty.

They both came to a halt at the end of the dorm's corridor, where Max and Victoria's rooms sat opposite one another, glaring each other down in an eternal stand-off. Victoria noted, with some small gratitude, that her door had been repaired. Aside from needing a new coat of paint it looked perfect, or as perfect as possible for a penny pinching school looking to fix dilapidated student accommodation on the cheap. As soon as the paint job had been finished, there'd be no external indication anything had ever happened. Her room's interior was another matter, one she'd have to put right herself eventually once she felt up to it. She ran her hand down the side of the door, feeling the smooth wood and remembering how just that morning it had been a mess of hewed splinters. It had had all the hallmarks of Nathan Prescott's berserk rage. Only it couldn't have been Nathan. Chloe had given him an airtight alibi in the form of an ambulance ride. It didn't seem the work of Daphne Grey, she might be able to sneak into the school undetected, but vandalising the property of a target like this, tipping off her target and leaving evidence just wasn't her style. That meant someone else was out to get her. Someone in addition to Sean Prescott, his hit-bitch and that ghost. Victoria sighed. Perhaps they'd care to take a number and get in line?

Averting her gaze from the door, Victoria quickly found something else to offend her. Someone had scrawled a cartoon on the small personal whiteboard next to her room. It showed a rather unflattering caricature of her fainting in the arms of a shorter girl, who was saying "wowsers you're heavy." Victoria studied the scrawl carefully, trying to deduce the artist, and managing a smile at the thought of what she'd do to them. She immediately ruled out Kate, the art style wasn't adorable enough. And she was so insufferably pure, she'd never resort to any sort of revenge. Probably not that overexposed ditz Dana either, she might well resort to revenge, but wouldn't drag Max into it; she'd also keep her co-bimbo Juliet from involving Max, so not her either. Courtney lacked the artistic talent, primarily taking liberal arts subjects, rather than fine arts and photography. Realistically any other student could have been involved, and while she was sure more than a few were 'jealous' enough to want to take her down a peg, those four were the ones she'd really managed to especially offend. Well, at least this week.

"Oh, no." Taylor griped, providing a distraction from the apparently fruitless search for a suspect. "Victoria. I just realised. Your new door has a different lock. You'll totally have to see the custodian to get the new key, before we can get in. Unless you want to..."
Victoria smirked at the suggestion. The locks the school put on the dorm rooms were pathetic, more designed to keep privacy than keep out a determined thief. There was no need to properly pick them. Slipping a bit of strong wire or string around the exposed bolt and pulling, or pressing down with a credit card could overwhelm the bolt's spring allowing instant access. A fair number of the students knew how to pull that little trick off too, either from a desire to maliciously prank one another, or simply to regain access to their rooms if they locked themselves out. That made her door's forcing seem oddly gratuitous. Perhaps the perpetrator wasn't from the girl's dorm. Or perhaps they just really wanted to send a message.

"Doesn't matter. We're not here for my room." Victoria answered to Taylor's surprise. Besides, she didn't want to have to deal with seeing her room like that again. Not if she could put it off. Instead she revealed the key Max had given her. "I left what I needed in Max's room."

Taylor nodded slowly. She thought about saying nothing, whatever was going on with Victoria and Max seemed to be making Blackwell's student queen a vastly more pleasant person. On the other hand, since she'd witnessed that 'spontaneous hugging' incident in the middle of class and everything that succeeded it, she was overwhelmed with curiosity. She simply had to pry.

"Honestly, Victoria, what's up with you and Calf-field? I know you always had this odd fascination with her. But yesterday it's like everything went crazy. Suddenly you're literally jumping into her arms after class-"

"I felt ill and fainted. She just caught me." Victoria protested. Not that she considered jumping into Max's arms entirely objectionable any more.

"Fainted in her arms after class." Taylor corrected. Somehow that sounded even worse. "Then you two rushed off to the bathroom with your fingers linked. You suddenly installed her in the Vortex Club, you and her disappeared together after school last night, and did it again this morning. You totally even spent the night in her room; and now she trusts you with her keys so-"

"Don't try to insinuate something crude!" Victoria snapped, as she gently inserted the key into Max's lock. She carefully rotated it and pushed, causing the hinges to groan slightly. She made a mental note to buy Max some lubricant. "I only stayed in her room because my own place was trashed, and we're only here now because I left some things in there, and-"

She felt Taylor regarding her knowingly.

"And there's a small chance that I'm completely fucking smitten with her." Victoria finally admitted, resting her forehead on the door frame in defeat.

"I knew it. I SO fucking knew it. Ever since you saw her walk into the class near the start of term, you've been splitting your attention between her and Jefferson. So, does that mean last night..."

"We slept. That's it." She decided not to mention that Max had some rather unconventional dreams, which seemed to drive deviously errant hands. And what the hell did she mean 'ever since Max first walked into the class'? She'd treated Max as the enemy until yesterday. A worthy if duplicitous enemy, who expertly milked the sympathy angle to gain more and more attention. It had been so frustrating watching her day after day dithering around, pretending she wasn't completely fucking amazing. She took a deep breath, and contemplated her own thoughts for a moment. In hindsight, perhaps it was possible that she had slightly mixed feelings about Max Caulfield all along.

"I'll tell you more later, maybe." She answered, her face red with a revelation that was obvious to everyone not blind. She didn't want to talk about it there though. There was still the matter of that warning from the future. That Max's room had somehow been bugged. The last thing she needed..."
"So, Calf-field's room." Taylor said, as the door swung open. She snooped around casually, while Victoria made a bee-line for the window, and the video camera she needed. Truth be told, this wasn't the first time Taylor Christensen had been in Max's room. Shortly after the start of term, she'd been forced to aid Victoria in a clandestine search. "Gathering intelligence on the enemy," Victoria had called it. Creepy, but you had to see it from Victoria's point of view. For years she'd tried and failed to kiss up to Mr Jefferson, both figuratively and literally. It had hurt, the casual dismissiveness. It began with a single birthday present: a book collecting his work given to her by some uncle. She forgot which. The shots in it were all so incredible, and also a little mature and edgy, in a completely tasteful way of course. It had all been so different from the 'boring stuff' in her school's art class; for a girl on the brink of adolescence they were captivating. Soon after, she had all his photography books, and poured over them relentlessly in her spare time, got to know it, and him. It was only natural to think they'd developed some sort of connection.

Then she'd finally attended one of his exhibitions. She'd tried to introduce herself as confidently as ever. Demonstrate her vast knowledge of his work, perhaps even provide her own critique of it. Real artists liked that right? He'd said hello of course, remarked on her precociousness, then made it clear he needed to attend some other young talent, who he subsequently spent the whole event with. The same thing happened at every other exhibition or event of Jefferson's she'd attended. The faces changed, but there was always someone else. Young and fresh-faced and not half as dedicated. She'd thought things might be different once she began attending Blackwell: directly submitting her work to him, he'd have to acknowledge her ability. It turned out the only difference was the other young talent now had a name. That name had been Rachel Amber, and she had the perfect face to go with it. Perfect almost everything. When she just up and vanished last year, hope stirred again. Next term, it would finally be her turn!

Victoria barely gave the new girl, who had mysteriously appeared at the back of his class a couple of days into the term, a second thought. Sure she'd done her usual superficial appraisal, noted that she was "obviously malnourished, but not without charm, from a certain angle, in some ridiculously wholesome waif-like way that neither her nor Taylor could pull off. Beautiful, slender wrists and potentially magnificent lips, if only she had the confidence to pick a stronger shade of lipstick to make them pop." She was prepared to leave things at that unless this new girl stepped out of line; perhaps even consider drawing her into the vortex club. Just so that ridiculously wholesome innocence of hers could contrast and highlight Victoria's more mature charm, of course.

Then Jefferson introduced her: Max Caulfield, his personally selected "scholarship student." All she did was bat her wide innocent eyes, grab her elbow awkwardly and claim she wasn't worthy, then milk more sympathy with some sob story. How she still wasn't one hundred percent from her illness that had made her miss the school's orientation. How she still had an awful headache. That just lead to more praise. More congratulations. The vortex club invitation was summarily destroyed, and replaced with plans for a clandestine break in. Victoria simply had to see what was special about her, beyond the obvious superficial things she'd already catalogued: her eyes and her lips, those fucking adorable freckles and her dainty little arms.

And so, one slightly scratched Platinum credit card later, they had broken into this "Max Caulfield's" room and were conducting an intense search for her professional portfolio. She didn't seem to have one though. Victoria couldn't believe it: what the hell kind of career-minded photographer didn't have a portfolio? The closest thing she had found was an old cardboard box labelled "OK photos". They were all taken with some shitty old Polaroid camera, and yet they were all good. Some incredible. Taylor remembered Victoria obsessing over just about everything in the box, labelling shot after shot tacky and cliché while looking more nervous and insecure with herself with each
successive one.

The most obvious difference between then and now was that many of those photos now adorned her wall. It was unnerving, almost like the photos they'd snooped through were now returning the favour, the many faces of Max Caulfield watching them in judgement. Not that Victoria's room was much better: she had huge, professionally taken photos of herself directly above her bed.

*Perhaps Max and Victoria were perfect for each other. Taylor mused idly. They both seemed to revere their own images in a manner that borders on narcissism.*

A few feet from her objective, Victoria froze in her tracks, witness to a tragedy, a scene of death. Max had a potted plant, which she'd given the name "Lisa" according to the scrawl on its flower pot. And the tense used there was completely appropriate. "She" was in a very sorry state, thin trunk drooped to the floor, leaves wilted and pathetic. An experimental prod of the dirt with a finger revealed it was bone-dry. She recalled Lisa looking better in the morning, and supposed she might have been saved if they'd acted then. It was all too late now, of course. Max had been too busy, caught up with a battery of tasks designed to keep them and the rest of the town's populous alive, to really think about something as mundane as watering her plant. Still, no doubt Arcadia Bay's denizens would be appreciative of Lisa's sacrifice to save them all. She carefully stepped over her broken, desiccated form as it lay helpless on the ground, and reached for the video camera.


"Right, the plant." Victoria replied. All very tragic, but that wasn't what had upset her. The camera's alignment had clearly been very subtly altered. Her fist balled in frustration. Max just had to put her own little touch on the shot, didn't she? Even after the previous alignment had been declared perfect. Not that it mattered for a surveillance film, but Max always found a way to frustrate the hell out of her. She couldn't even bitch about it to Taylor (which was the main dynamic of their friendship, really). That would lead to questions as to what the camera was supposed to be aligned with.

"Let's go." She finally said quietly, while removing the camera from its stand, and shoving it into a free partition of her camera bag.

"You needed your video camera? Why was that in Calf-field's room?"

"It was one of the few valuables not smashed by the vandal. With my door lock broken, I decided to stow it in Max's place." Victoria said, dredging up the excuse she'd carefully rehearsed on the way there. She trusted Taylor, but if the truth even accidentally got out that they'd been surveilling the exact point where Jefferson's lackey had been lured to, at the exact time of the lure, things could become complicated. She let out a silent sigh of relief when Taylor seemingly bought the answer without question.

As they turned to leave, Taylor once again offered to carry her bag. Once again Victoria declined, causing a despondent look to hang over her friend's face. She felt conflicted. Hanging around Max and Chloe somehow made her feel guilty for treating Taylor like her personal servant, yet her blonde companion seemed genuinely upset when unburdened with Victoria's kit. It was like her place in the world had been torn away from her, and she didn't know what to do with herself. It reminded her of some British period drama she'd watched once about life in an aristocratic manor, where a newly assigned valet was horrified to discover his master actually knew how to dress himself, rendering his entire profession obsolete.
Of course there was one overriding factor for Victoria insisting on carrying her own luggage: she really didn't want to lose custody of that pistol; unlike Chloe, she lacked a bulky jacket to secret it away behind, so the bag was really the only place she could carry it. It was all too easy to imagine a scenario where Taylor, desperate to be of help as always, reached into her bag looking for a replacement lens or something and instead found a lethal weapon, perhaps even pulling it out and showing everyone else nearby in a moment of stunned stupor. She briefly entertained an alternate solution, strapping the gun to her thigh above her skirt-line, living out a long-time fantasy of becoming the fem-fatale from an espionage movie. As usual, reality interceded to ruin a perfectly serviceable fantasy: the gun Chloe had stolen was too bulky to be worn garter-strapped. Perhaps next time Chloe could be considerate enough to steal her a Beretta 418 or Walther PPK?

As the two girls began walking out, something metallic glistened from Max's wardrobe; catching Victoria's eye and tempting her. It was a tin of cookies, the one Max had offered her a selection from in an attempt to cheer her up after they discovered her room had been vandalised. A partially successful attempt, in spite of the depths of misery she'd been exposed to; those things were divine, and her mouth watered just looking at them. They called out to her and she acted without thinking, beginning to reach out. She caught herself. There was trust between Max and her now. She couldn't go around stealing her delicious chocolate chipped treats. And what if Max somehow caught her?

What are the chances of that happening? Some dark corner of her mind shot back. Taylor's actually understating things when she says you've been obsessing over her. You're practically worshipping her like a deity. You need to prove to yourself that you can still get away with something, anything, behind her back. Otherwise you'll end up little more than her "Taylor with benefits", kissing her dainty little all-powerful hands and anywhere else she desires.

Victoria's hand still hovered above the tin, indecision rendering it as effectual as the claw in one of those fucking crane games. She could feel Taylor watching her, giggling quietly to herself. Her last loyal follower laughing at how weak she'd become, how weak tiny little Max had made her.

"Victoria, you're not afraid of Calf-field?" Taylor gently mocked. She was met with a moment of silence. Blackwell's queen-in-exile could hardly explain that Max had these ridiculous powers that surged out of the slender fingers on her petite little hand and changed the course of history. That behind those freckled cheeks was a streak of righteous fury, terrifying and captivating. And if that weren't enough she had this ridiculously hot muscular delinquent wrapped around her little finger, who could reduce you to a pulp in seconds. And seduce you almost as quickly.

"Are you?"

"Of course not." Victoria snapped back. In spite of all that, she'd come around to associating safety with being in Max's arms. And safety from being hurt with Chloe's, though she felt certain other dangers resulted from being in her grasp. Fates that she might enjoy on some level.

She made a decision. She'd just reimburse Max later. Buy her a year's supply of cookies or something. That would assuage her conscience. She had to do this now though. One little completely pathetic secret she could hold onto behind Max's back. Just to keep her sane. Just to prove Max wasn't a god. Her hand moved. She felt the tin's cold metal touch her fingertips.

A sudden buzzing startled her, and the final fantasy victory fanfare rang out, the message received tone she'd set on her phone for texts from Max. It sent a shock down her spine, and she halted immediately. Gingerly taking her phone in hand, she read the incoming text.

Max: If you and Taylor want, you can have a cookie or two. You know which tin they're in. ;)

For the longest time, Victoria just stared at the message, dumbstruck. A daydream of Max, glowing
in translucent and barely secured white robes assailed her mind, her every slight curve visible in silhouette. She looked up at the vision, kneeling in a position of reverence, desperate to moan at the sight but unable to do so. Her lips had far too important a job, surrounding and gently worshipping the lithe fingers on that all-powerful hand.

Taylor's hand gently shook Victoria's shoulder, snapping her back to reality. She was greeted by the sight of the cookie tin lidless, exposing its indecently delicious content, the sound of teeth munching cookie, and the sensation of her own lips quivering to the memory of that daydream. Taylor must have looked over her shoulder, read the message, and helped herself while her imagination indulged itself. She brought her hand to her lips and tried to still them. Sucking at Max's fingers? What the hell was she thinking?

"I'm sure the message is coincidental." Victoria said, trying to keep an even tone. "Max is a kind generous person who decided to offer us a small baked good that she knows I enjoy."

