Second Chances
by Kimikochan

Summary

Carrie doesn't die, and Veronica takes the job with Truman-Mann. When she comes home after her father's so-called accident, she starts questioning her life choices, but not without solving a few mysteries, too.

Notes

I don't write many AU fics because, for the most part, I really love Veronica Mars canon, but it always bugged me that the whole movie was based around Logan being accused, yet again, of murdering another one of his girlfriends. Regardless, it worked great for the movie, which I loved. I still wondered what would happen if Carrie didn't die? Would Veronica still realize she wanted to be a P.I. instead of a lawyer? Would LoVe find each other again?

"A Fleet Week Fling" looked at what would've happened if they ran into each other before Carrie and Piz. "Second Chances" is my take on what happened when they meet up afterwards.
Chapter 1

Veronica’s mark was in her sights when the ringing began. The furry, black figure danced along the Neptune boardwalk, thrusting his hips at hapless tourists. She lifted her gaze from her camera’s viewfinder. There was something vaguely familiar about the way that ape gyrated.

She frowned, annoyed by the distracting buzz of her phone. Who could be calling now? Everyone knew not to disturb her when she was on a case - not unless it was an emergency …

Veronica jolted awake, her heart hammering as she reached blindly in the dark for her phone. Blearily, she peered at the screen before grudgingly hitting the answer button.

“Wallace, so help me, if you’re drunk dialing me again …” she groused as she turned onto her back, her eyes still closed.

“Veronica.”

The serious tone in her best-friend’s voice instantly put her on alert, and she sat up. Piz stirred beside her. She threw off the covers, creeping quietly out of bed so she wouldn’t disturb him.

“It’s your dad. There’s been an … accident.”

The next few hours passed in a frantic blur as she arranged a complex series of stand-by flights with layovers in Chicago and Seattle that had her arriving in San Diego around 4 o’clock in the afternoon. Numbly, she packed a carry-on suitcase while the wrenching conversation with Keith’s doctor played over and over in her head.

“You father has some pretty serious injuries, Ms. Mars. He has fractures of the ribs, skull and pelvis. We’re going to have to keep him in the ICU.”

She waited as long as possible before waking Piz. Nerves shot, she gritted her teeth at his outpouring of concern, riding out the tidal wave of questions and wishing for blessed solitude.

“And Sacks? The other man in the car?” Piz asked, sitting on the corner of the bed dressed in boxers and a t-shirt, his shaggy hair disheveled.

“He was … DOA,” she said, tightly, pushing aside any grief she felt for the quiet deputy she’d known since she was a child.

“Was he a friend of yours?”

But she didn’t answer.

Veronica knew of course, that Piz would want to accompany her to Neptune, but she deftly nixed the idea.

“No, it’s okay, really. You’re swamped with work, and things are going to be crazy, anyway. I promise I’ll call if I need anything,” she told him.

“Veronica …”

“I have to go. I need to get on this flight or it’ll be another 24 hours before I make it home. I’ll call you as soon as I know anything.”
She bent, kissing him perfunctorily. Evading his embrace, she slipped on a black leather jacket, grabbed her purse and left the tiny Brooklyn apartment. She was at the airport in less than an hour, sipping a hot coffee as she waited for her flight - alone at last.

Gradually, other passengers began trickling through security, and when a trio of men in designer suits sat nearby, deep in conversation about depositions and trial dates, Veronica suddenly realized she had to call her boss.

It was still early. No one would be in the office for at least another hour, and by then she’d be well on her way to Chicago. So she’d left a detailed message on Gayle Buckley’s voicemail, and when she was done it was time to board the plane. She slung her purse over her shoulder, gripped the suitcase handle and got in line.

Veronica had graduated from the prestigious Columbia School of Law, and after a vigorous round of job interviews, she’d started working for Truman-Mann, a firm with Fortune 500 clients and glass offices high above Manhattan. But after six months of making frivolous lawsuits disappear before landing in the courtroom, she was bored out of her skull.

She’d worked her ass off all the way through Stanford, followed by four long years of law school. Her life’s goals were within reach - solid relationship, quality career prospects, low-profile existence - and yet, for some reason, she was feeling increasingly dissatisfied.

Her job was not without its perks, but money and status were never high on Veronica’s list of priorities, and she was fast learning just how soul-sucking corporate law could be. What was the point of an expensive, Ivy League education, when very little of what she did really mattered? She missed the kind of work that left her feeling satisfied. Sure, being a private investigator had its seedy aspects, but at least the end of the day she’d felt as if she’d helped someone.

Similarly, she was starting to realize her so-called solid relationship with Piz was on shaky ground, although he seemed to be blissfully unaware of it. They’d been together for more than a year, and he’d moved into her apartment shortly after graduation.

Things between them were good, and in many ways, he made her very happy. He was thoughtful and sweet, and they were interested in a lot of the same things such as books, music and movies. Veronica and Piz were highly compatible - at least according to the *Cosmo* her roommate left behind.

But she was beginning to see they had very different ideas about the future.

It all started when Piz told her about his parents’ upcoming trip to the Big Apple, and how eager they were to meet her. Their visit was still a couple weeks away, but he was already hinting about her joining them on a family cruise to the Bahamas.

He’d even dropped the M-word once or twice.

And while Veronica may have swapped her telephoto lens for a leather briefcase, she wasn’t ready for a diamond accessory. Judging from her panic, she suspected she never would be.

She shut her laptop, unable to concentrate on the brief she’d promised to have on Gayle’s desk by the end of business on Monday. She’d spoken with Wallace just before boarding the plane, but he’d had nothing new to offer on her dad’s condition. That had been hours ago, and her anxiety had grown with each passing minute.

When the plane touched down, she didn’t wait for an announcement to switch on her phone. “I just landed at O’Hare - any news?” she asked Wallace the moment he answered.
“Just that they want to keep him in ICU for the next two days at least. You might not get to see him until he’s out,” he told her.

*Fuck that.* He was her father, the man who’d raised her virtually on his own. No one was going to stop her from seeing him.

She had three hours to kill before her next flight, but she was too keyed up to eat. She bought another cup of coffee instead and sat at a table to work on her brief. An hour later, she sent the document to Gayle’s inbox and left Starbucks. Aimlessly, she wandered through the terminal, walking by souvenir shops, restaurants and expensive designer boutiques.

She was just passing a newsstand when a grainy photo of a smiling Logan Echolls caught her eye, stopping her short. *Pop Star Reunites with Navy Pilot Beau,* screamed *InTouch Weekly.*

Logan was all over the celebrity rags these days. He’d disappeared from the public eye until a couple of years ago when he’d started going out with rising singing sensation Bonnie DeVille, otherwise known in Neptune as Carrie Bishop. There was a skirmish with a paparazzo, in addition to the usual It Couple sightings: vacationing in Ibiza, shopping at The Grove and even grabbing coffees at Veronica’s old haunt Java the Hut.

There was also a red carpet appearance at the MTV Music Awards in which Bonnie DeVille snagged Best Album of the Year. A reluctant-looking Logan remained in the background during the usual photo op, but the cameras caught him beaming with pride when her name was announced later in the evening.

Veronica had devoured it all - secretly from behind hooded eyes while in line at the supermarket.

She hadn’t seen or spoken to Logan since she’d fled Neptune over nine years ago, but it was nearly impossible to avoid all news of her ex. Stories about him dropping out of Hearst only to graduate a year later were believable enough, but she’d dismissed rumors he’d enlisted in the Navy. So she was stunned when news broke that infamous Hollywood bad boy was a decorated fighter pilot. Though she had no right, she was also fiercely proud of everything he’d accomplished, and scared to death of everything his job implied.

Veronica had sidelined herself long ago, but she couldn’t resist observing from the periphery.

Grabbing the magazine along with the latest *Entertainment Weekly* featuring a cat-eyed Bonnie DeVille on the cover, she paid for them and hurried to board the plane.

Once settled in her seat, she opened the gossip rag and began to read, grateful for the distraction. The former lovers had been spotted at small restaurant along the Pacific Coast Highway, where someone shot a photo of them having a romantic, candlelit dinner.