"Duh, of course it is." Taylor replied, brushing a crumb from her mouth. "It's not like she can see the future."

You really think Victoria wants my cookies?" Max asked absent-mindedly, as she walked together with Chloe along Blackwell Academy's front lawn. A cool breeze brushed against her face, and she felt her lips tingle from its gentle bite. Or perhaps from the memory of how they'd pressed against a certain blue-haired girl's lips, after throwing said girl up against the wall. Did I really do that? She constantly asked herself since then. She'd been so aggressive. She idly brushed a finger across the corner of the smile that had permanently fixed her lips since that moment. Then she looked across at Chloe, who returned her smile in an uncharacteristically nervous fashion, her cheeks slightly flushed.

Yes, I really did that.

"Max, everyone wants your cookies." Chloe replied in a way that made Max question if she was really referring to delicious buttery treats, or at least the kind you baked in the oven. "Victoria probably more than most. Rachel always used to say she had a sweet tooth and that she couldn't handle spontaneous generosity, so tickling both spots is gonna hella mess with her."

The strange thing was, since that moment, their conversation had kept gravitating toward Victoria. Perhaps they needed a pause to digest what they'd just done, and the idiosyncrasies of Victoria Maribeth Chase were a convenient diversion. Or perhaps they'd both kind of been waiting for a chance to talk about her behind her back. They seemed to have a lot to discuss: How she was always calling them idiots; how her left sock probably cost more than their combined wardrobes, how she always seemed to need to prove herself, and how intoxicating the scent of her perfume was.

"I think you're overselling the effect a cookie can have." Max smiled back at her. "It's not like she's blue, furry and googly eyed. Besides, I don't actually want to mess with her. I just want to be nice."

That wasn't entirely truthful. Part of her did want to mess with Victoria, just a little. She felt a slight thrill every time she managed to provoke, mildly offend or otherwise grab Victoria Maribeth Chase's attention.

"OK let me follow this logic." Chloe said, her tone gently mocking. "In order to be nice to her, you have to deny her something you know she'd enjoy, because you know she'd enjoy it?"

Well, yes. When put that way, that did sound a bit stupid.

"It just feels, I don't know, a little manipulative." Max tried to explain. "With these weird powers, I feel I should be especially careful of that. The things I could do-"
"Max, it's just a biscuit. It's not like you're manipulating her into falling in love with you." Chloe replied, a provocative grin lighting up her face. She expected Max to laugh that off. Perhaps call her a dork again, at worst jab her lightly with her elbow. Instead Max's smile, which up until that moment had been gloriously radiant, suddenly became a little laboured, and the only thing Max did with her elbow was nervously grab at it herself.

"You're not, are you?" Chloe asked.

"Of course not." Max replied. The idea was abhorrent. It was also uncomfortably close to what had actually happened. How her future self had hurt Victoria in order to engineer her figurative and literal falling into her arms. The memory felt like it was haunting her: it was easy enough to ignore while dealing with a near continuous onslaught of threats, but it always seemed to slink back into prominence to spoil a blissful moment of peace. Whispering in her ear that, somewhere down the line, she was going to turn into a monster.

"But..."

"But, what?" Chloe asked, discarding most of her front, her usual attempts at humour. There was real concern in her voice now. "Max, you can tell me anything. You know that right?"

Max remained silent, reliving the moment inside her head. Watching Victoria's legs suddenly give way, and her head clash against the table with a decidedly unhealthy crack. Rushing to her, witnessing the extent of her injuries, blood oozing onto her hands. Then undoing everything, feeling relief wash over her at having duplicated whatever she'd done in the girl's bathroom to reverse time, seeing Victoria's injuries evaporate with the wave of a hand. Desperately clutching the statuesque blonde to prevent events from repeating. And perhaps gaining a heightened appreciation as to just how statuesque Victoria Maribeth Chase was, and also how fragile. Vulnerable, like a small animal that arched its back and hissed at anyone who approached it out of fear. Someone she wanted to protect and coddle, to reassure that nothing bad would ever happen again, that she wouldn't allow anything bad to happen again. Like she had last night.

How could she explain any of that to Chloe though? Having those kinds of feelings now, after their first real romantic moment together, felt like a betrayal. At the same time she found herself suddenly burdened by a guilty feeling, that there might have been something unsaid but somehow implicitly agreed on between herself and the statuesque blonde. Something she might have just betrayed behind the school gymnasium. Then on another level, it felt the height of insincerity having those feelings toward Victoria in the first place, given she'd been the one to endanger her. And there was the corresponding fear that she was doing worse, and for far longer, to Chloe. Reshaping her whole life, giving her the impression that Max Caulfield wasn't just some insecure coward, too busy feeling sorry for herself to reach out to someone in far greater need. She thought of her future self, so hesitant to explain anything to them. Perhaps she'd done so much, reduced everyone to puppets and woven such a tangled web from tugging their strings, that revealing the full truth would destroy her in their eyes. Was that what she was absolutely going to become? Or could she still manage to become someone else?

"Max?"

"I guess I worry I'm not as good a person as I like to think I am." Max replied quickly.

"Pffffff," Chloe snorted. "Max, you're only a soiled diaper short of Gandhi. Seriously, you know all the dumb shit I'd probably do if I had your powers? Basically all you've been doing is helping people avoid tragedy and trying to catch serious criminals. Even your edgy-as-fuck future-self's just trying to save everyone."
"My future-self's got some strange ways of going about it though, Chloe." Max said. She paused, wondering how much she should explain. How much she had the courage to explain. "She plays with people's pasts and even hurts them if she thinks it will further whatever she's up to. She's someone I don't think I want to become."

Chloe rolled her eyes.

"If you mean shanking Mark Fuckerson, it sounds like he totally had it coming."

"Not just Fuckerson." Max replied, a smile forcing its way back onto her face in spite of everything. Something about how Chloe threw crude insults around was just kind of funny. Then, craning her neck back to meet Chloe's eyes, she was met with an uncharacteristically thoughtful and concerned look, for just an instant. It evaporated within a second, replaced by her trademark confident smile that seemed to all but guarantee everything was going to be fine.

"Max." She began, her words just as soothing as the warm hands that came to rest on Max's shoulders. "I know you're a force for good, and that's something that will never change, no matter what's in your future."

"How can you be sure though?" Max asked.

"That's my superpower." Chloe said with a wink that left Max staring at her with mild incredulity. "What, you got time travel so don't be too jealous, even though knowing Max Caulfield's heart is objectively a better power. It's got a more interesting origin story, too. Remind me to tell you all about it sometime."

*Just about anything would be a better origin story than randomly discovering superpowers at a highly convenient moment.* Max thought. Not that somehow having the power to save her oldest friend at the right moment wasn't hugely appreciated, and something she was glad to exploit to it's fullest extent.

"So anyway." Chloe said, goosebumps forming on Max's arms as she worked in just a hint that smooth provocative tone of hers. "Afternoon classes with the feisty Victoria Maribeth Chase. I can't help but feel kind of jealous, being as I'm all expelled and everything, and she gets to sit in class with you."

"It would have been great if we could have gone to school together, and the worst thing we had to worry about was if we were going to keep our grades high enough to hold onto our scholarships." Max agreed with a surge of child-like innocence. She couldn't help it. That's how she honestly felt.

"But this way you get the lovely Victoria all to yourself." Chloe teased. "Hey Max. You're not going to, you know, hit on her during class, are you?"

"No. Of course not." Max replied with just a little too much haste. Honestly why did Chloe have to ruin a good and wholesome fantasy with a bad and better one?

"Two screams of 'of course not' in the space of a minute? The lady doth protest too much, methinks." Chloe quipped.

And then, Max felt something unexpected. Chloe's choice of words echoed inside her head over and over. Her mind seemed to short out. She turned pale, and in an instant there was something beyond anger, an explosive mix of molten rage and icy hatred seemed to surge through her veins. Her hands balled into fists. It was like that moment in class, where her future self had taken over and probably stuck Jefferson in the neck. Only there'd been no photograph taken this time, and no takeover.
The instant passed, and with it the rage, leaving behind a void of numb shock. Her hands shook with fear at the thought of having done something again. Having hurt someone again. She looked down at those suddenly cold shaking hands, found them thankfully blood-free this time. Then she looked back at Chloe, who was trying to process this sudden change in Max's emotional state.

"Um. OK fine. I won't mention Tori again." Chloe tried to joke. Then she noticed how Max was actually shivering. How her fists were balled so tightly that her knuckles were close to turning blue. She slipped her hands from Max's shoulders and offered them, and Max took them in her own gratefully, unballing her fists to reveal the angry red crescents her nails had left in her palms.

"Oh GOD. Chloe, I'm sorry. I don't know what happened. It's just, that phrase. For some reason it made me so angry. Maybe it's just all the pressure I'm under. Having to save the town, being hit by all these weird side-effects to my powers; first headaches, then periodically shocking everybody. I just don't know why it set me off like that."

"Maybe a teacher gave you a bad grade in English lit?" Chloe suggested, her thumbs gently massaging those nail marks away.

Max stared blankly in confusion. "I thought I got the use of periodic right. I looked it up-"

"You did, Max." Chloe said. "I'm talking about that phrase that got you raging, it's from some play. Probably Shakespeare since it's got 'doth' in it. I'm sure Victoria could tell us-"

"It's Hamlet." Max answered without thinking.

"Or you might know it yourself and show me up for underestimating you. See this is why you're not evil-"

"Because I know which play some random line out of Shakespeare comes from?" Max asked, wishing she could remember details like that in class, and for some reason also that her teachers could look more like Chloe.

"Because you give so much as one nasty glance, and you immediately apologise unreservedly for it. Knowing Shakespeare is actually worrying. It's the trait of a cliché villain. Of course, I choose to think knowing things like that just means you're smarter than you give yourself credit for." Chloe answered. "Now, ready to share your worries? Or do you want me to hold your hand and quietly grin like the luckiest idiot alive because I'm holding your hand? Because I'm fine doing either."

Max steeled herself. She had no idea if it was possible to avoid becoming her future self. But she rather intended to try. Then, nervously, she asked the obvious question. "Can we do both?"

"Why limit yourself to binary choices?" Chloe smiled back, gently stroking her fingers.

"I guess part of it is about Victoria." Max said. She felt Chloe's hand stop its gentle caress and freeze. Just for an instant, but so noticeable. Her right hand flinched instinctively; were Chloe not holding it, she might have rewound time right then and taken up the offer to just sit grinning at each other. It would be far, far easier. Instead she found some untapped reserve of courage, and managed to carry on. "Something happened yesterday, just before I saved you." She said quietly, her voice soft and steeped in guilt. "My future-self left a scribble on my hand telling me to wave at Victoria at a specific time. It seemed harmless, so I did it without a second thought. It set a chain of events in motion that left her badly hurt."

"OK. Well she's unhurt now. I guess that means you gave a fuck you to future you and undid it."

"Not fully. It was easier to just rush over and save her than go back further in time and undo
everything. Later, future me revealed that was always her intent: to make me rush over and save her. Victoria thinks I'm a hero, but the whole thing was staged for her benefit. I'm a fraud. I actually put her in danger."

"Jesus." Chloe swore. She had no clue what to do, what to say. Her usual response to problems, beating them into submission couldn't be applied here: Max's future self was the problem, and she'd never lay hands on a Max from any time period. It went further than that though, her life to that moment had taught her that Max was absolutely trustworthy, that while she may not come through for her quickly, she would absolutely do so in the end. She had to believe that whatever future Max was up to, there was a good reason behind it. A plan. In her world view, a genuinely evil Max simply could not exist.

It belatedly occurred to Chloe that there was something she could do, something Max never objected to. She pulled her close and hugged her tightly, and after a moment felt Max bury her head in the nape of her neck in response.

"I don't think I could take that again Chloe." Max said, face buried so tightly that her lips brushed Chloe's neck as she spoke, voice rough with an edge of desperation. "I can't let anything happen to her or you or anyone again. I need her to be OK. I need you to be OK. I just need everyone I've seen hurt to be OK."

"Max. It sounds like you're just as much a victim in this as her."

And suddenly, both of them paused for a moment. They slipped apart, hands sliding down their opposite's arms until at last they were hand in hand again. Then they looked at each other, each struck by the same revelation. Chloe had originally only meant to point out that Max had been used as an unknowing agent, trusting her future-self and acting with no clue as to the final consequences of her actions. But on further thought, Chloe's statement seemed to be taking on a rather different second meaning. That perhaps Victoria wasn't the only one Max's future self had been trying to influence.

"What if she was trying to manipulate your state of mind just as much as Victoria's?" Chloe asked. "Since you've got the power, controlling your behaviour has to be more important than controlling Victoria's."

Max considered that for a moment. She'd literally gone from glaring at Victoria in a stupid classroom cold-war, to hosting a sleepover in a matter of hours. That couldn't have been achieved with the state of mind she'd had on Monday morning. She had to undergo a major change of perspective as well. Perhaps she was just as much a victim as Victoria and everyone else in this.

"It puts an entirely different spin on fucking with your selfie." Max said. "Chloe, what do I do about it? I can't not go along with everything, or people will get killed or badly hurt. But if I blindly follow her instructions, I become complicit in more of this."

"I don't know Max, I guess we've just got to carry on, trust your future-self is doing all this for a reason, and decide if we can follow through with whatever she tells you to do on a case by case basis."

"We've just got to carry on?" Max asked.

"Well yeah. You aren't alone. I've got your back on this no matter what you choose. I thought that went without saying."

"Don't just decide to leave out the emotionally reassuring part!" Max snapped. "It's the one bit I need
"Hella needy girlfriend." Chloe grumbled. Her complaint somehow lifted all of Max's worries just for an instant, as her mind focused on what it apparently considered a far more important point: Her actually being Chloe Price's girlfriend. Of course she was back to feeling guilty an instant later, with the added discovery that she might secretly be a shallow person, in addition to being a bad one.

"Anyway, maybe we're worrying about nothing." Chloe said in response to the return of Max's frown. "Future you hasn't done any more morally dubious shit since then, has she?"

_Not really._ Max thought. In fact, for all the problems they'd faced today, everything seemed to be a lot less morally complicated. Just avoid getting killed by what seemed like unambiguous evils and enact schemes to bring about their downfall.

"Maybe future you has done all the morally fucked up things she needs to then. Victoria took your photo at the diner and she didn't show up to tell us to do anything different. Just imagine: we could be riding the perfect timeline, with Victory literally inevitable!"

Max allowed herself a brief smile. She desperately hoped that was the case, but somehow it felt like wishful thinking. Then again, being reunited with, and this close to Chloe had felt like wishful thinking up till yesterday afternoon.

"Just one more thing Max." Chloe asked, with a hint of scepticism. "How did you manage to cause serious injury just by waving at Victoria?"

"It caused her to severely panic, which made her faint when she got up, and she hit her head on the corner of her desk on the way back down." Max answered. Chloe nodded slowly. Well it wasn't exactly the easiest thing to believe.

"It caused her to severely panic, which made her faint when she got up, and she hit her head on the corner of her desk on the way back down." Max answered. Chloe nodded slowly. Well it wasn't exactly the easiest thing to believe.

"Really?" Chloe asked, still more than a little dubious. "That's more convoluted than that fucking mouse-trap game. You know, you turn the crank and a bunch of weird shit happens with stop signs and bathtubs and marbles. Eventually a cage drops down on the cheese."

"We only got to play it twice before you lost the spring for the spring-loaded hand that knocks the bowling ball over." Max reminded her.

"That wasn't my fault, I think Mom accidentally vacuumed it up after I left it on the floor." Chloe said defensively, and somehow Max found it in herself to smile again. "Anyway, just how many variations on this week do you think future you has gone through to pick up on a possibility like that?"

"I don't know." Max replied. "Lots?" She'd been too wrapped up in the effects of her future self changing time to really think about the mechanics of it. But on reflection it seemed strange, especially given the pain she felt in her head each time she used her powers, that her future self could use them over and over. Just how many rewinds did you need to discover small details of such potency. Hundreds? Thousands? Or More?

"The frightening thing is, it's worked so well." Max said. She supposed she could take some solace at being destined to become a somewhat successful manipulator. At least that meant there was a pay-off for her duplicity in lives saved. "Victoria's gotten, well, not exactly nice, but you know, _nicer._"
Chloe did in fact know, a little too well. Yesterday, she'd have been sorely tempted to sock Victoria on the jaw. Now Victoria tempted her in entirely different ways. She had the scratches on her back to prove it. It felt deeper, more than Victoria draping her body all over her though. Just sitting with her this morning, helping her with her chemistry lab prep had been a revelation to Chloe: her brain still worked. More than that, someone else noticed her brain still worked, and got her working it. Last time anyone had done that was, well, Rachel probably. Not that Victoria was Rachel. There were similarities, but she was far more blunt, less free-flowing, and seemingly forever pissed off. Not that that was all bad; it was nice to see a pissed off face without looking in the mirror.

"She did help save my ass a few times." Chloe said. Why did it always come back to that with her? "She's also kind of fun to be around, all sexy and sassy." She paused briefly to look at Max hopefully. "That's something I've got in common with her, right?"

"I think I made my opinion clear behind the school gym." Max replied. Chloe's lip tingled in response.

"You so hella fucking did." Chloe agreed. She'd expected Max to back off, at best plant her with a gentle peck. But to somehow trip her, push her against the wall and make her go through with it, Make her helpless, was kind of incredible. Unbelievable. And something she hoped would happen again, soon. What were they talking about again? Oh yes, Victoria. From the girl who literally just pushed her against the wall, to the girl who practically begged to be pinned against one.

"I guess," Chloe said, "with Victoria, once you get used to being called an idiot every five minutes and realise she mostly doesn't mean it, things go swimmingly. I even somehow ended up helping her with her homework. Chloe Price doing homework? How does that happen?" She paused for a moment, realising she was at risk of becoming just a little too effusive with praise. "I know she can be a complete bitch from time to time but."

"She's our bitch." Max answered for her, nodding sagely. Her hand rushed to cover her mouth a second later, as Chloe failed to stifle a laugh.

"Damn, Max. That's-"

"I didn't mean it like that!"

"Sure you didn't." Chloe replied with thick sarcastic undertone, savouring the indignation that flashed across Max's face. "Hey, you're not planning to ride off into the sunset with Victoria in her flash sports car, the wind in your hair and her leash in your hand, and leave poor old Chloe and her cheap, broken-down truck all alone."

"No!" Max answered automatically, and rather loudly, drawing the attention of the handful of random students sitting around the front lawn. She blushed deeply as she imagined how she must look, standing there hand in hand with "The Price" of all people, gazing longingly into her eyes and intermittently uttering loud, brief exclamations. They probably thought she was just the next notch in her belt; that just proved they didn't know the real Chloe Price. Quickly, she decided she didn't care what they thought, tightening her grip on Chloe's hands. After all, she was going up against armed criminals, and some sort of ghost. Why would something as minor as school yard gossip matter to her? She did make an effort to keep her volume down though.

"Actually, I might prefer your broken-down truck, at least when it's not leaking brake fluid." Max said. "It's got character and soul and."

"And it accommodates three?" Chloe suggested.
Well yes. Passenger capacity was an important and practical consideration. And apparently one that made Max a little short of breath.

"Can you make it work? The truck, I mean." Max asked, trying her best not to cringe. Why did she have to tag on that last bit?

"Depends what fucking Irma Bunt did to it." Chloe replied. "If she just slashed a brake line, it'll be done by this evening. I'm, um, quite good with my hands."

"I may have noticed." Max smiled back, and noticing with some satisfaction that she'd put Chloe in an uncharacteristically shy frame of mind all over again.

Taylor Christensen munched the last of the second biscuit she'd taken from Max's private reserve, following quietly behind Victoria. The fast click of their shoe-heels against paving rang out as she was led along the path back to Blackwell's main buildings at a brisk march. It was more or less the usual pace for them; Victoria Chase always had a busy schedule, and found moving from place to place an infuriating waste of time to be minimised. Taylor prided herself at being able to keep up, her legs were good for far more than just looking at. She remembered Courtney had always struggled though, probably because she was shorter. Still she supposed Courtney didn't need to worry about that any more. Now she was the one setting the pace for everyone else to follow.

"So." Taylor began, re-tasking her mouth after finishing the biscuit. "Am I going to have to keep pesterling you about Calf-field, or are you going to, like, spill?"

Victoria let out an over-the-top sigh then halted her forced march to look around. No one seemed to be within earshot.

"Don't gossip about this to anyone." She said. "Seriously, half the problems I'm having wouldn't exist if you hadn't shot your mouth off to Courtney about what you thought happened at the end of last photography class."

They probably wouldn't have happened if Victoria hadn't treated Courtney as a total homework mule either, or pissed off Dana and Juliet, but Taylor thought it politic not to mention that.

"And this is worse. It could literally ruin me. I'd be nothing."

Whatever Victoria, Taylor thought. She seemed deadly serious, but prior history had demonstrated she could throw a fit from just about anything. Catching a light misting from a garden sprinkler last week had caused an enormous scene about how her "fucking cashmere" was ruined. How serious could this really be?

"Fine." Victoria sighed, trying to compose herself. "This is really awkward." She scuffed her heel against a paving brick, out of need to buy just a little more time. "I'm only telling you this because I totally trust you. All those bitch-sluts walked away, but you didn't. Where do I begin?"

Anywhere! Taylor thought. Just get on with it. You've got me on tenterhooks here.

"Sweet T," she said. Her tone became increasingly uncertain, nothing like the Victoria that Taylor knew. Their eyes met, and then Victoria actually looked down and away. Victoria 'my bitch gaze is stronger than Superman's heat vision' Chase couldn't hold eye-contact! In a strange way it was cute, adorable really, and charming. Not that she'd ever say so, the thought of being flayed alive and worn as part of Victoria's winter collection was decidedly unappealing. Speaking of Victoria, her spontaneous failure at self expression continued: her mouth hung open dumbly, like a puppet without a ventriloquist, almost as if her body was trying desperately not to vocalise her brain's instructions.
"What do you think of three-way romances?"

To the longer haired blonde's credit, her jaw didn't quite brush against the ground. But it wasn't from lack of trying.

"You- you mean you want a three-way with Max?" Taylor gulped, face stooped in a sudden heat, infinitely grateful that Victoria was occupied dealing with her own embarrassment. "Well she definitely isn't my type. Give me someone taller, someone I can totally talk shop about fashion with and-"

"Why the hell would your type matter?!" Victoria snapped, her face a mix of indigence and obliviousness. Her words struck her companion like a slap in the face, an instant reversal from the kinder, more considerate and even a little awkward Victoria, to the old faithful petroleum soaked blaze of fury that everyone loved.

"This is a purely hypothetical scenario between a theoretical person who resembles Max Caulfield in all relevant respects, her oldest friend, and a third person who may have some coincidental similarities to myself. You're my completely dependable friend, the only person in the Vortex inner circle who didn't betray me. The third-, no, better make that the fourth party who I can rely on absolutely to give me impartial advice."

Oh, right. Taylor replied, trying to conceal feeling like she'd just been sucker punched. It had been followed up so quickly with being told she was trusted and relied on for this, that it left Taylor unsure how to feel.

"Look. Am I making an idiot of myself?" Victoria demanded impatiently.

At that instant, Taylor felt herself something of an expert in that field. She wondered if this was how that weird nerdy guy Victoria kept pointing out last week felt, the one that seemed to be desperately trying to replace Max's shadow. Probably not, if so he'd have definitely given up by now.

"I don't think I get the whole dynamic." Taylor replied, still wincing from her misunderstanding of the situation, and trying to wrap her head around it. She tried to imagine what Max and her mysterious oldest friend might be like, personality wise. Mousy, inoffensive and socially retarded came to mind. Zero fashion sense but apparently great taste in biscuits. And generous and thoughtful. Having been exposed to Victoria for extended periods, she could appreciate those qualities; it didn't make sense that they'd stir this particular reaction from Victoria, though. Not unless...

"Is this, like, a case where you saw these two helpless, awkward, inexperienced girls and swept them off their feet with your power, sophistication, and charm? Because that's totally messed up."

If only that were true. Victoria thought. The idea of being the one calling the shots tickled her in strange ways and places. She shook her head. Reality, while just as enjoyable, was the polar opposite of that little fantasy.

"I'm completely at their mercy." She explained. "They dominate my every thought. We aren't even really a thing, and I still can't help thinking about them. It's like a fucking obsession. An addiction. I don't know how else to explain it, it's not easy, unless you've experienced something like this yourself, or seen someone else go through it. Am I making a fucking bit of sense here?"

"So... exactly how you act around Mr Jefferson?" Taylor suggested.

Victoria grit her teeth in abject annoyance before grinding out the answer "yes."
"It's more than that, though. You might find this hard to believe but Mark-" she winced at having referred to him using his first name out of force of habit. "Jefferson never really returned any of the affection I did my best to subtly offer. It almost seemed like he was pushing me away."

Taylor could in fact believe that rather easily. The nature of that prior obsession with him, and complete inability to grasp she was being rejected over and over did bring up one thing that she felt needed clarifying.

"And you're sure this is more than that?" She asked pensively. "I know you haven't, like, signed the deed, but you've at least put in an official notification of interest or whatever?"

The scowl Victoria gave in response to that made Taylor consider taking out life insurance.

"Not official." She admitted. Still, the way they all seemed to exchange longing gazes, lingering touches, and transparent innuendo. It was about as blatant as armed robbery. Almost definite. Wasn't it?

"That's probably the cause of half your anxiety. If-"

Taylor gulped as Victoria's death stare intensified.

"When you get a commitment that you're officially a pair; no it's actually two, no wait, it's three pairs, if you take every combination. But you're actually only in two of those. Once you get that anyway, you'll totally feel more secure."

Still, that was easier said than done. How did you propose a serious three-way relationship? She presumed mostly like any other. Someone had to stump up enough courage, assume they'd read the signs correctly and take a risk with the limited information they had. It either paid off, or they looked like an utter weirdo and had to move out of town. But if she didn't try, she'd end up standing at a distance, shooting the other two longing gazes while they moved on with their life. The behaviour of that filthy little limpet she'd caught spying in Max's window, in other words. And that was a fate worse than death. Still, it left an important question. Could she find that courage?

At that moment, the path abruptly ended, opening into Blackwell's front lawn. Victoria's eyes were immediately drawn to Chloe and Max, who were for some reason loitering at the far end of the lawn near the gym. They were facing away from them. And they were in each other's arms again. She looked on in envy, and confusion. Confusion because her mind wasn't sure which of them to be more envious of.

"God, look at them. They're so fucking perfect together, embracing and probably discussing how many kids they're going to adopt. How am I supposed to compete with that? Wait, hold that thought."

Her hands were like lightning, fishing out the DSLR camera from her bag; eye to the viewfinder, she snapped off a few quick shots in rapid succession. The lens on her camera really was remarkable, catching a close-up of Max's face buried against Chloe's neck, pulling out of that horrifically suggestive nuzzling action she seemed to perform while hugging. She swore under her breath. Why couldn't she be the one standing there being nuzzled, or be the one doing the nuzzling?

Thanking technology for having supplanted the need to wait for some Polaroid to develop, Victoria studied the shot she'd captured on her camera's rear display screen. Jesus. Max's normally innocent eyes looked desperate and needy. Her full lips were open a crack, and practically rasping against Chloe's long, slender neck. She'd probably just caught Max at the moment of taking a breath, but it looked like she was about to enact a scene out of Bram Stoker's most well known work. It was
definitely behaviour from Max that most people would find surprising, but really not the sort of thing she wanted a creep like Jefferson to see. Another bust for her homework assignment, but a keeper for that secret Max folder of hers.

"Um, why are you competing? Don't you feel some weird- I mean, non-conventional thing where you all want each other?" Taylor interjected.

Victoria considered that as she returned her camera to her bag. She wanted both of them. Desperately. The thought of both of them either side of her, working her into a frenzy as she laid bare writhing on a hard desk was the most deliciously perverse thing her mind had produced to date. It would double as the perfect revenge too, if they happened to use Jefferson's desk. But seeing them together without her, enjoying that casual familiarity unique to the two of them made her feel seethingly jealous. Inadequate.

"I just want what they have together. With both of them." She said under her breath. That wasn't too much to ask, was it?

"Um, hello Victoria? You can't just have that with someone. It's something you slowly build up and- God! Is that really Max's friend? I didn't get a good look at her before. She's..." Taylor paused to gulp and settle a sudden flutter in her chest. "...kind of dangerous looking."

And this is hardly helping the issue of my jealousy. Victoria thought, rolling her eyes. Yes Chloe Price was magnificent. She was also flawed, tragic and poor as anything, a fuck-up who was wasting every aspect of her potential and capable of so much more. Someone who probably needed to be coddled and encouraged, not just physically admired. She felt angry that no one else saw that. Not that Victoria Chase knew much about coddling, or encouraging. But she liked to think she'd be open to trying new things, things that made her slightly uncomfortable even. For the right people.

"Haven't we seen her somewhere before though? I think I remember her at one of your parties. The one where that fight happened?"

"Yes. She started the fight. And finished it." Victoria grumbled. And the guy she tossed out the window was probably trying to drug Taylor's drink. She decided not to mention that. Taylor was far too worked up already.

"That's, like, wow. I think I get what you meant by being at her mercy."

Victoria desperately suppressed a whimper at that idea, and decided to start reciting multiplication tables in her head. It didn't help matters that Max had expressed similar thoughts. Chloe and her together in front of the camera, and Max behind it, explaining exactly how she wanted them both.

"We should slip inside before they notice us." She managed, between impulses to gnaw her own lip off.

"Right, we wouldn't want Max to know you were gazing longingly at her and her hot alt girlfriend from a distance like a total weirdo." Taylor agreed.

The central hall of Blackwell's main academic building was abuzz with people: students mostly, either preparing for the afternoon classes or idly chatting. Victoria's eyes narrowed as she caught
sight of Juliet Watson bouncing down the corridor, overexposed as always and dragging her idiot boyfriend Zachery around by the arm. She braced herself for a verbal altercation, but Blackwell's foremost student journalist failed to notice her, adsorbed in a one-way discussion with her boyfriend. Whatever she was saying seemed to be making him absurdly uncomfortable. Victoria followed their eyeline to a gaggle of rather attractive girls. They crowded around a central figure, her eyes striking, highlighted by smoky eyeshadow; her generous cleavage all but poured out of a low-cut black top that was studded with silver sequins in a crude heart shape.

_Dana and her ditzy cheerleaders._ Victoria grumbled.

The whole cabal of them seemed focused on the phone in Dana's hand, giggling in an obnoxious way that made Victoria think their cumulative IQ could be expressed in two digits. One suddenly made a lunge for it and quickly texted something; long, practised fingers like lightning against the touch screen. She watched as Dana seized it back, and wrote something equally quickly, her cheeks reddening. Then there was another fit of that obnoxious giggling, and an exchange of smiles. _Texting that new boyfriend Taylor mentioned, obviously._

Victoria turned away, her nose raised in contempt. Just a day ago she'd had dozens of followers and sycophants hanging off her every word, and none of them would dare snatch her phone. But then again, she strongly suspected that none of Dana's would knife her in the back and usurp her. Seeking out somewhere less busy and bubbly to rest her gaze, she turned toward one of the two long corridors that ran either side of the hall, providing access to classrooms and smaller offices. She humphed in disgust. At the end of the corridor lurked something ghastly, a mop being propelled by the ever-oily caretaker Samuel. He looked remarkably contented for a scruffy and disheveled lunatic, he and that mop seemingly in a world of their own, though that was probably just because no one else wanted anything to do with him.