“He was very attentive and affectionate, and they seemed to genuinely enjoy each other’s company,” said a female patron, presumably the photographer. “He was so handsome, and really sweet, which surprised me.”

A year ago, Veronica had been studying in her favorite cafe when she’d spotted Carrie and Logan’s pictures in a People magazine someone had left on the table next to hers. Logan had finally called it quits after Carrie’s highly-publicized affair with Sean Friedrich of all people. Only now, they were being spotted in L.A. and Neptune, fueling rumors they’d reconciled.

It didn’t bode well for him if the *Entertainment Weekly* cover story, chronicling Bonnie DeVille’s downward spiral, complete with numerous stints in rehab and embarrassing public displays, was true.
Loyal to a fault, Logan had stuck by her through it all, and even after their ignominious split, he’d continued trying to help her.

She chuckled at the irony of Logan Echolls as a stabilizing influence, but also felt a strange sense of satisfaction and pride. She was pleasantly surprised to find the only reference to his past was a vague mention of “overcoming a laundry list of personal issues.” The writer’s description of Logan as “a real American hero” brought a genuine smile to her lips.

Logan had finally managed to escape Aaron’s evil shadow.

She stowed the magazine in her purse, then sat back and closed her eyes. Exhausted, Veronica slept.

_The warm wind blew across her face, making her hair swirl crazily, tickling her neck and cheeks. Her favorite song was playing on the radio, and she reached down to turn up the volume. She smiled faintly, leaning back against the leather seat and peering at the boat lights twinkling from the dark bay._

_As they drove over the Coronado Bridge, she could feel him looking at her, and she turned to meet his curious gaze. For one long moment, she stared into those familiar dusky eyes she’d loved so much, and her smile widened. He answered with a grin of his own before returning his attention to the road ahead._

_She closed her eyes, feeling more peaceful than she had in a very long time._

_“I’m glad we took the long way home,” she whispered._

She jerked awake when the captain announced their descent into Seattle. Three hours later, she was holding back tears as Wallace hugged her.

_“Thank you,” she said, squeezing tight. “If you hadn’t been there…”_

_“But I was, and your dad is gonna be okay.” He quickly whisked her through the San Diego airport and drove straight to the hospital, where Keith’s doctor allowed her to see him._

_“He’s improving, Ms. Mars, but we’ll need to repair the fracture to his pelvis, probably first thing tomorrow, and we’ll want to keep him in ICU for a little while longer,” his doctor said. “He’ll need his rest, so you won’t be able to see him for very long.”_

Wallace had tried to prepare her, but the sight of Keith laying prone on the hospital bed, his face scratched and bruised, bandages wrapped tightly around his head shocked Veronica. Not for the first time that day, she pushed aside painful memories of another hospital room and third-degree burns, and clutched her father’s limp hand.

_“I love you, Daddy,” she whispered, finally letting the tears fall._

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Veronica stayed at the hospital, curled up on a waiting room chair, until nearly midnight, when Mac and Wallace finally persuaded her to go home and get some rest. Wallace took her back to the tidy Craftsman bungalow Keith bought four years earlier. She made up the guest room sofa bed, where she lay awake for hours, unable to sleep despite her exhaustion.

She rose early the next morning, her inner clock still on East Coast time. Fueled by coffee, she showered, dressed, and after locating a spare set of car keys, headed to the hospital in Keith’s late-model, beige Honda Accord. Her dad was being prepped for surgery when she arrived, and she had
just enough time to press a kiss to his cheek before they whisked him away.

“Ms. Mars?” Veronica turned to see a young Asian woman dressed in nursing scrubs. “Your father’s things are in his room. They’re in a plastic bag in the bottom drawer. Feel free to go in and get them.”

“Thank you. I will.” She made her way down the hall into Keith’s room. Last night she’d barely noticed the flowers covering the bedside table. Now she took the time to read the accompanying cards.

Cliff, Leo, Wallace’s mom, the Mackenzies and all of Keith’s softball teammates sent flowers wishing him a speedy recovery. Inga Olofson, Keith’s former receptionist at the Sheriff’s Department, sent a bouquet of yellow daisies with a card expressing her deep sorrow over Sacks’ death. Even Parker reached out with an offer to help in any way she could, taking care to leave her phone number and email address.

Nearly everyone they knew in Neptune had either written, called or sent flowers - with one notable exception.

Veronica passed the rest of the time working on her laptop. She’d spoken to her boss the day before, and Gayle and been very sympathetic. “It won’t be a problem for you to work from home or even our San Diego office, if need be. Worse comes to worse, you can take a leave of absence,” the formidable attorney said.

Mac showed up around noon with food. Veronica didn’t even realize she was hungry until the smell of greasy burgers and fries wafted from the open bags. Gratefully, she wolfed down a cheeseburger then chased it with a chocolate milkshake. “Thanks, Mac. You saved my life,” she mumbled with a mouthful of fries.

“My dad had emergency gallbladder surgery here last year, so I’m familiar with the cafeteria. I’d steer clear of everything but the Caesar salad and curly fries,” Mac replied.

Well-wishers stopped by throughout the day, including Cliff, Inga and a woman from the Balboa County prosecutor’s office named Michelle Yamamoto. She was about her dad’s age, maybe a year or two younger, and she was a deputy district attorney.

“Keith worked with our investigators on a tricky case last year … Your dad talks about you all the time. You must know how proud he is of you.” She pressed a business card into Veronica’s hand. “Call me if you need anything - my mobile number’s on there, too.”

She was allowed to see Keith for a couple of minutes when he was out of surgery, and his doctor was optimistic that he’d make a full recovery. “Eventually,” he said. “He’ll need a lot of physical therapy first, but he’ll be tripping the light fantastic by this time next year. I heard he’s a big ballroom dancer.”

“Um, yeah,” Veronica said, mystified. It had been years since her dad took Alicia Fennell ballroom dancing … or so she thought.

She left the hospital once she knew Keith had been settled into his room for the night. Mac and Wallace were waiting at the house, where they’d put together a homemade dinner. The three friends spent the evening catching up over spaghetti, a bottle of wine and ice cream sundaes, and for the first time since Wallace’s late-night call, Veronica started to relax.

“You look tired, girl,” he said. “Have you been sleeping?”
“Aww, thanks Wallace. Just what I needed to hear. ‘You look like shit, Veronica.’”

“Judging from her surliness, I’d say, no,” Mac said.

Wallace didn’t stay long since he was coaching a basketball game the next day, but Mac stuck around to help Veronica clean up. “I’ll have to go into my dad’s office at some point this week to wrap-up any unfinished business. I have a feeling my dad’s going to need all the income he can get - the hospital bill will be astronomical,” she confided. “I might need you to help me get into my dad’s computer files. Are you game?”

“Sure, anytime. You know that,” Mac said.

They’d opened another bottle of wine, which they drank sitting on the couch in Keith’s living room. Veronica’s phone buzzed and she reached for it, knocking over her half-full glass and spilling its contents over a neat stack of mail, magazines and papers she’d left on the coffee table.

Veronica went to the kitchen for paper towels and when she returned, Mac held up the celebrity gossip magazines she’d bought at the airport. Clearly amused, her friend simply looked at her with raised eyebrows.

“Shut up, shut up, shut up,” Veronica said, raising a pointed finger. “I’ve had a shitty day, and I don’t want to hear it.”

Mac tried unsuccessfully to suppress a grin. “Here I thought you only read *The New Yorker* and *The National Law Journal*. I guess you just never know about some people.” She paused, looking pointedly at Veronica. “He’s staying with Dick Casablancas, you know.”

Veronica’s eyes widened. “Why do you suddenly know so much about Logan Echolls?”

“It’s not sudden. I’ve always known. I just didn’t think you wanted to. Parker keeps in touch with him … Actually, I’m kind of surprised he didn’t show up at the hospital.”

She shrugged and concentrated on mopping up the spilt wine. “Why would he? We haven’t talked in years,” she said, even though a small part of her had wondered if he’d put in an appearance - for old time’s sake.

Alone in bed that night, unable to sleep, Veronica admitted Logan’s presence at the hospital would’ve been comforting.

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The next day passed in an endless blur of procedures, x-rays and tests, but late in the afternoon Keith woke up just long enough to smile groggily at Veronica. “I’m a tough old bird, ya schee?” he slurred in a bad Humphrey Bogart impression.

Chuckling, she kissed his cheek. “I love you, ya big turkey.”

“Back at ya schwet’art,” Keith murmured before closing his eyes again. Moments later he was snoring.

Before leaving the hospital that night, she stopped by the admissions desk. Might as well find out what Dad’s facing, she thought. From what his doctors told her, it would be months before Keith was well enough to go back to work, and she wanted to set up a payment plan. She’d already arranged to stay in Neptune for at least the next few weeks. While she was in town, she would wrap-up any on-going cases and make sure all his clients paid on-time so her dad wouldn’t come home to
a mountain of debt.

“Everything is being covered by the insurer,” the clerk told her. “Oh, wait a sec. Mr. Mars does have a $100 co-pay, as well as a $2,000 premium. Would you like to take care of that now, or shall we bill him later?”

Veronica frowned in confusion. “I didn’t think my dad had health insurance. Are you sure you have the right patient?”

The clerk peered at the computer screen again. “Keith Mars, date of birth December 25, 1959 … He was a Christmas baby - poor guy.”

“Yes, that’s him. And you’re sure his entire bill is covered?”

“Well, he’s still a patient here so there will be additional expenses, but everything so far has been paid, which is a little unusual. These things typically take a while. You should talk to his health insurer to get more details.”

Veronica gave the clerk her debit card for the $200 co-pay and arranged a payment plan for the premium. She thanked the clerk and left, still puzzled.

“It’s just odd,” she told Piz later that night.

“Well, you know what they say about looking a gift horse in the mouth. What did your dad say?”

“He’s still pretty out of it, and I don’t want to bother him with this. He just needs to worry about getting better.”

They chatted about work and his latest segment for This American Life before he brought up Logan.

“I read somewhere he’s back in Neptune. Are you going to see him?”

“I … don’t know. Neptune’s a pretty small town. Would it matter?”

“No, I was just wondering.”

Keith’s doctors had scheduled a litany of tests for the following morning, so she decided to go into Mars Investigations rather than sit around waiting at the hospital. She nearly drove past the turn-off for the new office, which wasn’t really new after five years. While Veronica never once missed their old Sunset Cliffs apartment, she still couldn’t quite get used to her father’s new work digs. He’d kept a few pieces of furniture from the old place - two large, wooden desks and a worn leather couch - to maintain the “authentic noir aesthetic.”

She sat at her old desk, which faced the office door, and got to work. She spent the first hour reviewing his caseload. There were three cheating spouse cases that he’d already wrapped up, so all she had to do was write the final reports and arrange to meet with his clients to get their final payments.

Two other clients wanted thorough background checks - a rich, overprotective grande dame trying to get the goods on her grown son’s fiancée, and a self-made businessman looking for information about a prospective right-hand man. Keith had made some initial checks and it would be easy for Veronica to pick up where he left off.

Keith also had appointments lined up with several new clients. Veronica would have to contact them soon to let them know he wouldn’t be able to take their cases. It was too bad, really. From what she
could tell, business was booming. Her dad could really use a partner to help with his caseload. She
could only hope Neptune’s seedy underbelly still needed his services once he was better.

Wishing she’d thought to bring a bigger bag, she stuffed a few files into her purse so she could work
from the hospital, and stood to leave. Just then, the chime above the office door tinkled and she
looked up to see a woman in her mid-40s crossing the threshold. She was dressed in a grey jersey
dress, which she wore with black ballet flats. Her sleek chestnut hair was pulled into a low ponytail,
and the only jewelry she wore besides a simple gold wedding band was a pair of white pearl earrings
that contrasted sharply against her dark skin.

“Can I help you?” Veronica asked.

The woman pulled off oversized sunglasses and glanced around the dim office before settling her
gaze on Veronica. “Yes. I’m here to see Keith Mars. I have a job I want to discuss with him. I called
several times, but I haven’t heard back.”

“He was … in an accident, and he’s in the hospital, so I’m sorry, but he obviously can’t take any
new cases right now.”

The woman grew visibly upset, but she quickly composed herself. “Does he have an associate?”

“No, he’s a one-man band. Look, I can ask around and recommend someone else. If you leave your
name and contact information, I’ll get back to you in a few days.”

“And you are?”

“I’m his daughter - Veronica.”

The woman nodded, extending her hand. “I’m Elizabeth Geller. I’m sorry about your father. I hope
he gets better soon.” She fumbled in her purse, taking a business card from her wallet. “Here’s my
information. I - I’d appreciate any help you could give me.”

Veronica nodded, promising to get in touch. Mrs. Geller started to leave, but on impulse Veronica
called out to her. “May I ask the nature of your case?”

The older woman turned, hesitating for a moment, before shrugging slightly. “I-I think my husband
was cheating on me, and I need to know for sure, but … he’s dead, so it’s not like whoever I hire
can follow him around with a camera. I need someone good, someone who will go digging.”

Well, there’s a twist, Veronica thought. Somewhere deep inside she felt a spark.

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Over the next few days, Veronica gradually fell into a routine of sorts. She’d spent the mornings at
the hospital, working on her laptop while her dad underwent yet another procedure or test, then went
home for lunch so he could rest. Depending on how tired he was, she’d go back in the afternoon and
stay with him until dinner.

One morning, barely a week after the accident, Veronica discovered she hadn’t lost her sleuthing
chops.

She was combing public records for Leslie Jones, a 30 year-old stylist from Laguna Beach, who’d
just become engaged to the sole heir of a biotech billionaire, when she struck gold. An online
database of marriage licenses revealed a six-month union between a then 18 year-old Leslie and one
Mark Spencer, who coincidentally was also in line for a hefty inheritance, according to the San
Keith’s client had specifically said her daughter-in-law-to-be had never been married.

Veronica’s triumphant whoop had startled the hospital orderly, but she didn’t care. Given the other cases she’d solved over the years, it was a tiny accomplishment - miniscule, really - and yet, she felt as if she’d solved the crime of the decade.

*You still got it girl,* she thought, grinning broadly.

Back at home, she called Piz, eager to gloat over her P.I. prowess, but before she could mention it, he hit her with news of his own.

“I know you can’t make it back for my parents’ visit, so I thought we could go to Oregon for Christmas. We could stay at my parents’ place - your dad’s invited, too, of course. My folks would love to have both of you, and you know my mom is just dying to meet you. She always makes a huge turkey with all the trimmings. Her mashed potatoes are the best…”

Veronica’s good mood slowly seeped away. She had no problem meeting Piz’s parents, but spending the holidays interacting 24/7 with a family straight out of Leave it to Beaver made her stomach knot.

“We’ll see, okay? I don’t know if my dad will be up to traveling, and I’m not sure I’ll be able to get the time off.”

“Think about it. You’ll love it there, I know it. My family can be a little much sometimes, but they’re fun and they’re gonna be crazy about you. We can go skating at the outdoor rink and oh, there’s a bunch of great music clubs I want to take you to.”

Piz prattled on for a few more minutes before finally pausing. “Sorry to talk your ear off. Was there something you wanted to tell me about?”

“It was nothing. I finished some work for my dad so there’ll be a few checks in the mail soon.”

Deflated, she returned to the hospital to find Keith retching over a plastic bucket.

“He had a procedure today and he’s having a reaction to the anesthesia,” the nurse explained.

When the anesthesia began to wear off, Veronica had to call for the nurse again as her father writhed in pain. Sweat broke out over his brow and he clenched his teeth, so Veronica held his hand until the morphine worked its magic and Keith slipped into unconsciousness.

She went home soon after, knowing he’d sleep through the night, now. But she was restless and at loose ends, so she decided to look for Keith’s health insurance policy. She quickly located several forms in a file cabinet in the guest bedroom. The papers appeared to be current, but the policy included a $2,000 premium and only covered 50 percent of most medical expenses.