Finally Victoria reached her destination: A cheap wooden table and two chairs set up along one of the walls. Posters hung from it pronouncing the Vortex Club's latest event: the "End of the World" party. On the desk sat a binder with "Victoria" written along its spine. She sat at the desk and opened the binder to find all the necessary forms for the party's preparation, and a note penned in Courtney's handwriting.

_Get to work 'secretary Victoria'. These forms have to be completed by today._

Her hands balled into fists as she read the note. Courtney was completely insufferable.

"This is so fucking humiliating. What the fuck did I do to deserve this?" She asked, ripping the note into confetti and casually discarding it beneath the desk. With Vortex club posters covering its front and sides, no one would notice her act of litter. She quickly scanned through the binder's content and began running through the last minute preparations. It all seemed fairly routine. A guest list, already mostly drafted to finalise for the vortex club's VIP section, which she quickly added Max and Chloe's names to. A note to harass the caterers to make sure there was no repeat of "last event's incompetence," whatever that meant; Victoria had never really paid much attention to the minutia of running the parties before, so long as everything turned out well in the end. Finally, a transfer of funds to the school. The Vortex Club made a point of renting the gymnasium building from the school for the duration of the party. It apparently allowed them to skirt some of the school regulations and divorce them from responsibility over what tended to happen there. She harboured doubts over whether it would hold up if a court or Department of Education decided to look into the matter, but for some reason, the small layer of legal padding apparently satisfied Principal Wells. _Or perhaps it was the monetary padding_, she thought, as she saw just how much money they were transferring. She wondered if they'd be able to keep that up in the long term, now that Nathan and his seemingly bottomless pockets had been removed.
"Make her do all your homework and generally treat her as your footstool?" Taylor suggested, distracting Victoria from the mess of papers. She was rewarded with a reproachful glare.

"Do you know what a rhetorical question is Taylor?"

"Um, no." Taylor answered. Victoria's head sunk into her hands. Taylor had many admirable qualities: her loyalty, her apparent resistance to extreme cold. Command of the English language was not foremost amongst them. "Should I look it up?"

"I still feel like I'm acting like an idiot." Victoria said, treating Taylor's question exactly the way Taylor should have treated her last two. "Chloe and Max are perfect together. They've got this relationship that goes back almost their entire lives, then a stupid, tragic break where Max had to move out of state and neither of them spoke, which I can only assume was caused by their mutual inability to use Skype. And they've somehow turned their stupidity into romantic nostalgia. How do I match that?"

"Have you tried being yourself?" Taylor asked.

Victoria grumbled derisively. As far as relationship advice went, 'Be yourself' was the sort of crap you read in insipid glossy teen magazines, and to relationships what 'try turning it off then on again' was to IT support. Then she realised Taylor had indirectly just called her stupid. She glared for an instant, noticed Taylor wearing her usual vapid smile, and decided it was probably an accidental insult. Besides, Taylor quickly began gushing praise. It was difficult to stay mad under those circumstances.

"Victoria, I totally have no clue about the dynamic between petite Max and her not-quite-so-petite companion, but you've got plenty of your own thing going on. You're stylish, refined, and know fucking everything. You can talk shop about photography with Max. I don't know what her tall friend's into- "

Tits and science, based on the magazines strewn around her room. Victoria thought.

"-but I'm sure you have commonalities with her too."

Well she liked to think she could speak with some authority on either of those topics.

"You just need to confidently present yourself and take a chance. It'll either be or it won't."

When put that way, it didn't seem so difficult. And it wasn't like Victoria Chase wasn't used to presenting an incredibly confident front, fraudulent as it may be. She'd confidently sent her best photos to a half dozen art galleries last month. And they'd been equally confident in rejecting her outright. "Incompatible with our mission statement," one had actually told her. She'd gone and looked up their mission statement. When she'd read "to discover the greats of tomorrow, and exhibit them today," it made her seriously consider mailing them an envelope full of icing sugar combined with another photo submission, this time of someone dying of anthrax. She eventually settled for redoubling her efforts to become an established and famous photographer, just so she could publicly snub that gallery and every other one that had rejected her. Compared to all that, what was one more rejection? She'd just allow herself a moment to collect herself, summon all her elegance and sophistication, then-

"And you need to do it fast because she's walking this way now."

What?

A shot of adrenaline surged through Victoria and she went rigid, her knees audibly, and painfully,
banging the tabletop. She looked up slowly while trying to fight off the urge to wince in pain at having banged her knees, and the mess of butterflies that seemed to have settled in her stomach. A condition that was in no way helped by the sight of Max walking in, seemingly clueless as ever, her cute little right hand and with it all the power in the universe swinging idly by her side.

Chapter End Notes

OK I'm trying to get back into posting after a long gap. I say get back, but I've actually been writing then deleting everything I write since the last update since it didn't seem to fit. Hopefully I can find a new groove here and get some consistency again. Thanks to everyone who sent me encouragement. I know this chapter seems to be mostly miscellaneous details, and probably not the big event everyone was hoping for.
Letters from tomorrow rises from the dead once more. Appropriate for a release just after Easter, I guess.

The heavy front door to Blackwell academy's main building sprung open just as Max Caulfield was reaching for its handle. She found herself having to take evasive action, flattening herself against the banister of the stone staircase that led up to the door just in time to avoid a stampede of roughly a dozen students exploding from it. Max had absolutely no idea who any of them were: she barely knew most of the people in her dorm, let alone the wider school population. They, however, seemed to know who she was, and a shout of “check out doom-sayer Max” went out as she gingerly peeled herself away from the banister. Reassessing her surroundings made her feel decidedly uneasy: she became acutely aware that a whole mess of eyes were now watching her. The mob that had nearly ran her over as though she were invisible had suddenly stopped and were impatiently regarding her. Probably holding the entirely unreasonable expectation that she’d have something both profound and endlessly amusing to convey. Why did people always expect that?

“Um, hey.” She replied. “Weird dream right? I've got no idea what I'd do if it all came true.”

An awkward pause seemed to stretch out forever. Then finally one of the students shouted “two moons motherfuckers! Woooo!” This was followed up with another of them pronouncing “cashmere on tap!”

“Don't forget the rogue eclipse. I hear that's scientifically impossible and could never happen.” Max added as they turned to resume their rapid and erratic journey away from the school building, apparently in the rough direction of the parking lot. Watching the group leave, Max wondered if perhaps she'd been a little too on the nose with that last comment, especially given what was about to happen. But on seeing several of them spontaneously break out into air guitar while the remainder raised their hands to issue the sign of the devil, she decided she'd probably matched her delivery to the level of subtlety they were accustomed.

Well that was random, Max thought. Still, she supposed it meant at least a few people had taken notice of the mock-bullying event she'd engineered with Victoria on social media, even if they had associated it with that silly “Maximum Victory” video Courtney had released yesterday. Somehow it didn't quite feel enough though. For their plan to work, almost the entire town needed to become aware of her prediction ahead of Friday. And not just a mob of intellectually questionable school students. She needed the attention of the more “eminent” people. The older people. The kind that still read printed newspapers and watched the television for news; the kind who in general treated social media with confusion and contempt and would definitely not be following the posts of a couple of teenage girls. More strange though, was that she found herself not really caring at that moment in time, instead feeling that somehow everything was going to just turn out perfectly. Perhaps having escaped death from at least three separate sources had left her feeling a little invincible. Perhaps the knowledge that her future-self had some master plan that would somehow make everything work out was emboldening her. Or perhaps she was riding a high from having felt Chloe shiver against her lips. She glanced in the direction of the front gate, where Chloe's old pickup truck was parked. Chloe
had discarded her jacket, and the corded muscles in her arms were making their presence obvious as she unloaded several large cinder blocks from the mess in the back of her truck, wedging them behind each wheel as a safety precaution before moving in to inspect the vehicle’s underside. Biting her lip, Max conceded to herself that, yes, it was probably Chloe that had her in a good mood.

There was only one thing threatening to ruin her momentary sense of elation: a lingering concern for the welfare of Kate Marsh, that had began in earnest yesterday when she’d noticed that Kate, normally the patron saint of hope, soft animals, and pretty much everything good, was scribbling a hangman's noose beside her optics notes. She’d subsequently gotten a fair idea of what Kate had gone through, and just the thought of it had her torn between wanting to cuddle Kate in an everlasting embrace while softly reassuring her that everything was going to be fine, and ‘dealing with’ her tormentors; perhaps using her power to simultaneously extract every one of their fingernails before handing them over to the authorities. Then she reflected that there was no reason why she couldn't do both.

Some small part of her seemed to raise a slight objection. Asking whether, from a cold, intellectual standpoint, she was focusing too much of her concern on one person here. After all, Max actually had forewarning that the entire town was in jeopardy, while it wasn't even clear that something was going to happen with Kate. Her future-self, seemingly obsessed with preventing tragedy, had definitely not volunteered any warning or mentioned a strategy to help Kate. Perhaps she felt so strongly in this instance simply because she'd actually witnessed Kate's suffering first hand: the portrait of cold misery that was Kate's face that morning, and the quaking voice which had explained how she'd been drugged. Compared with that, most of the townspeople were somehow unreal. More silent cardboard cut-outs than actual people to her. Perhaps she was encountering one of those “a single death is a tragedy, a million is a statistic” scenarios everyone attributed to Stalin, apparently falsely. Evan Harris, the resident contrarian of the photography class had taken great pleasure in explaining Stalin never actually said that.

Then something else occurred to Max. A subtle point, but infinitely more important than accidentally misquoting a lunatic dictator. She recalled how Kate had been a shining beacon when Max first walked into photography class, a genuinely kind, welcoming person amongst a sea of unknown and seemingly unfriendly glares, her first real friend at Blackwell. With that friendship came an important unsaid agreement to look out for one another. She had no such agreement with the random denizens of the town, so was actually obliged to place Kate's welfare above a group of strangers.

*Wowser, introspective much?* Max thought, as she made a second attempt at the doors. Normally she had to sit down and relax for a moment before her mind became inundated with thoughts like that, though maybe having to squash her posterior against the banister qualified.

There was a noticeable change in the air as Max stepped inside Blackwell Academy's main building: it was warmer, with an absence of the gentle sting of chilled wind gusts brushing her cheeks. Stuffy in other words, and perhaps appropriate in an institution dedicated to structured learning. That slight nervousness she'd been feeling about Kate seemed to grow as she cast her eyes around. Kate was nowhere to be found among the sparse crowd of students sifting through hallways, idly gossiping or retrieving items from their lockers. Max checked the time: this was when they were supposed to meet. Kate should have been waiting right outside Jefferson's class. But she wasn't. A horrible, and thought came to mind. What if something had happened, if Kate decided she couldn't take it any more. What if she followed in Rachel's footsteps, and was never seen again?

That thought spurred Max into action. Taking her phone in hand, her fingers danced across the touch screen, typing out what she hoped would be taken as a friendly text inquiring about Kate's whereabouts. She sent it, and immediately felt better. Then after a minute with no gentle whir from a
message received’ vibration, she began to feel worse. She sent another. Then a third. Then a fourth. She nearly dropped her phone midway through typing a fifth message, unprepared for the vibration that accompanied receipt of reply.

Max: Hi Kate. I'm in Blackwell's main building. Where are you?

Max: Just tell me when you arrive.

Max: I'd really like to meet up before class.

Max: And maybe we could arrange to have tea after school, like we used to?

Kate: Sorry Max, the bus broke down and they had to call another one out. You don't need to blow up my phone with silly texts though. Do you know how annoying that is?

Actually Max did. She experienced it every day thanks to Warren, but she thought it politic not to reply as such. And now her minor panic attack had inflicted that same suffering on the one person who absolutely didn’t deserve or need it, more straw for the (already rather laden) camel's back. Wonderful. Max really didn't know what to make of Kate's response either; Kate never got snippy. Perhaps all of her efforts were making things worse. Perhaps she should back off a little. God, why didn't her future-self just tell her what to do, instead of leaving her on the verge of ripping her hair out from having to second-guess everything?

Still, it was good to know that Kate was just running extra late, that nothing bad had happened to her. It also left Max with a handful of extra time, though what she could do with it beyond standing gormless in the hallway wasn't immediately apparent. She glanced around, and her eyes immediately met someone else's gaze. Max fought the urge to flinch, she hated it when this happened: an instant's eye-contact and somehow the other party always assumed that you'd been gawking at them for ages and they'd only just noticed it. Fortunately, the person she'd made eye contact with, Taylor Christensen, seemed not to have taken offence.

Taylor sat to the side of a table that was covered, top, front and sides, in vortex club posters. They were emblazoned with spiral motifs that were rendered in stark monochrome, announcing the upcoming “end of the world party”. It could almost be considered prophetic, especially with the spiral vortex club logo being eerily similar to a tornado. They seemed to be off by a day though: the “end of the world” party was scheduled for Thursday, and the actual end of the world (or at least the town) for Friday. Behind the table, of course, was Victoria Chase. She was hard at work, directing that formidable glare at a stack of paperwork. Against all expectations, the papers did not spontaneously combust in response.

And then something happened that was completely at odds with the casual contempt Taylor had given Max in their last photography class: she actually waved her over, smiling broadly, if a little slyly. Max watched for a moment as Taylor proceeded to turn to Victoria and say something; she wasn't close enough to hear what. For an instant Victoria seemed about to jump to her feet, perhaps frustrated by an interruption to her stupid vortex club preparations, though in a feat of apparent restraint she restricted herself to a sharp pained glare. Seeing that, Max wondered if she should leave them be, give Victoria some alone time with her vortex club friend, doing whatever stupid stuff the Vortex Club actually did. Taylor's face seemed so insistent though, that Max felt obliged to head over.

“Um, hey.” Max said in trademark awkward fashion, breaking a veil of unnatural silence that seemed to have smothered the Vortex club desk in front of her as she approached. Two “um, hey’s” in a row? She really needed a better greeting. She pondered how Victoria would go about it. Probably
just walk up and begin a tirade about someone or something that had annoyed her, without really
acknowledging the other person at all. At that moment Max realised Victoria’s ability to take offence
at just about anything might actually be a blessing to her, in that it provided an inexhaustible supply
of conversation openers. Speaking of Victoria, she was right there, directly opposite Max at her desk;
as always she looked both beautiful and beautifully frustrated, a hue of slight redness across her pale
cheeks and her thin eyebrows pinched with annoyance; a slight jingle rang out as her solid gold
bangles gently brushed one another as she made herself busy with the mess of paperwork in front of
her.

Obviously feeling completely decimated at having this secretarial job dumped on her. Max
concluded. Why else would she suddenly be in this state?

Taylor sat over to one side on a spare chair beyond the shroud the poster-covered desk provided. At
that moment she seemed a perfect contrast to Victoria: leaning back, completely relaxed. Her long
trademark legs were on full display, drawing glances from virtually everyone walking past. Max
watched as Taylor's hand idly played with her long golden locks, and threw the odd wink at some of
those who took more than just a cursory glance at her, if she kind-of liked the look of them.

The whole situation gave Max a moment's pause. She had almost forgotten how intimidating she'd
found it in the past, having to confront Victoria and her posse simultaneously. Being outnumbered by
people she felt were so much more elegant, fashionable, confident and attractive than herself. And
with the potential and propensity to be rather nasty. Yesterday there'd been a perfect storm of
circumstances leaving Victoria mostly isolated from her sycophantic entourage. That had probably
gone a long way toward emboldening Max, putting their interactions on far more even footing.
Finding out she had superpowers, having the surprisingly muscular Captain Chloe on her side, and
discovering a common enemy in the Prescotts probably didn't hurt matters either.