She replaced the papers, then looked around the room, wondering where her dad stored her things. Opening a wooden trunk in the guest room, she lifted her old leather bag, turning it by its wide, studded strap. She put it back in the trunk and took out a box marked “Accessories.”

One by one, Veronica withdrew the remnants of her old life - her trusty taser, pepper spray, fake IDs and a throwaway cell phone still encased in plastic. She also unearthed a wrinkled cream-colored envelope lying under some old books. Her name was written in Logan’s surprisingly neat, slanted hand.
It was the Christmas card he’d slipped under her door their freshman year at Hearst. They’d broken up by then, and she hadn’t bothered to send him a card or even call to wish him merry Christmas. Later, she’d absently stuck photos of them - together and happy - in the envelope along with a handful of sweet notes he’d written during their numerous, but brief, courtships.

She’d left Neptune without even saying goodbye. He’d called one day shortly after she arrived at Stanford, but she didn’t listen to the message. She’d also ignored his email. Veronica told herself she was still angry with Logan for beating up Piz, for making himself a target of the Russian mob, and she was. But it was more than that - she was afraid of being drawn back to Neptune, being drawn back to him.

She always thought she’d eventually get in touch, after enough time and distance had passed to quell those old impulses, but after a while it was easier to do nothing at all. Now she wouldn’t blame if he slammed the door in her face.

But that wasn’t Logan.

Abruptly, she stood, spilling the envelope and its contents on the floor. Grabbing her keys, she left the house. Ten minutes later she found herself sitting in her father’s car, across the street from a small, beachside cottage. A dark blue BMW convertible with U.S. Navy plates told her Logan was most likely at home.

She got out, and walked up the stone pathway. Taking a deep breath, she rapped on the glass door. To her dismay, a familiar, shirtless towhead answered.

He didn’t even look surprised to see her. Belching loudly, he said, “What’s this? I specifically told the agency an eager to please brunette. Why’s that so hard?”

“Dick.”

“Just kidding. Been a long time, Ronnie. I presume you’re not here to see me.” He held the door open and motioned her inside. “Hey, did you get some work done? Your boobs look bigger.”

“So do yours.”

Veronica followed him into a sun soaked living room with large windows that looked out onto the Pacific Ocean. Logan was in the kitchen, opening a bottle of beer not bothering to look up, and she took advantage of the opportunity to study him unawares.

His long face was more angular and rugged than she remembered, his golden-brown hair cropped military short. He wore a gleaming white uniform decorated with a rainbow of ribbons on the lapel and gold wings that glinted in the light. The Navy had apparently drilled all the baby fat out of him, judging by the way his uniform hung on his body, which was all clean lines and planes.

She swallowed to keep her jaw from dropping.

“Hey Logan - that girl who follows you around is here,” Dick bellowed, his voice tinged with sarcasm. He glanced back at Veronica. “Maybe I can save you some time. Whatever it is - he didn’t do it.”

“What are you … ?” Logan began, his mouth going slack with shock as she stepped into view. “Veronica …”

“Hey, Logan,” she offered, shrugging her shoulders and offering a nervous smile.
For a long moment, they just stared at one another, until Dick brushed past Logan on his way to the fridge for a beer.


Logan rolled his eyes, murmuring, “Sorry about that.” Suddenly, he frowned. “Are you alright? Your dad … he’s okay? The papers said he was out of ICU.”

She nodded. “He’s fine. Or, he will be. I’m planning to stick around for a while, at least until he gets out of the hospital. I heard you were in town, too, so I thought … I mean, I wanted to say hi. I - I know it’s been forever …”

He recovered from the initial shock of seeing her after all these years, but paused as if expecting more to her explanation. Slowly, when none was forthcoming, he smiled. “I’m glad you did.” He came around from the kitchen island and gave her a hug that was friendly and brief.

“So,” he said, studying her closely. “How are you holding up?”

Veronica started to brush off his concern, but as she opened her mouth, she thought of Keith’s face grimaced with pain. Her voice hitched, and she was suddenly sobbing. Mortified, but unable to stop, she covered her face with her hands. The next thing she knew, Logan was holding her.

Instinctively, she stiffened, but his arms tightened gently and she relaxed into the familiarity of his warm, solid embrace. “You’re gonna be okay,” he murmured, and she cried harder remembering how he’d held her on the rooftop of the Neptune Grand.

“That was fast even for you two.”

Veronica jumped at the sound of Dick’s voice, and she quickly wiped her eyes, muttering, “Some things never change,” as she watched him retreat to his room again.

Logan gave her a wry smile. “What can I say? He’s loyal.”

She glanced away and took a step back, noticing a damp spot on Logan’s shirt. “God, I’m sorry. I got snot all over your uniform,” she said, flushing.

He shrugged, waving his hand carelessly. “S’alright. I do laundry now,” he replied, earning a burst of watery laughter.

Sniffing, she gestured to his uniform. “I had heard of course, but I couldn’t quite picture it...You should wear only this … like ever.”

This time, Logan flushed but there was pride in his almost bashful smile. “I just got back from the base. Have you eaten - will you let me buy you dinner?”

She nodded. “Yeah. Sure … I’d like that. Where do you want to go?”

They ended up at Mama Leone’s, where they spent several hours catching up on the last nine years over pasta and glasses of red wine. Veronica was mildly surprised how easy it was to be with Logan again, even after so much time. She found herself telling him about her dad’s so-called accident and the white work truck that turned around to hit Sacks’ car a second time.

“Wallace was watching a baseball game with him,” she said. “If he hadn’t been there …”

“Jesus,” Logan swore. “I assume the dumbass with the badge doesn’t have a clue who was behind
“He refuses to acknowledge it was anything more than a hit-and-run accident, no matter what my dad or Wallace say.”

“Neptune traded one evil sheriff for another - this Lamb’s worse than his brother,” Logan muttered. “If that’s even possible. He’s been roughing up the homeless camping out in areas big-time developers have earmarked for gentrification. He also seems to have a thing for young girls.”

She frowned thoughtfully. “You know, Don Lamb was screwing Madison Sinclair when we were still in high school. I wonder if Sacks knew something about the new sheriff … “

“Veronica …”

“Relax. I’m not going to do anything. I’m just … curious.”

“And there’s that familiar chill up my spine,” he said, arching his brow skeptically. He sat up and leaned closer. “Promise me you’ll leave this alone. Bad things tend to happen when you get curious.”

“Still have that protective streak?”

“Yeah, but now I get paid for it.”

“Stand down, Lieutenant.” A small smile played on her lips, but it faded as she grew serious. “I don’t really do that anymore.”

His eyes narrowed, disbelieving. “Right.”

She met his gaze for a moment, before looking away and rolling her eyes. “Okay, maybe I have been looking into my dad’s cases a bit, but it was just to square things away so he’d have a business to come back to,” she protested.

“And?”

She lifted her chin. “I’m kicking ass.”

“Naturally.” He grinned crookedly, and when they laughed she saw a gleam in his eyes.

While they waited for their check, he asked her about work. “I was a little surprised you went to Columbia. I always pictured you in one of those blue FBI windbreakers,” he said.

“How did you know about Columbia?” she asked.

Logan shrugged. “Parker and I are still friends. You know her - there’s a reason she’s good at public relations. She talks a lot, and if you listen you pick up a few things.”

“Yeah, I just found out she’s Mac’s source of information, too. Of course if I want to find out about Neptune’s own ‘real American hero’, all I have to do is pick up *Entertainment Weekly.*” She leaned forward, whispering conspiratorially. “Did you tell the reporter about your G.I. Joe dolls?”

He bent his head closer to hers. “Action figures, Veronica. They’re called action figures.”

She sat back, laughing. “I missed you.” The words came tumbling out before she could catch herself.

Logan stared at her for a moment. “Me too. Neptune hasn’t been the same without you,” he murmured. Clearing his throat, he added, “I’m sorry I didn’t come to the hospital. I wanted to, but …
I didn’t know if you’d want to see me, and I didn’t want to upset you more than you already were.”

But Veronica was already shaking her head. “No, I’m the one that’s sorry, Logan. I should’ve called a long time ago.”

“Bygones,” he said, absolving her with a casual wave of his hand.

Her eyes met his. “Nine years of radio silence and it’s ‘bygones,’ just like that?”

“Just like that,” he replied.

Despite his many run-ins with the law, the teenage venture into bum-fights, his violent tendencies and the parade of women he’d bedded, Veronica thought Logan was a far better person than her.

After he paid the bill, they left and, by unspoken agreement, strolled along the pier, still bustling with locals and tourists. They got ice cream cones and ate them sitting on a bench while looking out at the water. The inky darkness was dotted with cresting whitecaps and twinkling boat lights, and for a moment Veronica had an odd sense of déjà vu.

“You okay?” Logan asked.

She nodded, smiling. “I haven’t been here in years.”

He was quiet, tossing the ice cream wrapper in a nearby trash can. “Carrie and I came here once. She wore this ridiculous, red wig so no one would recognize her.”

“I didn’t get a chance to say before, I was really sorry to hear about everything with Carrie.”

“You mean the drugs, the cheating, the whole sordid thing?” Logan shook his head. “We had a good first year, falling in love. Then her shitty friends, the self-loathing kind of destroyed all that. You think I had demons … that last year was bad. I wasn’t her boyfriend. I was something more like a sponsor.”

“You still are, from the sound of things. She’s clean now, isn’t she? I thought you were seeing her again.”

He gave her a sidelong glance. “Since when do you read the tabloids? Yeah, she’s better - for now - so we hang out sometimes … She’s a lot like Lilly. Free-spirited, a little wild. Which should’ve been a tip-off, I guess.

“I tried to stick it out, but after a while - what was the point? Something was missing … a connection. It wasn’t good anymore. Even I know enough to tell the difference.”

Veronica stared at him, her mind wandering for a moment. “Yeah. I know what you mean.”

They looked out at the water, sitting in companionable silence until the carnies started shutting down the rides and the last of the tourists went home. As they made their way back to his car, Veronica scoffed. “Lilly was a lot wild.”

Logan chuckled, nodding. “Yeah, she was.”

He took the scenic route, expertly navigating the winding Pacific Coast Highway with the car top down. Veronica sank into the leather seat, enjoying the feel of the wind blowing across her face and ruffling her hair. She glanced at Logan, and he turned to smile at her before focusing again on the road.
When they reached Dick’s house, he walked her to her car. “Take care, Veronica,” he said, pressing a light kiss on her forehead.

“You too.”

He started to walk away, but abruptly spun on his heel and called out her name. “Let’s not let another nine years go by, okay?”

Smiling, she strode over to him and held out her hand. “Give me your phone.”

Wordlessly, he dug it out of his back pocket and gave it to her. She typed her number into his contacts list, then thumbed to his calendar before handing it back to him. He peered at the screen as she returned to her car.

“What do you want to get drinks on Saturday?” he called to her.

“Surprise me.”

He grinned, shaking his head as he watched her drive off.

Lying in bed that night, Veronica came to a decision. Feeling at peace for the first time since her father’s accident - for the first time in years, really - she fell into a deep, restful sleep.

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She slept in the next morning. It was nearly 10 o’clock by the time she woke up, so she quickly called the hospital to check on her dad.

“He had a good night, Ms. Mars. He’s resting again, though, so take your time,” the nurse told her.

“Good, because there’s a few things I need to take care of, she thought. But first …

Fortified by coffee, Veronica took out her phone, letting her thumb hover over a number for a moment. Resolved, she hit the call button.

“Hey Piz,” she said. “We need to talk.”

She broke up with him as gently as she could, wishing it didn’t have to be over the phone, but she couldn’t continue as they were - it would be misleading him. It didn’t matter how compatible they were, how many interests they had in common, because something else was missing. Something wasn’t quite right, no matter how deeply she cared for him.

Veronica couldn’t quite see herself with a husband, two kids and a house with a picket fence, but she still wanted a committed, meaningful relationship with someone she loved and could possibly spend the rest of her life with.

Piz simply wasn’t that man.

“Does this have anything to do with Logan?” he asked, quietly without rancor.

She hesitated. “I did see him, but nothing happened. He’s … an old friend.”

“Yeah. Look, I gotta go. Give Logan my best. Tell him I’ve totally gotten used to the loose bone fragments floating around my orbital socket.”

“Piz …”
“G-Goodbye, Veronica.”

Well, that was super fun, she thought. Sighing, she headed for the bathroom to get ready for her day.

A little while later, Veronica was driving downtown, past expensive boutiques and upscale restaurants into the industrial area, where she parked in front of Mars Investigations.

A few years after she’d left, a local developer had turned the crumbling, vacant warehouse into an office building in the hopes of cashing in on a spate of growth. But the economy had tanked and the only businesses flourishing in the surrounding neighborhood were dive bars, which meant Keith’s rent was cheap.

Grabbing her bag from the passenger seat, she slung it over her shoulder, feeling the cold metal studs digging into her skin. Once she was inside, she sat down at her father’s desk, opened her laptop and spent a few minutes online.

Next, she picked up the business card she’d left on the desk the other night. Turning it over between her fingers, she took a deep breath and reached for the phone.

“Mrs. Geller, this is Veronica Mars. I’ll take your case.”
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

FYI: I've totally messed with the timeline and other little bits of details.

By the time Saturday rolled around, Keith was sitting up and eating. He was finally out of ICU and allowed visitors. People trickled in and out of his hospital room during the day, including the woman from the D.A.’s office.

He even made a valiant attempt at challenging Veronica to a game of gin, but she stopped keeping score after her lead topped a couple thousand. “If you need to be getting back to New York, honey, I’ll understand. You’ve got a life there,” Keith said between bites of strawberry Jell-O.

“Yeah … About New York…”

Keith put down the Jell-O, fixing her with a hard stare even as he let out a resigned sigh.

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Veronica had her first meeting with Elizabeth Geller a little over an hour before she was due to meet Logan for drinks. The young widow arrived right on time. She was dressed casually in navy blue shorts and a matching Breton shirt with brown leather sandals. She wore little makeup and minimal jewelry - only the same pearl earrings and wedding band she’d had on earlier.

Upon closer inspection, Veronica realized Mrs. Geller was Eurasian, or what her Chinese American roommate at Columbia called *hapa*, meaning someone who was part Asian. The woman had thick, sable hair which she wore in a ponytail and a deep, natural tan. Her nearly black eyes were generously fringed with long lashes and vaguely almond-shaped.

“Thank you so much for agreeing to see me, Ms. Mars,” she said, accepting the glass of water Veronica offered.

Since Mars Investigations was closed, they were seated on the old, leather couch in the reception area rather than Keith’s private office, and Veronica had a notebook and pen ready to take down relevant information.

“Call me Veronica,” she said. “Why don’t you start from the beginning, and tell me about your husband.”

Elizabeth Geller smiled wanly. “I suppose if I’m going to tell you my deepest fears, you might as well call me Beth.”

Adam Geller, aged 42, had been a freelance writer when he’d died in a car accident three months ago, leaving behind a wife and 10 year-old daughter, Eva. The Gellers had just celebrated their 13th wedding anniversary with a romantic trip to San Francisco and Napa.

“We met our freshman year at Cal,” Beth explained, referring to University of California, Berkeley. “We’ve been together ever since...
“Why do you think your husband was cheating on you?” Veronica asked.

Beth withdrew an envelope from her purse, and placed it on the couch between them, sliding it over towards Veronica. “This arrived in the mail a few weeks after Adam died. He had his own credit card that he used for work - gas, travel, photography supplies. It just made it easier for tax purposes.

“He handled all his own work expenses, so I’d never seen any of his bills...until he died. Most of it is pretty routine, but there’s a $2,100 charge for a necklace purchased at an art gallery in Napa. I haven’t found anything in the house or his office that matches the description.”

“He could’ve bought it online or over the phone after your trip, and it hasn’t arrived, yet,” Veronica suggested.