Taking what she hoped wasn't too noticeable a deep breath, Max tried to calm herself. She still had
her superpowers and she and Victoria had come a hella long way in what was actually a very short
time. They seemed to kind-of like each other now. Maybe. Besides, the Prescotts were still trying to
discreetly kill them, which meant Victoria was hardly likely to completely revert to her old ways.
Weird she could turn that last point into a positive. Taylor would probably just follow Victoria's lead,
like she always did, which meant she really wasn’t an issue as long as Victoria behaved. In any case,
Taylor actually seemed rather nice after Max found herself all but press-ganged into the Vortex Club,
if still a little condescending about her lack of fashion sense.

“Hi Max. Victoria's been talking non-stop about you.” Taylor replied, her words slathered with
implication. Max's face flushed. That couldn't be right. Could it? She doubted there was that much to
talk about. Except for her powers, which she was sure Victoria wouldn't ever mention. She noticed
Victoria drop her pen, turn and give Taylor a frightfully icy glare that immediately silenced her. The
bright gold sparkle of that pen (at least solid 18 carat, no doubt), drew Max’s attention. She watched
it fall, then roll slowly across the wooden desk with a gentle rumble. Her eyes followed it until it
finally came to a halt, colliding with the side of Victoria's binder.

Max felt a strange sensation. Uncertainty. Almost a feeling of danger. In that instant, she was
captivated by this seemingly innocuous bright-red folder, absent-mindedly reaching out to touch the
hard spine where Victoria's name was emblazoned, as if trying to recall a dream or nightmare long
forgotten.

“Yes Max, it's a school-issue administration binder. Most of the paperwork done in the school gets
filed away in them.” Victoria huffed, chiding herself at hitting a new low: feeling jealousy toward a
piece of stationary. The thought of being bested by some stupid red folder seemed to cause
something to snap in the back of her head, and she felt driven to take action. What was it Taylor had
suggested? *Try being yourself.* The words echoed in her head. Fine. That was exactly what she would do.

She took a deep breath, causing her enviable bust to tease its outline through her exquisite cashmere sweater. She hoped that would distract Max from noticing her ugly, thick wrists, and the slight tremble running through them.

She rose to her feet, looming over Max, then leaned forward toward her, hands resting on the desk aggressively. She’d need support with how Max could make her feel.

She planted a hard, smouldering leer into the blue abyss of Max’s eyes, and tried not to get hopelessly lost in their infinite depths.

Then she sniffed derisively, in that way all French waiters did.

“Unbelievable! Chloe gets you alone for less than five minutes and she’s already completely corrupted you?!”

She practically spat the words at Max, possessed with such venom that they were met with shock. Shock from Max, from Taylor, and from the half-dozen other students passing by that were caught within their effective blast-radius, all of whom wisely decided to quickly make themselves scarce.

There was an extended moment of silence between the three of them. At that point Taylor remembered exactly who she’d advised to “be herself,” and felt that, in hindsight, it might not have been the best suggestion. Meanwhile, Max stood in stunned disbelief. OK, she’d had her first real kiss, on a dare no less (though a ridiculously transparent one). That hardly counted as being ‘completely corrupted’, did it? And how did Victoria even know about that?

“You reek of cigarette smoke.” Victoria clarified, in an appropriately smoky tone.

*Oh, right, the cigarette. Was it really that noticeable?*

“Honestly Max. There’s a reason Chloe got that firm, dumb ass of hers expelled.”

Suddenly set with a strange desire for a tub of popcorn, Taylor watched as Victoria shot out an arm toward Max. There was an uncertain touch, then a far more decisive snatch at Max’s left arm, and Max quickly found herself being dragged toward a set of small rooms set to the side of the hallway. Used as a mixture of offices for ‘lesser’ staff, areas for students to take make-up tests and remedial tuition, they were usually vacant and tended to be poorly secured. Taylor continued to watch in fascination. Victoria, as a rule, didn’t like casual contact, or at least that had been the case prior to whatever spell Max had worked on her. Now she was initiating it, leading Max off somewhere quiet, hand in hand. Taylor wondered if perhaps she could take some credit for this. After all, she had suggested Victoria drag Max off somewhere quiet yesterday and ‘do whatever she needed to do’. And honestly, the smoke was barely noticeable, though Victoria always seemed oddly observant to scents. On several occasions she’d been able to mock her rivals by naming the perfume they’d been wearing, as well as its (apparently too low) recommended retail price with a single sniff.

“Taylor, fetch the kit. We need to take care of this fast.”

“Jawohl, Frau Kommandant.” Taylor replied, rising more sedately than Victoria had, and clicking the heels of her boots together in mock salute. She didn’t immediately leave on her errand though. The interactions of Max and Victoria were strangely captivating, like watching someone who was engrossed in reading a romance novel while simultaneously driving at speed without a seatbelt on demonstrate why doing so was probably a bad idea.
“What do you think will happen if Wells or some teacher smells tobacco smoke on you?” Victoria scolded. She kept her back facing the doors, a hand behind her checking their locks as inconspicuously as possible. She smiled as she felt one of them rotate fully in her hand. As expected, someone hadn’t locked up.

“You’re lecturing me on being a good girl?” Max shot back defensively. She was already worried because of Kate, with no clue how best to help her; being yelled at, accosted, seized and dragged off did nothing to relieve that. The use of cliché Hollywood German in response to a request for something with a slightly sinister title, and the rather uncomplimentary description of her current aroma weren’t helping matters either. “Didn’t you try to cheat on your homework this morning?”

“I’m lecturing you on how to be a smart girl, Max. Something I feel more than qualified for.” Victoria answered, suddenly quietly; a whisper in that perfect voice that was equally condescending and intoxicating. She compensated for the low volume by stepping close to Max, delighting in invading her space and making her crane her head up, luxuriating in the mild hostility it provoked. More than ever, she seemed to be exuding that quintessential Victoria: imperious and entitled, asserting that she was simply the smartest, prettiest and generally best person in existence. It carried an implicit challenge to “do something about it” if you thought otherwise. In Taylor's experience, no one could stand up to that. Not directly.

Except Max did, staring her down with an unflinching answer of “I think I just might.” The sight, the imagined power arcing between them left Taylor a little breathless; watching the pair slip into the side-office together left her with two distinct impressions: firstly, Victoria really had nothing to worry about with respect to securing Max’s attention. Secondly, that she should either stop dawdling and get 'the kit' very quickly, or alternatively very slowly, lest she walk in on Max catching a fainting Victoria in her arms yet again, or worse doing something that might actually make her faint.

The door to the office swung shut, and Max took in her surroundings. The room she’d been herded into was small and spartan, lit by a single underpowered ceiling light that seemed to be on its last legs, flickering slightly. Probably not Mr Jefferson's office then, or another star member of the staff. The room’s sparse furnishing consisted of a single long desk of simple design, little more than a table really, and a single accompanying rather plain chair of the kind they usually forced students to sit on, not one of those nice rotating office chairs they afforded to teachers. A plastic basket sat on the desk, filled with a diverse collection of brick-a-brack: a glossy teen fashion magazine, what looked like a few photos, and more than a few items of women's clothing, a couple of which looked rather intimate. The desk held no computer, or other modern office equipment. Just a pad of paper with a scrawl of barely legible notes. Darkness seemed to ooze from the walls, stalking and surrounding them, prevented from swallowing them entirely only thanks to the desperate efforts of that solitary light. And in that murk of darkness, dozens of the school’s standard-issue red folders sat, almost completely packing bookcases that lined three of the room’s four walls. Once again they seemed to draw Max’s attention, just for a moment. She squinted, and managed to make out the creative title “Maintenance Records” followed by a series of ascending numbers on each one, written neatly in marker down their spines. Max tried, unsuccessfully, to understand her sudden fascination with bits of school stationery. Like Victoria said, those folders were standard issue for most of the school’s staff, used everywhere from the swim team’s records to the photography classroom. As she’d just learned, even the vortex club secretary had one.

“So what are we actually doing in here?” She asked Victoria, who seemed completely disinterested in her surroundings, beyond using the table to park her heavy camera bag.

“I’d say we’re making you presentable, but that’s impossible without a serious makeover. Restoring you to some semblance of your usual bouquet of generic soap and boundless naïveté is the best we
can hope for.” Victoria said. She reached over to Max, took the front of her hoodie in hand along the
open zipper, and gently ran her fingers along it. She almost expected to find a label reading 'fashion
retardant'. Still, it felt nice in her hands. Warm and soft. Kind and familiar.

“Normally the girl's potty would have been the go-to place, but I don't care to go back there anytime
soon.”

Max shared that sentiment. It was the rest room block in this building where all the trouble with
Nathan had began. Where they'd seen Chloe shot. She wasn't in a hurry to relive that, in fact Max
had actually been considering whether it was feasible to rush across to the gymnasium toilets if she
felt a call of nature.

“Now take this tacky thing off. It reeks of smoke and K-Mart.”

Ouch. Max gingerly rolled her shoulders, causing her 'tacky' hoodie to fall from them. It was quickly
snatched by Victoria, who held it pinched between a finger and thumb as though it were some
obscene item with which contact had to be minimised, then laid it out on the table. Max couldn't help
but feel a little defensive about the whole act. It wasn't her fault she didn't have platinum credit cards
to go buy the latest designer fashion and jewellery. Also the sudden cold caused by the loss of that
jersey seemed to be getting to her. Why else would her arms break out in tiny goosebumps with
Victoria towering over her, all angry and glaring and being her usual obscenely elegant self? Neither
feeling was helped when Victoria took a step toward her, first gingerly pressing a fingertip to Max's
shoulder, perhaps worried Max might be suffering from that weird electrical discharge phenomenon
again. Feeling nothing electric, at least in the literal sense, she strengthened her grasp, lowered her
face to Max's shirt and began to inhale through her nose.

At that moment the door swung open. Taylor Christensen had returned with 'the kit', which in spite
of the slightly sinister name, turned out to be a pack of dryer sheets, a can of aerosol deodorant, and a
half-used pack of chewing gum. She stared blankly, having caught Victoria and Max in yet another
easily misinterpretable position. They returned the favour, eyes wide like a pair of deer caught in the
headlights, which Taylor felt somehow appropriate.

“I'm trying to decide whether Max should lose the shirt too.” Victoria finally stammered.

“Obviously,” Taylor said, and the soft thud of the “the kit” being placed on the table next to
Victoria's camera bag briefly eclipsed the grinding of Victoria's teeth. “Don't worry Max. Cigarette
smoke is something Victoria is totally used to dealing with. You wouldn't believe how often she
freaks out and needs a fix of tobacco, or something a little more relaxing.” She winked, and quickly
pivoted toward the exit, hoping to get there before Victoria regained enough of her senses to flay her
alive. “Well, I'd better go. Dana promised to model for me and Hayden. Don't worry though, it's
obvious Victoria's got you totally well in hand.”

“Wait. I meant whether her shirt smells of smoke!” Victoria shouted, as Taylor slipped out the door.
“And it's 'Hayden and I'. Say the other person's name first. Fuck.”

Her words fell on deliberately deaf ears, and were quickly silenced by the click of Taylor closing the
door behind her.

“Idiot slut probably thought I was about to throw myself at you.” Victoria scoffed, reluctantly
detaching herself from Max, taking a drying sheet in hand, and gently stroking it against the exterior
of the hoodie. Max didn't comment. She was still rather shocked, and imagined this was the point at
which they were supposed to both laugh at the absurdity of the idea. Something that, for some reason
neither of them seemed to be doing.
“It pisses me off all the more because some part of me might not be entirely opposed to that. Victoria said, digging her fingers into the fabric. “You, and your idiotic brilliant friend.” She decided the garment must have been no stranger to dryer sheets, or maybe fabric softener. The ugly thing just felt so perfect in her hands.

What? Max's brain managed, before every thought she'd had to date seemed to disappear, drowned out by a white noise of panic and confusion. She'd initially thought Victoria angry, the way she'd puffed herself up like a porcupine then dragging her off. Instead she just came out of nowhere and dropped a proposition like that with no warning whatsoever?

No warning whatsoever? A little voice inside Max’s head seemed to ask, before exploding with incongruity. Holy shit, are you cereal? Have you not paid attention to a single thing that’s happened. She’s rushed you into the top echelon of her precious vortex club, she’s jumped into bed with you, she’s literally paraded herself in front of you in her kinky underwear, and told you she’d only do that for people she deemed ‘worthy'. She cradled your head in her fucking lap on the way here. What could it all possibly mean, dumbass?

“I had this thought.” Victoria began, luring Max away from this internal self-torment and back into reality with a voice suddenly so soft, so sweet, that the words felt like golden syrup drizzled on her tongue. “Us, in San Francisco. Doesn't that sound wonderful: the three of us alone together, a state away from this bullshit hick-town. Staying in a luxurious hotel, our every whim catered for. Just imagine what we could get up to.”

“W-Why would we all be in San Francisco?” Max asked, addressing the only part of that her brain was capable of dealing with right then. Sure, Chloe had been insinuating things in a not exactly subtle manner, teasing out glimpses of possibilities. It was still kind-of difficult to tell how much of it was just a big joke, and how much of it she was pretending was a joke. Victoria didn't seem to have that problem. Pushed past a critical point, she just went all out and flung literally everything in your face. Perhaps this shouldn't have been surprising, it was exactly the same behaviour they’d witnessed after Victoria had been 'convinced' to dress up in Chloe's clothes. Once Victoria Maribeth Chase decided to do something, she fully committed with no scope for retreat whatsoever.

“Well, I'd have won the everyday heroes competition obviously,” Victoria said in an almost shocked tone, clearly finding the answer self-evident. “You two would be there to support and cheer me. I'd take care of the plane tickets of course; two extra domestic seats are practically chicken-feed.”

Obviously. This was Victoria's fantasy, after all. Still, Max supposed it was nice that their presence was worth the price of two airline tickets. There was something of a presumption in her fantasy though, one that really couldn't be allowed to go unchallenged, even in Max's virtually stupefied state.

“What if I win the competition?” Max asked.

Victoria immediately pouted, though her expression seemed so over the top that it might have been a playful attempt at humour.

“You're asking me if I'd still pay for the plane tickets just to go along as your lowly supporter, show my face just to say 'yes I entered, but that girl in the thrift store-sourced jeans and tee-shirt over there utterly destroyed me? And she did it with a selfie. Isn't that novel?’” Victoria asked.

Max gulped. That did seem a little too much to ask. It was essentially treating Victoria as some combination of her personal ATM machine and cheerleader, and it was completely unfair to even hope that-
“Because I would.” Victoria said suddenly, her words cutting through Max's chain of thought like a guillotine. “I would.” She repeated, almost to reaffirm the idea to herself as much as Max, “but I'd be so fucking humiliated.” A slight red clouding her cheeks, she quickly looked away, and made herself busy stroking that dryer sheet down Max's hoodie. “I'm sure you and muscles would eventually think of something to help me get over it. Somehow. Anyway, why aren't you helping me with this?”

Max stared blankly. “I didn't know what you were-”

“You stroke the sheet across the outside of the jacket Max. It's hardly advanced chemistry homework.”

“Why dryer sheets though?”

“They'll imbue the scent of fresh washing,” Victoria explained. “Failing that, you can hose yourself down with a thick coating of deodorant, but unless you can convince everyone you've been practising your sprints all lunchtime, they'll be able to guess what sort of scent you're trying to mask. And hurry up and chew the gum. I don't want smoke on your breath.”