Beth shook her head. “I called the gallery, and the necklace was mailed directly to the recipient after he purchased it … the day before we left for home.”

Veronica made a note to get a detailed description of the necklace from the gallery.

“There’s more,” Beth said. “He’d been acting strangely the last few weeks. Nothing I could really pinpoint, just a little withdrawn, distant. And he didn’t show up for one of Eva’s soccer games, which was very unusual for him. He’d never once missed one of her games, let alone ‘forgot’ about one. He was a devoted father, even if he might not have been a faithful husband.

“I had the distinct feeling something was bothering him, but he just said he was busy with work. I would’ve pushed harder - I’m not the kind of woman who lets these things go - but I never had the chance.”

Veronica took a few more notes, then had Beth fill out a few forms and sign a contract before telling her she’d need to have access to their financial records and her husband’s office and personal belongings, particularly his computer.

“I already tried looking through his computer, but there wasn’t anything in his emails or web browser,” Beth started to say.

Veronica waved her off. “I know someone who can find anything he might’ve tried to erase.”

Beth nodded and wrote out a retainer check, pausing before holding it out to Veronica.

“I was prepared to dismiss the other things until I saw the credit card bill. Even then, I tried to get over it and just give him the benefit of the doubt, but I can’t. I need to know if the man I’m grieving for was real. Was he the loving husband I thought he was, or was he some stranger I slept next to every night?”

Beth paused to compose herself. “Can you understand that?”

“Yes, I can. I’d want to know, too, and I will do my best to get you some answers,” Veronica promised her.

After Beth left, Veronica had just enough time to go home to freshen up before meeting Logan for drinks. She changed into a pair of black skinny jeans and a blousy, dark green tank top, then pulled on a pair of low-heeled, black suede booties. She wore her long hair in loose waves and spent a few moments debating about whether to add eye shadow and mascara.

**Quit acting like a lovestruck teenager, Veronica,** she chastised herself. **It's not like you're going on a date.** But she brushed a little color on her eyelids anyway, and hurriedly fastened Lilly’s necklace
before running out the door.

Logan had texted her the name of a downtown bar earlier in the day. She found a parking spot a block away, and quickly spied his lanky frame, leaning against the brick facade of an old warehouse building, which housed the bar they were going to as well as a tea shop, knitting store and a British pub that looked like they’d been doing business there for decades.

The neighborhood was an old one, still dominated by small businesses, but slowly the aging mom-and-pop corner stores were being replaced by cafes, trendy eateries and art galleries. The place Logan had chosen was out-of-the-way, crammed into a ramshackle building and lacking the requisite fashionable sheen to attract the likes of Carrie or any of his other ’09er friends.

“You picked a dessert bar?” Veronica asked by way of greeting, indicating the wooden menu placard for Bittersweet.

“Says the woman who eats waffles and ice cream for dinner,” Logan replied, holding the door open for her. “They serve drinks, too.”

She grinned, considering for a moment. “Good. Let’s order champagne,” she said, as she breezed past him. “I feel like celebrating.”

The place had a pleasant, rustic feel with wooden tables and chairs, and a long, glass display case filled with fruit pies, tiered cakes elegantly decorated with delicate sugar flowers and platters of dainty French pastries. One wall was lined with an espresso maker as well as bottles of wine and other alcoholic spirits.

“This place has been here for years, only now the owner is getting squeezed out because of rising rent. My squadmate’s wife just got hired here as a pastry chef,” Logan said.

After they’d ordered – prosecco and a tasting menu for two - Logan turned to Veronica, and quirked an eyebrow. “So what are we celebrating?”

“I quit my job today.”

Logan nodded, and Veronica realized he wasn’t at all surprised. He at least had the grace to ask her why. She started to reply, when a shadow fell over their table and they both looked up.

“Hey, Veronica.” Mac hovered next to them, looking mildly uncomfortable as she shifted from one foot to the other. She looked at Logan and held up a hand in a half-wave. “Hi, Logan.”

He waved back, throwing Veronica a confused smile. “Hi, Mac. It’s been a long time.”

“What are you doing here? Wait. Are you on a date?” Veronica asked, noting the way her friend watched the bar’s main entrance.

“What? No,” Mac said, quickly. “I had … a thing. A work thing. What are you two up to?”

Logan motioned for Mac to join them at their table, and she sat down after checking her phone and glancing at the door again. Just then the waiter appeared with their drinks, thoughtfully producing an extra glass before filling all three with bubbly prosecco.

“We’re celebrating,” Logan said, when the waiter had gone. “Veronica quit her job. I gather that’s a good thing.”

“Well, yeah,” Mac chimed in. “You were wasting your talents at that place. Corporate law just didn’t
seem like the Veronica Mars well all know and love. So what’s it gonna be instead? Criminal law, right? That’s a no-brainer”

Veronica shook her head. “Actually, I renewed my P.I. license. I’m going to work with my dad. I’ve already taken my first case.”

Mac gaped at her, but once again Logan appeared unsurprised. It was unnerving, and a part of her was starting to get pissed off. He just sat in his chair across from her, the slightest hint of a smirk playing on his lips.

“So you’re moving back to Neptune? Is that why you broke up with Piz?” Mac asked.

Logan looked at Veronica sharply, but said nothing, and she glanced at him, feeling sheepish for not ever mentioning Piz. “Not exactly,” she answered Mac. “It was a long time coming … at least this way, it’ll be a clean break.”

“’Cause break-ups are always clean and easy,” Logan mumbled, his voice so low only Veronica heard him.

“Well, I’m happy you’re here to stay,” Mac said, reaching over to hug her friend. “We’ve missed you. It’s been too quiet - no drama - since you left. And don’t worry about Wallace. He’ll come around.”

“Where is Wallace tonight, anyway? I tried calling him earlier.”

Mac paused, before shrugging. “Beat’s me. Um… I should go. I have an early work thing tomorrow. Let’s have lunch next week, Veronica. Logan, it was good to see you again.”

As they watched her leave, Logan turned to Veronica and said, “You’d think after being friends with you so long, she’d be a better liar.”

Veronica quirked one eyebrow. “What are you talking about?”

“A work thing? Tomorrow is Sunday.”

“Yeah, I know. She was on a date. What I can’t figure out is why she’s being so secretive about it.”

The waiter arrived with their dessert tray, and for the next several moments, they ate in silence. Logan speared a piece of passion fruit cheesecake, but paused before taking a bite.

“So what’s the deal with Wallace?” he asked.

She shrugged, savoring a spoonful of Mexican chocolate sorbet. “He’s just upset about the whole Piz thing. They’re still close, and I’m sure he’s getting an earful.”

“You didn’t tell me you and Piz were a thing.”

“Parker never mentioned it?” She sighed, fingering the base of her champagne flute. “It didn’t come up the other night, and I wasn’t anxious to volunteer the information.”

“Sorry, it’s none of my business…”

“… No, that’s not it, Logan. It was like you said - I knew something was missing. But it didn’t seem right to discuss it with someone else when I hadn’t even talked to him.”

He nodded. After a long moment, he raised his glass and offered a fond smile. “Welcome home,
Veronica.”

Their glasses clinked, and as she took a deep sip, Veronica could feel bubbles of joy welling up inside her, and she knew it had nothing to do with the prosecco.

**********

Over the next couple of weeks she divided her time between the hospital and Mars Investigations. Keith was on the mend, and scheduled to be discharged any day now. She’d wrapped up all her dad’s old cases and had even taken on a few more clients in addition to Beth Geller.

She saw Logan occasionally, but no more than Wallace or Mac, who she hired from time to time to work her computer magic. She’d even asked her to discreetly look into Keith’s hospital bill. The programmer was spending more and more of her off-hours at Mars Investigations, and Veronica was beginning to suspect the only thing keeping Mac at Kane Software was the handsome paycheck.

It was surprisingly easy to slip back into her old life. She quickly discovered being a private eye - digging up dirt and searching for the truth - was easier than riding a bicycle, even if it did mean staying up some nights turning over a challenging case in her head.

As much as she had hated Neptune with its unrelenting class warfare, corrupt public officials and shady patina of suburban perfection, it was good to be home. She had a small group of trusted friends in New York, but it didn’t compare to being close to Mac and Wallace, who’d been in the trenches with her.

Having Logan back in her life, too, was like finding a missing part of herself. Despite the nine year absence, he was her oldest friend, and she was grateful he hadn’t dismissed her out of hand. Though no one was convinced Logan hadn’t played a role in her break-up with Piz, least of all Wallace, Veronica was determined to just be friends. Anything more was bound to end in disaster.

There was no doubt they were good together. He’d always understood her uncomfortably well - better than anyone - and the last few weeks had proven he still did. She knew they’d burn hot and for a while it would be blissful, but their passion would inevitably be their downfall, and the tumultuous roller coaster would end in disaster.

Veronica had missed Logan more than she’d realized, and she wanted to be sure he stayed in her life this time.

There were plenty of other reasons to keep things platonic. His job, certainly, was one. He’d just returned home from six months at sea, and he’d been assigned to the Navy base in San Diego for his shore duty, but in another year-and-a-half, he’d be floating on an aircraft carrier somewhere in the Persian Gulf again.

Veronica also suspected he was still in love with Carrie.

They’d had plans to catch a movie one night, but he’d cancelled at the last minute after getting a text from Carrie. The singer’s so-called friends had lured her to the ‘09er, and he had to extricate her before she succumbed to old habits.

“You’re a good friend,” Veronica had told him.

He’d just scoffed. “More like a fucking idiot.”

“No. Just … loyal.”
Nothing short of a kidnapping would have dragged Veronica to her high school reunion. But she’d heard Logan had been elected Most Changed by a landslide in absentia, since he had skipped the barbaric ritual, too. It may have been the only thing she and the Neptune High masses agreed on.

He’d shed the cocky arrogance of his youth with a calm self-confidence that was wholly attractive. Most of his nervous tics were gone as well, the dramatic hand flourishes had disappeared and she hadn’t seen him pull on his sleeve cuffs. The confrontation with a tabloid photographer notwithstanding, he also seemed slower to anger, or at least he didn’t lash out the way he used to.

He hadn’t risen to the bait when a paparazzo confronted him outside a cafe by shouting a question about Bonnie DeVille’s rumored drug-fueled night out in Hollywood. Veronica saw his jaw clench, but he’d ignored the bald little man who continued hurling insults just to get Logan to turn around.

Logan Echolls had grown up, and Veronica suspected the U.S. Navy had a lot to do with it. But underneath that spanking white lieutenant’s uniform that fit him so well, he was still the boy she remembered.

It wasn’t long before Veronica got her first break on Beth Geller’s case. A few days after their meeting, she spoke with the gallery owner herself, who’d just returned from a three week European tour.

“Why the necklace is here,” Mary Wright exclaimed. “I’m looking right at it. It really is a beautiful piece - a jade dragon strung by a knotted, silk fabric cord.”

“I don’t understand. Mrs. Geller was told it had already been shipped.”

“It had, but it was sent to the wrong address, and it was several weeks before the mix-up was discovered. By the time the necklace came back to the gallery, I had already left for my trip,” the woman said.

“I was so upset when I realized the mistake. Nothing like this has ever happened before. I do hope it hasn’t caused too much trouble for Mr. Geller.”

The gallery owner added that she’d left several messages on Mr. Geller’s voicemail, but she hadn’t heard back from him.

Veronica considered a moment. “What address was the necklace sent to?”

“Um, let me see. 401 First Street.”

She glanced at her notes. Adam Geller had rented an office space at 401 Fir Street.

“What phone number do you have for him?”

The gallery owner recited a Neptune exchange, but it wasn’t the office or mobile numbers Beth had given her. She made a note of the unknown number, and passed along Beth’s contact information before hanging up.

It seemed Adam Geller had arranged for the necklace to be sent to his office. On a hunch, she called Beth.

“Out of curiosity, when’s your birthday?” Veronica asked.

“It was three weeks ago. Why?”
Veronica quickly updated her client and told her to expect a call from Mary Wright. “It doesn’t really tell us anything for sure, one way or the other, but it does explain the credit card purchase. It’s very possible he bought the necklace for you, and had it sent to his office so he could surprise you on your birthday.”

Beth was silent for so long, Veronica thought the call had been disconnected until she heard a muffled sob.

“Thank you, Veronica,” she finally said.

“Do you want me to continue? I haven’t gone over the financial records, and there’s the question of the phone number he gave the gallery, but if you feel satisfied …”

“No, I-I want you to keep digging. I’m starting to think I was crazy to doubt Adam, but I know something was bothering him, so I want you to stay on the case.”

Relieved, Veronica promised to continue investigating and hung up. Not only could they use the business, but it was an intriguing case and she wanted to see it through. She called Mac and asked if she’d be interested in another job - trolling through Adam Geller’s laptop.

“Sure. By the way, I looked into that other matter for you. Cliff McCormack’s the culprit.”

“Cliff? Why would he …”

“Dunno. That’s not my department. Maybe, you should ‘ya know, ask your dad.”

As soon as they hung up, Veronica called the attorney on his mobile phone.

“As much as I’d love to chat with Neptune’s newest P.I., I’m due in court in a few minutes. What’s up Veronica?” her dad’s longtime friend asked.

“It’s about my dad’s hospital bill. I know you’re the one who’s been paying it.”

“Ah yes. As small business owners, your dad and I thought it prudent to put money into an emergency fund for catastrophic events like this. Don’t worry, he’ll pay it back when he’s able. Now, is there anything else?”

“No, Cliff. Thanks. For everything.”

“Not a problem kiddo.”

The next day, Veronica paid a quick visit to her dad before heading over to Adam Geller’s office on Fir Street. When she pushed open the hospital door, Michelle Yamamoto was sitting by his bedside and they were laughing quietly.

“Hi Dad,” she said, and they both turned to look at her.

Keith started to make the introductions, but Michelle stopped him. “We met earlier. How are you, Veronica? I hear you’ll be staying in Neptune, following in your dad’s footsteps.”

Veronica nodded, glancing at Keith. He hadn’t exactly been happy to hear she’d quit her high-paying job in Manhattan to catch cheating spouses in the act, but seemed resigned for the most part.

“Never thought I’d say this about Neptune, but it does feel good to be home,” she said. “How’re you feeling, Dad?”
“Good. The docs are gonna let me go tomorrow, daughter-of-mine. You ready to have me at home? No more raging keggers in the backyard, ya know.”

Rolling her eyes, she laughed and leaned over to kiss his forehead. “I can’t wait.”

Veronica left a little while later. She parked in her usual spot at Mars Investigations, where she met Mac, and together they walked the half-mile to an office building that had once been an old bottling plant.

Once inside, Mac located the laptop tucked away in a box on the bookshelf just where Beth had said it would be, and started tapping away while Veronica made a thorough search of the one-room office. She found a cell phone buried haphazardly under some papers in his desk drawer along with a set of keys and several notebooks.

Next, she riffled through his file cabinet, but nothing stood out. They appeared to be notes from old articles he’d written. He’d been a freelance journalist whose pieces had appeared in everything from National Geographic to an online news magazine. He’d written about oil frakking, a developer in San Francisco who was illegally stuffing the coffers of a county supervisor, and a business feature on Bittersweet, the wine and dessert bar she’d gone to with Logan.

“Finding anything?” Mac asked from behind the laptop.

“Not really. He was all over the place in terms of the subjects of his articles, but he was a good writer. I’m going to grab a few of his files, but I’m guessing I’ll find more by going through his financial records. How about you?”

Mac hit a few more keys before shutting the computer. “I’m not sure. I haven’t found much in the emails he erased - mostly just really old emails he’d cleared out, a lot of spam, that kind of thing. But there are a few, really large encrypted files that I haven’t been able to get into, yet,” she said. “Can I take the computer home and work on it there?”

“I don’t see why not. You about ready go to?”