Marvelling at how Victoria seemed to have distilled getting away with smoking on campus down to a science, Max carefully peeled the paper wrapper back from the roll of chewing gum, and slipped a piece between her lips. She felt oddly self conscious: In the small room, the sound of her jaw slowly working the gum over was amplified as it echoed off the walls. It seemed to be drawing Victoria's attention too. There was a noticeable pause every so often and the slight jingle of her gold bangles as she stopped sliding the sheet across Max's hoodie, looking up to shoot furtive glances; the sly smirk that was working it's way across her face announced she had a barb on the tip of her tongue, waiting to sting.

“Just say it.” Max sighed.

“What? The great Max Caulfield, presumptive winner of the everyday heroes competition, is inviting comment on her loud, desperate mastication, inches from me?”

Max started to roll her eyes, but Victoria hadn't finished speaking.

“To be honest...” Victoria began, before pausing. Her face uncertain for just a moment, reflecting a rather intense debate going on inside her. Whether she should actually go through with saying it, how far she should push. She recalled a piece of graffiti she'd seen on Chloe's bedroom wall. *I'd rather have a life full of oh wells than a life full of what-ifs.* Perhaps it was time someone actually gave that phrase more than simple lip-service. Discretely digging a fingernail into her thumb for courage, she completed her original thought. “To be honest, I'm feeling oh-so-slightly jealous of the gum.”

“What, you want me to eat you?” Max asked, confused. Then her mind caught up with her mouth, that internal voice seemed to chant 'dumbass' over and over, and a heat flared in her cheeks. Clearly, all that chewing had loosened her jaw figuratively as well as literally. Victoria found herself initially afflicted in much the same way, though a self-satisfied smile inched its way onto her face as she considered how things had played out. She inched herself closer to Max, emboldened.

“One thing at a time.” A perfectly smooth voice whispered in Max's ear, making that searing heat in her cheeks so much worse. Wowser. She really hadn't registered Victoria getting quite that close. A slight exhale of cool air across the back of Max's neck, prickling the hairs on it, the scent of French perfume and the slight press of a warm body against her back all confirmed that she had.

Victoria let out a melodious hum and her hand abandoned her drying sheet, instead reaching for
Max's right arm. There was a gentle, experimental touch at first, then the sustained kiss of her fingertips slipping down Max's arm, light as a feather, that sent a shock down her spine. Max heard a soft, shallow inhale from the lips that were inches from her ear, as Victoria's hand came to rest atop Max's. She spread her fingers and let Victoria's slip between them, then impulsively pulled them tight against Victoria's, not wanting to let her slip away.

This really wasn't at all how Max had imagined things with Victoria. Not that she'd really imagined 'things' with Victoria, at least not all that much. But on the (somewhat) rare occasion during which she might have, she'd always pictured a rough struggle of epic proportions, where mutual anger and frustration boiled over before sublimating to desperate need, where fitting Victoria with one of those gag things with the plastic ball was just as much an act of self preservation as the satisfaction of a kink she may or may not have harboured.

This? This wasn't like that at all. Instead it felt so incredibly gentle, softly intoxicating with a near-overwhelming urge to just go limp and melt in Victoria's embrace. There was terror, but it lay in what might happen next, where this all might lead, and the speed she seemed to be travelling at. Something told Max that she didn't need to say a word, just crane her neck slightly around and she'd find Victoria's lips first pressed against her own. Losing herself in that moment would have been so, so easy. She tried to think of Chloe, that she'd made certain commitments to her. Commitments she'd only just sealed in a rather aggressive fashion. Instead she remembered her teasing the idea of them all together at every opportunity. What was the latest one? “My vehicle's better than Victoria's because it accommodates three, wink wink.” Just how serious was Chloe when she said things like that. How much of it was a joke? Words of someone who'd been isolated from her peers and desperate for friendly interaction. And how much of it wasn't?

Max needed to stop. Or failing that, slow things down. At least until she had those answers, knew for sure this was what everyone else involved wanted, and just as importantly, what she wanted. Her body hesitated to obey, her lips grazing Victoria's; they were soft like velvet and begging to be tasted. Then there were the noise Victoria made: something mid-way between a soft groan and a desperate sigh; a sound that bordered on obscene in response to the slightest touch. It left a need to probe further, find out what other noises Victoria might make, if she brushed something other than her lips. OK, that was definitely it. Max needed an excuse fast. Something to bring Victoria, and herself, and everything else under control. And then she remembered something, someone she suddenly felt rather ashamed of momentarily losing sight of amidst being trapped in an ill-lit room by Victoria, who seemed hell-bent on using the opportunity to demonstrate her own state of desperation.

Kate.

Gently placing her hands on Victoria's shoulders, she restored some semblance of space between them. Victoria regarded her remarkably impassively, mostly because she couldn't quite process and accept that she'd just been shot-down.

“I need to go check if Kate's all right.” Max blurted out apologetically.

Victoria rolled her eyes and reluctantly backed away. “Of course you do Max,” she replied. “You do love to save us helpless blondes.” A brave attempt was made to make the observation seem humorous, though there was a definite bitter sting in her voice she couldn't quite mask. She mused that her face probably seemed rather peculiar at that moment; she was trying desperately to smile while wanting to do the exact opposite, her various facial muscles engaging one another in a tug of war. Fortunately the substance of the observation seemed to distract Max from the manner it was presented.

Helpless blondes? Max thought, thrown for a loop by the observation. It was true Victoria was a
blonde, and she'd saved her a couple of times. She supposed Chloe used to be a blonde too (though less platinum and more of a glazed strawberry variety), at least before her horrific incident with a vat of ace chemical's hair dye, and she'd saved her as well. Now she was rushing off to save Kate, who was once again blonde. There did seem to be a pattern forming. Still, she liked to think she'd save everyone, regardless of hair colour or any other qualifier. This was all just a strange coincidence, that would probably end up broken soon enough.

“I'll see you in class.” Max said, as she stumbled toward the door and the world of light beyond it, leaving Victoria alone and in a dark place.

Victoria slumped backward and sat on the hard wooden desk that lay behind her. She blinked as her eyes struggled to adjust to the torrent of light that streamed into the room through the door Max had just opened, watching Max step through the portal and slowly fade from view, as the door began to swing closed, groans gently echoing from its oil-deficient hinges.

Well that went Fucking perfectly. She thought, feeling like she'd been kicked in the teeth, and trying (not entirely successfully) to will her eyes not to tear up. But of course she felt miserable: she'd expressed her true feelings, suggested something hopelessly embarrassing that could ruin her, and Max had responded by literally fleeing the scene. More than that, she felt like kicking herself for her own stupidity, after all Max had been voicing concern for Kate's well-being all fucking morning. Great choice of timing there, Tori. Her mind spat at her. She tried telling herself that in some ways, the fact things had actually played out at all, that she'd gotten so close, was comforting. If Max was really opposed to the situation, she could have used her power to travel back in time and let her down gently. Instead she chose to let things stand as they were. That had to mean something, hadn't it?

Of course, there was a certain poetic justice in the situation that Victoria couldn't help but bitterly appreciate. She'd originated the bullying of Kate Marsh, founder and sole member of “the true love waits” club; now she was the one being forced to wait as Max ran off just to make sure Kate was all right. If I'd just been slightly nicer, she thought, shuffling in a forlorn attempt to find comfort sitting on that scruffy wooden table. Her hands grasped its edge, feeling the contrast between the relatively smooth varnished finish and the rough scars students had engraved into it. Evidently the table had once been in a classroom, before being demoted to whatever the hell this room was. And naturally, one of the engravings just had to read “Rachel Amber was here”. Victoria found herself impulsively scooting along the desk, shifting as far from that pronouncement as was possible. She sighed and tried to relax, letting her hands slip backward as her body slumped further; it was only graffiti, not something living, not someone that could hurt her again.

Something touched Victoria's right hand, making her almost leap from the desk in surprise. It was different to the hard scratched wood it had become accustomed to traversing over: it felt soft, nice to hold, and probably extremely unfashionable. Oh, that's right, Max had rushed off so quickly, she must have forgotten about her horribly tacky hoodie. Victoria took the garment in hand, raised it to her nose, and took a brief sniff of the outside. It smelt perfectly fresh, no lingering scent of smoke whatsoever. She supposed that meant she could get a job in some peasant laundromat, if the art world kept rejecting her submissions. Then, after a moment's hesitation she buried her face inside the hoodie and inhaled deeply. Repeatedly. It smelt perfectly Max, she could vividly see herself burying her face in every inch of that slight body as the fabric brushed her nose. God, I'm trash, she thought; fantasy providing her some small consolation after her failure in reality. Fortunately, no one was around to see how pathetic she was; the door had all but swung shut, the tiniest crack of light remaining that would be extinguished any second with the click of the bolt returning to its receiver.

Only there was no click. Victoria looked up, nose still buried in Max’s jersey, and felt her face grow cold in shock. A large hand, clad in latex gloves, was reaching around the edge of the door and
slowly pulling it open. The white of an eye appeared at the crack, watching her. Victoria sprang to her feet, lowering the hoodie from her face, but still holding it, clutching at it like a child with a security blanket. There was no chance of escape, she was surrounded on three sides by those stupid red folders, with this figure blocking the fourth. She watched as the door swung open, and a tall, imposing figure came into view. Its face was caked with grease and an ill-trimmed beard, and it was carrying its trusty mop and bucket.

“Hello there sweet young lady.” It called out in a soft, awkward and off-key voice.

“Oh my god! Why do I keep running into you?” Victoria asked, her fingers digging into the hoodie for support. Once again, she was face to face with Samuel the school caretaker, real life analogue to Frankenstein’s assistant Igor.

“This is Samuel’s office. But Samuel’s confused as to why he found you in it now. There are sensitive records here. They need to be kept safe, or poor Samuel might end up in serious trouble. His master gets so scary when angry.”

“I guess my weak feminine self was overwhelmed by the toils of existence and I needed a moment.” Victoria tried to say sarcastically. Her sniffley cracked voice and watery eyes made it difficult to completely sell as such. “And I need to collect the new keys to my room.” She added, remembering that she did actually have a legitimate reason for being here, as she wiped her eyes with a finger. She glared, shocked and dismayed, as she noticed the black smudge of runny mascara sticking to it. She wasn’t supposed to be like this. She was Victoria Chase, Queen of the school! Royalty didn’t cry.

“Why do you have a basket full of women’s clothes and magazines!?” She demanded, trying to go on the offensive, or at least shift the focus of the conversation.

“Oh, Samuel’s responsible for collecting lost property.” The walking grease stain in front of her giggled, as it slicked forward toward the desk. Toward her. Victoria found herself back-pedalling as if thrown back by some invisible force; probably odour. “I don’t think any of it’s yours though. Not in your size. Samuel understands the sweet girl's problems though. He has moments too. Not so many now, his new prescription made a big difference.”

Fists balled, as Victoria’s misery gave way to anger. She really didn’t need the filthy resident lunatic of all people sympathising with her situation. And the idea that Samuel had a fair idea of her size, or that he’d apparently examined and handled some poor girl’s lost outfit enough to have an idea of who’d be a good fit for it, disgusted her.

“Though if your existence is overwhelming you, perhaps you should seek spiritual enlightenment.” Samuel continued obliviously. “One of Samuel’s friends did that. They went on a vision quest to find their animal spirit, and talked to it everyday. It helped them deal with a dark moment and accept their place in this world. Samuel tried that a few times too, it really helped him as well. Samuel’s therapist was hesitating to give Samuel his new prescription, until he told them he was speaking to an invisible animal. Then he got an even better dose than normal.”

Victoria’s ears initially pricked at the sudden unprompted mention of spirit animals, then her head fell into her hands at the rest of Samuel’s tale, trying to see off another urge to burst into tears. She really was in no mood to handle this kind of stupidity. “I am not taking peote and 'shrooms on a school night,” she muttered quietly, apparently having a rather lowest common denominator understanding of “vision quests”. Samuel responded with a snorting giggle that sent a shot of yellow mucus out of his left nostril, most of which caught in his beard and moustache. Victoria fought a wave of nausea at the sudden juxtaposition of smile and snot in front of her.

“Not all vision quests involve drugs.” Samuel explained while attending the mess caught in his beard with an already well-used tissue. “Many just involve isolation, fasting, and meditation. The
traditional ceremonies placed their emphasis on a genuine, serious desire of the participant to understand their place in the world. But Samuel likes to think the spirits are occasionally open to a charity case, and might try to enlighten someone in obvious desperate need.”

Unknowing to Samuel, he had managed quite the feat: disgusting Victoria even more with his choice of words, than his nasal emissions. The most offensive C-word Victoria Chase knew was charity, and she was quite familiar with offensive language. She didn't think much of the suggestion to run off into the wilderness, fast and meditate for days either; at least taking drugs was convenient. She sighed, trying to pull herself together. The chances Samuel would ever say anything insightful, or useful, seemed ridiculously small; however his seemingly unprompted mention of spirit animals so soon after they'd been stalked by a literal animal spirit was something of a coincidence. And it wasn't like she had something better to do at that moment, not after Max had suddenly rushed off to go be a hero. “I don't suppose it's possible for a person to do something so totally egregious that their spirit animal would try to murder them?” She asked.

“Oh, no. No, no, no. Samuel doesn't think so.” Samuel replied with sudden haste, his grotesque smile fading as he grew strangely unnerved, and he took a corner of the desk in hand to steady himself. “No.” He said again, as if trying to convince himself as much as Victoria. “Samuel always tries his best to be a good person, but even if he didn't, history has many powerful, bad, bad people. Political and industry leaders who have caused great suffering. None of them have been bumped off by a spirit. How could a school custodian or sweet little school girl do worse than them?”

Well that's reassuring. Victoria thought. So if the lunatic's words are worth anything, a dubious proposition to begin with, then the spirit must consider them literally worse than Hitler. Why would it do that? Sure, Victoria had been a bitch to Kate (and a non-trivial fraction of the remainder of the school). She was hardly alone in that. Pretty much every school had someone like her. Chloe had probably put a great deal of strain on her parents, perhaps some of the people she'd beaten up hadn't really deserved it. Oh, and she frequently attempted to fleece money from people who frankly wouldn't notice it missing. Nothing to convene a war crimes trial about. That left Max. Who'd been nothing but a kind and righteous force of good. Who shamed her without even trying. Who just wanted to save everyone.

“So anyway,” Victoria said, deciding that at that moment, she wanted little other than to be somewhere else. “About that dorm key?”

The shutter clicks of a photography session in progress faintly echoed down the corridor as Max approached Jefferson’s classroom. Max barely noticed them, her mind a maelstrom of confused thoughts, centred around one question: how had her love-life gone from completely non-existent to scandalous in under 24 hours? Her finger absent-mindedly found its way to her lips, and she felt the tickle of slight contact as it traced their outline. She couldn't quite believe they were the same lips that had all but drank Chloe behind the school gym, and had Victoria all but beg to do the same, moments ago.

Max sighed. She really hadn't handled Victoria well. Almost giving in, then legging it, and using her legitimate concerns for Kate as a crutch, an excuse to escape a confronting situation. She'd gotten good at that over the years, avoiding interactions with other people. She'd avoided Chloe for so long that her future-self seemed to have stepped in to correct the situation, travelling back in time and posting her the odd letter just to make it seem like she wasn't so horrible. Max's present self had actually been tempted to do something similar here: turn back time and handle things more gently, explain in a cooler, more collected fashion that she just needed to get her feelings and Chloe's on the same page before they embarked on whatever the three of them might become. She wondered for a moment why she hadn't, when she'd been so ready to use those powers to cement a desirable
outcome with Chloe not so long before. There'd just been a surge of overwhelming desire in that instant, and a frustration at how things were playing out. She hadn't felt that with Victoria. Did that mean she had stronger feelings for Chloe? Or was she just honouring Victoria's staunch objection to the use of the power for flippant purposes, especially if it wiped away some of her memories in the process; something Chloe didn't seem to have as much of a problem with. Maybe her subconscious was in favour of using her powers to accelerate the progress of relationships, but was opposed to using her powers to retard them. No. She couldn't really be that desperate and pathetic, could she?

In any case, perhaps she was being too hard on herself; she'd obviously been completely overwhelmed in the moment. That was understandable, wasn't it? Someone rather new to displaying physical intimacy beyond a hug suddenly gets two people she considers incredibly attractive professing their interest in her one after the other, falling for her like dominoes. Perhaps she just needed a little more time, that was all. Time to work out what she wanted, and to build up the courage to express her desires. *And how long is that going to take, Max?* That obnoxious inner voice of introspection asked.

It only took five years to do something as benign as say hello to Chloe. How long will it take before you find it in yourself to nonchalantly go up to the girl who's dominated your thoughts for said five years, smile and say “go get a larger bed, because I want you, I and a third to share it.”

Then there were her other, less self-centric thoughts: the actual worries for Kate's welfare, beyond her utility in delaying a potentially awkward moment. The thoughts that shamed her. She wondered if it wouldn't be sensible for the three of them to put their personal lives on hold until the end of the week. Just, you know, until they'd dealt with a few pressing issues: the evil rich people and the storm and the angry ghost animal. Yes, that would probably be the sensible thing to do. Only Max doubted she could do that, at least completely. Sly thoughts kept slipping into her mind, accompanied by a warmth that seemed to begin in her cheeks but definitely not end there. Thoughts involving either Chloe, or Victoria, or both at once. And if she did manage to banish those thoughts somehow, her mind might start dwelling on other less pleasant parts of recent history; things like walls being painted with bits of brain, all the pain and horror she'd witnessed and undone.

A faint, yet pungent aroma wafted in from the science lab directly opposite Jefferson's class; its effect was like smelling salts, a light slap on the cheek that shocked Max back to reality. Were she competent in Chemistry, the scent would have no doubt been identified as the lingering vapours of an organic solvent, probably used in an experiment conducted a couple of classes ago. However, as that wasn't Max's area of expertise, she internally classified it as a 'weird science smell that reeked like a cross between a gas station pump and a gas station bathroom' and resolved to stay as far away as possible. She did find herself slightly confused as to why the school’s main science teaching lab was open and in use in lunch hour. Still, it wasn't like she had any free time left to investigate: class was close to starting and Kate's arrival was imminent. She couldn't risk straying from the vicinity of the photography class. Not if she was going to ensure a late bus was the last bad thing to happened to Kate that day.

A fair portion of the photography class were already in attendance when Max arrived. There were Taylor and Hayden of course, engaged in the photo shoot Taylor had mentioned; the striking and enviably proportioned Dana Ward acting as their model. Max watched Dana strut in the centre of class, momentarily taken by the power and confidence she seemed to exude in each pose; how her features, accentuated by skilled application of eye-shadow and mascara, demanded your attention; the way the silver sequins on her dark shirt dazzled with each camera flash, drawing eyes to her like a magnet. In Max's opinion, she was kind-of incredible, and that was completely ignoring her most prominent and showcased pair of assets. The poses Taylor and Hayden were having her do were by-in-large unimaginative, but she just seemed so at home as the centre of attention.
Could I ever learn to carry myself like that? Max wondered, suddenly feeling a little small. To be able to command that level of public confidence, if not that level of cleavage. It would be so great to be able to reply without freaking out when some random group acknowledges you on the stairway. Or leave on a flirtatious and hopeful note when a certain someone you may have feelings for all but throws themselves at you.

Managing to end her gushing appraisal of Dana, and somehow avoid stealing a glance at Taylor's legs as well, Max felt a tinge of worry as she regarded Hayden for a moment. He was actually like Warren in one respect, Max supposed: they both seemed to like wearing t-shirts over the top of other clothing, though Hayden's somehow seemed less ill-fitting. Actually, Hayden was probably the person Warren wished he was: tall, relaxed, confident, apparently popular with the girls. Plural. Careful Max, you're hardly in a position to judge at present. The real problem was that he might have drugged Kate. Kate’s hazy memory of who had passed her the drink, coupled with certain uncomfortable demographic realities regarding the Vortex Club's senior membership seemed to make him a suspect. He definitely had sided against Victoria in the vortex club leadership stouch, choosing to support Nathan's preferred candidate, Courtney. Could that really indicate a loyalty to Nathan? Why else would the normally calm and politically agnostic Hayden suddenly aid in Victoria's removal?

Once again, a problem for later. She thought. For now, Kate was her priority. Only she still hadn't arrived. Aside from Dana and her two photographers, there were two other students present. The first was Evan Harris, a self-described master of the history of photography. He was known for his immaculately curated portfolio (which he steadfastly refused to let anyone see unless they could answer a usually obscure photography question to 'prove their worth'), his generous use of hair gel, and his trademark scarf which he seemed to insist on wearing regardless of the actual temperature. Today it was looped over the top of a blue button-up shirt and khaki jacket. At that moment he was mostly absorbed in reading and taking notes from a photography text, though he seemed to occasionally pause from his study to regard Taylor's photography session, mostly with mild condescension.

The second, clad in an ill-fitting grey sleeveless top and jeans, and wearing several almost awkwardly large crosses suspended on necklaces, was Alyssa Anderson. Max regarded her as she glared toward the window, behind which grey clouds were gathering in the sky. There was something moody and atmospheric about how she was posed: the limited illumination of the classroom lights, the overcast and darkening sky combined to produce dreary muted tones; Alyssa's heavyset body tilted awkwardly, framing one side of the window as she seemed to glare bitterly outward: either through the glass at the gathering clouds outside, or at the glass itself and her own reflection in it. Before Max knew it, she was reaching for her camera. She glanced back at Taylor and Hayden for a moment; both were fully engrossed in taking shots of their model. Like she'd already concluded, Dana was beautiful, but their were millions of shots generically showcasing beauty in circulation; this view of Alyssa felt so much more evocative. A person clearly deep in thought, loathing the world, or herself, or maybe her place in the world. Whatever the case it was definitely full of true emotion. Alyssa didn't even notice the snap and whir of Max's camera, she was so lost in her apparent introspective trance. Though someone else did.

“Max, taking an opportunity on offer, I see.” Evan said from his desk, looking up from his textbook with curiosity.

“Perhaps in exchange for letting me observe this little shot in development, you'd care to peruse my portfolio?” He asked, pointing to a binder that sat alongside his textbook. “It's not an offer I extend to many.”

'Care to peruse my portfolio?' Max thought. And to think some people criticised the occasional use
of ‘wowser’ and ‘hella’. OK, fruity language or not, there had always been a certain mystique around the secret portfolio Evan kept. It was difficult to tell how much of that was baseless hype, since so few people could successfully ‘prove themselves’ by answering his usually inane questions, however there was a generally held belief that it contained, amongst other things, the product of an incredible photoshoot he’d done with Rachel Amber. With her mysterious disappearance, and radically divergent opinions on her: Chloe waxing lyrical about how incredible she was, and Victoria decrying her as the antichrist, Max felt a need to see her for herself, beyond the one mugshot she’d seen on those missing person posters. She looked at the classroom door. Kate still hadn’t arrived, and this was the right place to wait for her, so why not? She walked over to Evan’s desk and reached out with her hand, offering the Polaroid she’d taken in trade. Evan took it, but quickly placed his other hand over his portfolio binder, barring Max from accepting it in exchange.

“But first, a test to determine whether you are truly worthy.” Evan said quickly. “Who took the famous falling soldier?”

Oh, god, he was doing the stupid quiz thing after all; springing it on her after he’d gotten a good look at her Alyssa shot didn’t seem fair, either. Still, Max actually knew the answer to this one; it had been asked in a test Jefferson had assigned them last week.

“Robert Capa.” Max said automatically.

Evan frowned and slowly withdrew his portfolio from Max’s grasp.

“That might be what the gormless masses have been taught Max, however—”

Max threw her hand up and pulled time back a notch, annoyed with herself and not in the mood to hear the full lecture. Of course Evan wouldn’t want the official answer, she’d heard him ranting openly about this to anyone who’d listen last week. Fortunately she remembered the proposed alternate photographer’s identity. It was actually someone Max considered an inspiration, and a heroine. One of the first women involved in news photography. It was only a second or two, so she barely felt any discomfort as a cloud of red briefly assailed her view.

“But first, a test to determine whether you are truly worthy.” Evan said quickly. “Who took the famous falling soldier?”

“That’s actually a more complicated question than it sounds.” Max began. “The conventional wisdom attributes it to Robert Capa. But I think I heard from someone that a study published earlier this year argued it had actually been taken by his ‘professional partner’ Gerda Taro. A lot of her work at that time was officially published under Capa’s name.”

“A contrarian opinion!” Evan exclaimed, offering his portfolio to her with overt enthusiasm. “Max, you are most assuredly a kindred spirit. Please accept a most respectful nod and the freedom to browse my work.”

Max quickly seized the portfolio, just in case Evan decided to ask a follow-up she was less familiar with. As she flipped through the thick pages, it occurred to her that thanks to her powers, she could probably respond to anyone to their satisfaction. Rewinding and trying different answers until they got what they were hoping for. The only question would be whether it was worth the headache, figuratively and literally. In this case she found herself wondering if it had been. Evan’s work somehow didn’t live up to the hype behind it. It was undeniably immaculate, but cold. Technical and sterile, missing an x-factor. She actually felt a little let down.

And then she flipped the page again. Her jaw dropped in astonishment as life seemed to explode from the next set of shots, thanks not so much to the photographer but the model and the deft manner
in which she blended subtle expressions on her face: a slightly raised eyebrow that told you she knew exactly what you were thinking, or the faintest hint of a mischievous smile from the corner of her lip that invited you to try it. Rachel Amber. She was incredible, just like Max had somehow always known, in spite of having never met her. There was a warmth, a casual flirtation, and a touch of humour within every shot. Max had seen Rachel's face on the missing person posters Chloe had been dispersing, of course, but a plain, neutral head shot was totally different to deliberate posing under studio conditions. Rachel just seemed to own the frame utterly; she was at least as at home as the centre of attention as Dana seemed to be, and so much more dynamic. Everything else, the carefully curated backgrounds, the painstakingly chosen lighting, details which must have taken Evan an age to tweak to perfection, somehow became insignificant. Shot after shot, page after page, it was the same untamed magnificence, until Max abruptly reached blank pages. Evan hadn’t added anything more to his portfolio after Rachel Amber. That was understandable, she was a hard act to follow. After a moment's consideration, Max turned back a page to Rachel's last photo: her staring straight into the camera, with a smile and a look that saw straight through you. Somehow it seemed sad to end on a blank page.

“How long ago did you take these?” Max asked.

“About seven months.” Evan replied. “She disappeared less than a month later.”

“What do you think happened to her?” Max asked.

“Nothing good, Max.” Evan replied sombrely. He glanced down at Rachel smiling back at them through the photograph, and winced slightly. “Photographing Rachel felt so easy. She almost had a sixth sense of what would look best, and made sure to provide you with that. It was uncanny how real her shots felt. You could almost feel yourself being pulled into the scene you were looking at, even when you knew the scene was fabricated in a studio.”

“Sometimes a completely staged event feels more real than reality.” Max noted. “The falling soldier is still considered one of the greatest shots in the history of war-photography, and a lot of people are convinced it's a fabrication.”

“Careful Max.” Evan counselled. There are graduations between completely faked and fully authentic. It is, after all, possible to accidentally capture an evocative shot, which is not entirely representative of reality.”

That was certainly true: one theory posited that the “falling soldier” was literally just falling; that rather than having been shot, he'd tripped while negotiating a hill. It seemed that Evan was not just referring to Capa's (or Taro's) most famous work though, but also Max's photo of Alyssa. He returned the Polaroid, while gesturing to the slumped figure at the window. From the angle Max had moved to to conduct her conversation with Evan, she could see Alyssa's face, and rather than glumly contemplating the oncoming storm and her own reflection, she looked genuinely happy: her lips were upturned in a broad warm smile as she read from the screen of a smartphone that she held close, ensuring whatever it was displaying remained private.

“She's met someone online.” Evan explained.

Well that was a little surprising. And great. Alyssa always seemed to have such awful luck. She deserved something good for a change. Though it did leave Max feeling a little disappointed, somehow. Thinking she'd caught such an evocative moment on film, only to find out moments later that she'd completely misrepresented reality.

“It's nice to see someone's luck changing. Things have been going bad for too many people recently.”
“You are perhaps referring to Alyssa's car accident on the stairs yesterday? Or that horrible video of Kate doing the rounds?” Evan asked, “Perhaps even the one co-starring yourself?”

“Take your pick.” Max replied. She had a great many more events she could add to that list, things like having Nathan's crazy family trying to make them disappear, but decided it was best not to mention them. “At least Alyssa doesn't seem to have let her issues get her down.”

Evan nodded. “I hope everyone can follow her example, and not let themselves get affected by such obviously talentless hacks. The video directed at you was technically a joke: bizarrely filmed with low angle shots, with the subjects not placed in a point of prominence in the frame, and lapses in resolution consistent with movement simulation by post-process zoom. Whoever filmed it was a rank novice with the camera; as far as I can tell they did little aside from holding it still in roughly the right direction, something even an unattended tripod could accomplish. The editing of it might have made it superficially amusing, but was ridiculously over-the-top.”

Well, leave it to Evan to decry a bully due to technical ineptitude. Max herself had noticed some of what he was referring to. The Maximum Victory video did seem to have been shot from fairly high up, looking down on them. She hadn't really noticed the other points he was making though, she was too busy stressing about the content of the video and how it suddenly made her the centre of attention, to pay attention to its technical quality.

“As for Kate's video, it was a crude voyeuristic mess. I won't even dignify it with further comment, other than to express how utterly perplexed I am at you associating with its author.”

Right. Max had wondered about this. How many people were going to react negatively to her sudden cozying up to Victoria Chase? She felt it slightly unfair; they hadn't exactly welcomed her when she was alone and awkward, so why should they get any input into who she associated with now? At the same time she realised they had a point: Victoria Chase was, by many measures, a rather nasty person. She was a bit more than just that though, or at least Max thought so. There was a side to her that was nicer, though perhaps not any less potentially volatile, permanently hidden away from most peoples views like the far-side of the moon.

“Jefferson forced me to work with her.” Max protested. It was a weak excuse, he definitely hadn’t brought them to the brink of locking lips. “And I did get Victoria to take the video down.” That was a lot more than anyone else had achieved. “Though someone else just put it back up.” She conceded.

“Systemic problems, Max.” Evan sighed. “As long as the prevailing environment and value-structure provides opportunity and benefit for someone to act like an ass, someone will inevitably step up and act like an ass. You get one person to step down and behave, and you just create an opening for someone else to replace them and do the exact same thing.”

OK, were they still talking about high school bullying, or justification for some sort of quasi-communist revolution? Any further thoughts on sweeping political reorganisation of the schoolyard were quickly banished, with Max suddenly noticing that a long partial shadow had descended from the front of the class, smothering Evan's open portfolio, and darkening Rachel’s last smile. It seemed someone had walked up right behind Max, blocking the portion of light coming from the classroom's front overhead lights. Someone fairly tall then. “Did I hear the name Gerda Taro?” A familiar voice asked. Deep and soft, superficially caring, but with an unmistakable hint of cold superiority and a suggestion of hidden talons. Max went completely rigid. It was Mark Jefferson, he had appeared right behind her. Perhaps she shouldn't have been quite so shocked: this was the man's class after all, so his appearance wasn't unexpected. But not noticing him until he was literally right next to her felt frightfully unsettling. And how long had he been lurking in the background, listening? They mentioned Taro ages ago.
“It’s officially listed as Capa on the standardised tests, so while I’d never discourage someone from going above and beyond to further their own knowledge of what is undeniably the greatest subject of study in existence, do me a favour and just tick his name next assessment.” He paused for a moment, eyes narrowing infinitesimally as he regarded Evan, in a way that reminded Max of an owl who’d just spotted an oblivious field mouse. “Instead of crossing out all the multiple choice boxes and scribbling your own answer in the margin, including a reference to an academic paper that turned out to be written in Japanese.”

Evan just shrugged in response, while Max fought the urge to cover her mouth with her hand. Had he really done that? Wowser. She’d just ticked the box by Capa’s name, like a good little robot, and moved on. Then again, she was so reliant on her scholarship that she couldn’t even contemplate doing anything that might lower her already shaky academic record. Just for a moment, she fought the urge to wear a petty vindictive smile. She imagined the disbelief Jefferson must have felt, being forced to waste his precious time chasing down a non-regulation answer to what should have been a very simple to mark test, only to finally find it written in a foreign language. OK, it didn't remotely make up for what the bastard did to Kate, but it was a tiny step in the right direction.

“I knew a teacher of your calibre would appreciate the extra effort.” Evan answered, his tone smug.

“I see.” Jefferson said flatly. “Well perhaps you’ll turn out to be a worthy successor to Capa, and follow in the man’s footsteps. Max, could I have a word in private?”

He gently indicated the way to his desk. Max meekly followed, for some reason imagining a shepherd kindly leading a young lamb away from its flock, all while slowly sharpening the edge of a drawn blade against a whetstone.

Max stood nervously as Mark Jefferson took a seat behind his desk, regarded Evan again, shot him a reproachful glare, then released a deep sigh. Max, of course, had to remain standing: there was no seat opposite the teacher’s desk. It was a standard trick of educators everywhere, she supposed: relaxing in a comfy chair while forcing the pupil to stand, just another way of reminding everyone that there was a certain hierarchy to the classroom. So was making her wait and watch as he regarded another student with disdain, come to think of it. Strange that Mark Jefferson, supposed cool teacher that ‘got’ the youth of today would partake in that kind of tactic. Then again, she knew that he was about as far from the front he presented as Arcadia Bay was from San Francisco and that everyday heroes competition winner's podium. Which was, oddly enough, the topic of discussion.

“Don’t worry Max, you aren’t in any trouble. Quite the opposite actually.” Jefferson said with a smile. Max strongly disagreed. Was that another of his twisted ironic lines, like his lecture on trapping them in dark corners? Or did he seriously not know his masters the Prescotts had tried to arrange a ‘traffic accident’ that very morning? Just how closely did they work together anyway?

“This is about your everyday heroes entry.” He continued, opening an envelope full of printed photographs. Of course, Max’s stuck out like a sore thumb, the only one in Polaroid dimensions. He placed it on the desk in front of her, perfectly aligned so it was square with the desk’s edge. “It’s good, much more thoughtful and original than the majority of the others.” He said, voice kind and supportive in a way that made Max sick, knowing what she knew. “Most of the entries were riddled with cliché: one was even a shot of a fireman rescuing a cat from a tree. Can you believe that?” He smiled again, and Max didn’t. That was her backup plan, before she decided to do something more metaphorical and experimental, and also before she realised how much effort would be involved in chasing the Arcadia Bay fire department around.

“In fact, there’s only one photo it’s in serious contention with. I think you know which one.”
Victoria’s. Obviously. Max thought. Her suspicions were confirmed when Jefferson withdrew a photo of more standard proportions, and placed it directly alongside hers, edges perfectly aligned with the desk once again.

“So I have a problem.” He said, extending two fingers, and pointing one at each shot. “These two photographs are so closely matched in terms of merit, I may have to use the extra-credit work I assigned you as a tiebreaker. Now, I know it’s a bit unfair to pressure you with such a tight deadline for its submission, but I really need to book those airline tickets in time for Friday. I don’t suppose you’ve got something already?”

Obscured by the table edge, Max’s hand balled into a fist as she composed her thoughts. OK, this is the chance Chloe had talked about. All I need to do is sell the idea I'm really anxious about grades and extra-credit, and Jefferson will probably write-off any unusual behaviour he might notice today, like being reluctant to even make eye-contact with him, as 'academic-related nervousness'.

“I do have one shot.” Max said, looking down at the desk. At her humble little Polaroid entry sitting next to Victoria's ‘proper’ photo. Just looking at them side-by-side, every inadequacy in her shot became apparent. All the ways Victoria's was better. She felt like a fraud, a pretender, and that was entirely the state of mind she wanted, so she looked a little longer, until her eyes threatened to tear up. Only then, her face a portrait of anxiety and confusion, did she risk looking up to answer him. “I'm not sure if it's good enough though. I'm on the literal edge of losing my scholarship. Maybe I should collect a few more shots-”

“Max.” Jefferson replied, cutting her off. There was something about her face. A look of self-doubt, so deep it almost came across as terror. He felt his throat go dry. There were multiple reasons Max was his star student. The first, he'd discovered the moment he'd received her application for that Blackwell scholarship. The attached sample of her work was a collection of selfies naturally, and on Polaroid film. The only reason they escaped the trash was because he was too busy laughing at the sheer audacity, thinking that such an amateur format was suitable for a prestigious scholarship application. Then, on a whim, he actually looked at her sample shots. And found he couldn't stop looking at them. They weren't the expected smiles of a vapid twit posing, but an honest view of someone trapped between hope for the future and pain in their past. He was floored: it took a special kind of person to capture their own innocence intermingling with the realities of the world. The sort of person he needed to meet, and find his own chance to preserve for eternity, before the world inevitably ruined them.

He had read the first half of the accompanying application carefully. The reasons given for Max's interest in selfies were so tragic that they simply had to be genuine. It stemmed from what she called her 'social awkwardness': she simply lacked anyone else to act as a model after some tragedy separated her from her 'one best friend'. He didn't bother to read the second half. He was too busy drafting the acceptance letter. Max would be the perfect counterpoint and contrast to his prior subject Rachel Amber. And now, she was in front of him, so meek and uncertain, questioning her own work like any good artist should. It took a great reserve of will power not to reach for his camera then and there. Or extend just a finger and softly stroke her cheek, just to confirm he wasn't hallucinating, just to confirm that something so pure and uncorrupted really was standing across the desk from him, almost within his grasp.

“I have the utmost confidence in your abilities Max, and so should you. Perhaps…” He began in what he hoped would be taken as a gentle tone. He had trouble completing his thought, distracted by the way her lip quaked. How she could barely meet his gaze. She literally seemed on the verge of tears. If Max really was under this much academic pressure, another pathway might exist that would lead her to his private studio, less invasive than a dose of sedatives. Not so different a path to the one he’d used to gain the services of his little helpers, as it happened.
“Perhaps if you were to just hand me a shot, and ask for my opinion on it without any mention of the context of extra-credit or competitions. As a mentor and teacher I'd be obliged to give my honest opinion on it, and you could take that information and do with it whatever you cared to.”

He extended his hand, palm up and open expectantly, and enjoyed the moment's hesitation it provoked in Max, the obvious battle between sense of morality and deference to his authority. He wondered for a moment if this would raise or lower himself in her esteem. Would Max Caulfield appreciate his little bending of the rules for her? He imagined most students would, if it meant getting higher grades. Or would her image of him as some virtuous soul be tainted? In the end it really didn't matter; one way or another, she was going to stumble her way in front of his lens at some stage, at which point more than just her opinion of him would end up tainted.

Whatever her thoughts, Max acquiesced in short order, and produced a photo for his inspection. It was such a pleasure to deal with someone who did as they were told, someone who treated you as a figure of reverence, something that seemed to be getting rarer and rarer with the advance of time. Instead he had to deal with the likes of Evan Harris: obnoxious little self-entitled, self-righteous and self-important upstarts who tried to undercut and undermine him at every turn. Or their polar opposites, the Victoria Chase-type: students who continually made laughably transparent attempts at ingratitude, treating him as a vehicle for their own career advancement. Worse still was the ordeal he'd suffered last night, having to dissemble and scrape to his 'patron', that blunt philistine, Sean Prescott. Jefferson had found himself with a lot to answer for, but precious few answers: how someone managed to steal his burner phone's simcard, how someone had been privy to some of their clandestine communications, and how this someone had sent a message perfectly tailored to delay their current plans. Presently, he suspected David Madsen; the school's paranoid security head was always snooping around everywhere, investigating and accusing everyone of being 'up to something'. He knew for a fact it couldn't be any of the students: short of prying the phone off his dead body, something that clearly hadn't happened, the only opportunity to take possession of the phone was a brief moment in the staff room, literally the only place he'd removed his jacket in the company of others. Sean Prescott had gone on to 'strongly suggest' he confirm this theory and/or otherwise identify the thief. Jefferson fought back the urge to sneer, as he had last night when Prescott uttered those words. What did the man take him for, a fool? He already had plans to do just that. Plans he'd set in motion that morning.

Still, the observation had at least partially placated Sean Prescott. You could always tell, because the insufferable lout would shift the conversation onto some other detail he was displeased with. In this case, allowing some “inked-up blue-haired lesbo she-hulk”, to quote what Nathan Prescott had told his lawyer from a hospital bed, to pound the said younger Prescott insensate in a beautifully artistic manner. Were these two events that served to undermine him in Sean Prescott's eyes linked? Jefferson wondered. Or were they purely coincidental? He pinched his nose bridge in annoyance, then made a show of making it look like it was the pressure of his glasses that had caused the irritation. He had to keep up appearances for his 'star student', in case she came to the ridiculous conclusion that she was somehow to blame for his mood. Besides, why dwell on the past when you can examine photos in the present? He thought, finally turning his attention to the image in his hand.

He studied the positioning of the figures first. Victoria at one of the focus points in adherence to the rule of thirds. A second figure of similar height but less 'classically feminine' build off further to one side, denoting less importance. A desk was present in shot, text books and notepads on it, immaculately placed on Victoria's side, and strewn more haphazardly on the other girl's, reflecting their personalities. The overall impression was a scene of study, or perhaps finishing an assignment. A small irony for a piece of homework to showcase the completion of another piece of homework, he supposed. Now, on to the expressions.

Jefferson suppressed the urge to let out a snort as he regarded Victoria's face. He'd seen her
expression before, of course. He saw it every time she tried to ingratiate herself onto him. That slight hint of boundless desperation concealed behind a veneer of false power, hoping she'd prove herself good enough while knowing full-well she wasn't. Praying that a front of confidence and a streak of vindictiveness would somehow make up for her other shortcomings. That desperation was the only portion of her really worth capturing, the only remaining nerve of innocence that breached her calloused exterior. And of course little Max Caulfield captured it so perfectly. Her vision of the world was so compatible with his own. Still one aspect of it bothered him slightly. The ever-refined Victoria Chase was worshipping what appeared to be the potential next cover model for hipster-girl quarterly. Everything about the other figure desperately screamed “I'm so different! Notice me!” in unpalatably shrill tones: the blue hair, the tattoos, the clothing choice. Now, if the shot reflected his own interactions with Victoria, then did that mean the slovenly desperate-for-attention character was some sort of satire of him?

No. He was confusing Max's proclivities with that obnoxious ball of hair-wax Evan. Max was always earnest to a fault rather than subversive. Still he found his eyes lingering on this second figure. Blue hair, tattoos and on a second viewing a rather strong physique. Now why did that description sound familiar.

"Enlightening, and I'm quite sympathetic to the core subject matter. The shot conveys a story of gratitude in response to help in with one's homework quite successfully. While it may be cruel to directly state as much, I'm sure we can quietly agree that the vulnerability displayed is atypical of Victoria's normal behaviour, so it's on-topic as well. In fact it seems you've managed to find an innocence and sincerity in her that I'm sure we'd all enjoy seeing more of.” Jefferson said, opening his desk drawer and laying the photo inside it with all the reverence of a corpse being lowered into a casket. He quickly shut the drawer, and made a show of locking it, before depositing the keys in his jacket.

"Why had he done that? Jefferson had said this was all just an informal discussion, hadn't he?

"I don't think we need to even consider you submitting something else, it’s difficult to imagine this shot being beaten out Max. Unofficially of course.” He proceeded to make a grand show of opening his marking ledger, and with it in full view of Max, stroked the characters A and plus by her name with long, overly-flourished pen-strokes.

A+? Max asked herself. Wowser. It was probably the first time in highschool she'd gotten a grade like that. It made her feel strangely warm inside. At least until she remembered the person awarding the grade was probably a sociopath. Then she felt terribly uneasy. After all, what did it say about you if a sociopath 'liked' and 'could relate' to your art?

"One question though.” Jefferson asked. “The other model you used in the photo, with the blue hair. Do you mind me asking-”

But at that moment, Max's attention was snatched away by the diminutive figure that had appeared in the classroom doorway. Kate Marsh. Kate was standing bleary eyed, worn down, haunted, but somehow still on her feet. Everything else, Jefferson and the rest of the class, suddenly became completely irrelevant to Max. She just walked off, leaving her teacher mid-sentence, addressing empty space. For now, she knew exactly what she needed to do: stay close to Kate and guard her and somehow everything would be fine. And she couldn't imagine anything that could stop her from doing just that.

The cacophonous boom of an explosion interrupted everything, as it rang out from the science lab opposite Jefferson's photography classroom. There were five seconds of eerie, cold silence, during which Max, Kate, and everyone else in the room just stared toward the doorway and the corridor beyond. Then every student simultaneously made a beeline for the door, and of course headed toward, rather than away from, the source of the blast. By virtue of being closest to the classroom
door, Kate and Max got to the science lab first. Inside, they saw the remains of a failed (or perhaps highly successful) experiment strewn across one of the work benches. Their attention was immediately drawn by three things: first was the base of a shattered beaker, apparently the source of the explosion. Second was a rather formidable looking glass jar which sat next to the shattered flask, its lid open. The jar had a label with “Na” printed in bold, sinister writing along with equally sinister warning symbols that probably meant something to someone who studied science. The jar was filled with some sort of oil, under which the lustrous glint of shiny metal pieces could be seen. Finally there was the victim, Warren Graham. He was being ushered from the bench to a nearby sink by Science Teacher Mrs Grant with all possible haste. Warren’s face was pale with shock. He didn’t seem visibly burned though, and had seemingly escaped injury from the beaker’s Pyrex shards as well. All in all, it seemed he’d had a very lucky escape. That was, until Max noticed how his face was wet, splashed with the residue of whatever had exploded, and the way he was blinking furiously, his eyes rapidly going bloodshot. He'd not been wearing safety glasses, a lab coat, or any other protection when the blast happened, and seemed lost in a world of ever growing agony.

Chapter End Notes

Seems Max finally has to rescue a non-blonde person, and it’s my good friend Warren (well she did rescue those skaters too I guess, but the main skater Justin has dirty blonde hair so maybe the record still stands). In the original game Warren does his chemistry work without safety glasses or a lab coat, and as I’ve already noted the chemistry he tries is highly dubious. He literally sticks his face over a beaker full of aqueous solution that he’s adding alkali metals to. This seemed to have no consequences in the game, so of course it's going to have dire consequences in a satirical retelling of the story.

There was no Chloe this chapter :( She wasn't in the analogous portion of the original game either, and it's pushing belief to have her casually march back onto the school grounds, given she got reported in the girls dorm earlier. Perhaps someone will notice her working on her truck just outside the school. Or perhaps a critical situation might arise that will force her to enter.

Reseaching how Robert Capa died might give you insight into one of Jefferson's statements.

I wonder what Samuel's doing with all those red folders?

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