Veronica tossed the dead man’s notebooks, keys and mobile phone into her bag, along with a few files, and they left, locking the office after them. As they left the building, a tall, thin man with dark hair barreled past them on his way to the staircase.

“Nice guy,” Mac said. “You have time for a coffee break?”

Java the Hut was a little out of the way, but it still had the best coffee in town. The popular hangout was busy for a weekday afternoon, and they were scanning the room for a table when Veronica spied Logan. He was wearing jeans and a navy blue, crew cut t-shirt, and he was with an older man with graying, close-cropped hair also dressed in jeans and a white button-up shirt with a red silk tie.

“That’s Dr. Galway. Do you remember him? He’s a history prof at Hearst,” Mac informed her.

Veronica shook her head. “No, I don’t think I ever met him.”

Logan glanced up, spotting her almost instantly. He raised his hand in greeting, waving them over, and the women made their way through the crowded cafe.

“Please, join us,” the college professor said. “Mackenzie, right? You wrote a paper on DARPA and Donald Davies.”

“I got an A,” she told Veronica.
“Teacher’s pet,” Logan mumbled, but he was smiling. He rearranged the furniture to accommodate two more chairs, and the women sat down. “Veronica, this is Dr. Galway. Mac and I were in his class sophomore year. He got me into OCS.”

Veronica’s eyes widened. “Oh,” she said, remembering Logan had gone to Officer Candidate School in Rhode Island after enlisting in the Navy.

“Logan made quite the impression. You must be Veronica Mars,” the professor said. “I heard a lot about you while you were at Hearst.”

She flushed, uncertain how to respond, but Logan quickly jumped in. “Dr. Galway and Dean O’Dell were close friends,” he explained.

"Oh,” she said again.

"Veronica transferred to Stanford. It explains why she's so articulate," Logan added, grinning as she slugged his shoulder

“I’m sorry about your friend,” Veronica said. "I liked him. He seemed like a really decent man."

“He was. I’m just glad you caught the prick.”

The waitress took their order, and they spent the next several minutes talking about the latest Hearst goings-on and Neptune politics, before Logan checked his watch. The professor noticed and took a final sip of his coffee, throwing a few bills on the table.

“Dr. Galway is a former flyboy himself. We’re going to watch the Army-Navy game at the Officer’s Club on base,” Logan said.

“I want to arrive in style, so Logan is going to let me drive his Beemer.”

“I am?”

“Listen sonny, I was flying Hornets over Russia while you were still in diapers. Mac, it was good to see you again, and it was a pleasure meeting you, Veronica.”

“Same here, Dr. Galway,” Veronica said.

They left, and once their iced coffees arrived, Mac turned to Veronica. “I have an idea I want to run by you.”

“Consider my interest piqued.”

“Well, as you know, I’ve picked up quite a few jobs from you, lately, and I think you’ve been pleased with my work.”

“You’re the best, Mac. That’s why you get the big bucks - from Kane Software, anyway.”

Mac’s mouth twisted wryly. “The thing is … I hate my job at Kane Software. It’s like coding on a Commodore 64.”

“Yeah. I don’t know what means, but I’m gonna go with …. bland?”

Her friend nodded. “Exactly! So I was thinking of joining your team, maybe on a part-time basis. What do you think?”
Veronica put down her cup, and smiled slowly.

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Veronica and her friends threw a quiet homecoming barbecue for Keith the next afternoon. Her dad lounged comfortably in the backyard, chatting with Cliff, his cane resting against his lawn chair. Wallace manned the grill, skillfully flipping burgers while nursing a beer.

“No Logan?” he asked, a slight bite in his tone.

“I invited him, but he declined. I can’t imagine why,” Veronica said.

“You see him much?”

She shrugged. “More than I’ve seen you, lately. Come on, stay and watch a movie with me tonight. I made snickerdoodles.” She could tell from his grin that he was wavering. “Besides, you know you’ve been dying to tell me who Mac is secretly dating.”

At the sound of her name, Mac crossed the patio and draped her arm over Wallace’s shoulder. “Nice try, Mars. Do you really think I’d tell Lorelai over here if I was dating someone and trying to keep it a secret? Least of all from you?”

“Hey, now. How’d I get to be Lorelai in this scenario?”

Their laughter was interrupted by Keith, who called out to them from his perch on the deck. “I haven’t real food in three weeks. What’s a guy have to do to get a burger around here?”

A few days later, Veronica had dinner with Logan at his place. She sat at the kitchen island, chopping tomatoes while he grilled corn tortillas on the stovetop. “You know, when you said you’d make dinner, I thought it was just a figure of speech,” she told him, as she added the tomatoes to a bowl of chopped onions, garlic, cilantro and jalapenos.

“I had a craving for tacos,” he answered.

“Right. And this being Southern California, you can’t find a decent taqueria anywhere.” Veronica squeezed a lime wedge over the salsa. “So will I have to stop at Cho’s Pizza on the way home?”

“Why don’t you try it for yourself, smartypants?” He speared a fork through a piece of crispy pork in the frying pan and held it out to her. Her eyes widened as she chewed.

“My compliments to the chef,” she said. “If Weevil could see you, now.”

He chuckled and began spooning the carnitas into a serving bowl when Dick walked in. He grabbed a tortilla and began making himself a taco, chatting about the killer wave he’d caught that morning.

“By the way, our accountant called. He’s freaking out about a bunch of money you withdrew. You go on some crazy shopping spree, dude? What the hell did you buy for twenty grand?”

Logan remained focused on the tortilla on the stove, suddenly still. “Nothing. It’s no big deal. I’m just thinking of buying my own place.”


Later, after Dick retreated to his room, Veronica peered at Logan as he tipped his beer bottle. “Twenty thousand dollars isn’t going to buy you much real estate in this neck of the woods. You’re
not in any trouble, are you Logan? Because if you are, I might be able to help. I want to … but I can’t if you don’t tell me about it.”

Logan paused mid-sip. “See now, the adult me is saying I should just be touched by your offer, but the teenager is a little offended you still think I’m up to no good.”

“I didn’t say I thought you were up to no-good. I asked if you were in some sort of trouble. There’s a difference,” Veronica replied.

His eyes met hers and never wavered. “I’m not in any trouble, Veronica. I know $20,000 isn’t enough for a down payment. I was just moving some money around, okay?”

Relieved, she nodded. “Okay,” she said, adding salsa to her plate. “See now, the teenage me wouldn’t have believed you, but the adult me does.”

He grinned. “Look at us. All grown up and not falling back into our old rhythms.”

They ate in silence for a few minutes until Veronica suddenly blurted out. “I think my dad has been doing the tango with a deputy D.A. from San Diego.”

Logan raised his brows and chewed thoughtfully for a moment. “And by doing the tango you mean…”

“Ballroom dancing. Maybe more… I don’t know. Her name is Michelle Yamamoto, and she showed up at the hospital a couple of times. The thing is, he’s never once mentioned her to me.”

“ Weird, considering you’re so forthcoming about your love life.”

She pursed her lips in feigned annoyance. “Point taken.”

“Everyone has secrets, Veronica. You and your dad have something special, and that’ll never change.” He paused to dunk a chip into the guacamole. “Not that I know much about fathers and daughters, or families at all, for that matter.”

Veronica studied him. “Oh, I don’t know about that. You seem to know a lot these days.”

When a buxom brunette arrived looking for Dick, Logan and Veronica decided to vacate the house, opting for a stroll on the beach. She asked about his job and he offered a somewhat vague explanation of what he did at sea. She couldn’t help noticing how his eyes lit up when he talked about flying though, his hand gestures suddenly becoming more animated as he described his fighter plane. She swore she could see 12 year-old Logan describing his first wave.

“Why the Navy?” she asked abruptly. “I’ve wondered for years.”

“I’m amazed you held out so long.”

“Well, I tried to hack into your journal but Mac wouldn’t do it.”

He was quiet for a moment. She watched him stoop to pick up a rock then chuck it into the water.

“You were gone for nine years, so all you got to see was the ‘after’ picture. The ‘before’ - let’s just say it wasn’t so nice,” he said, finally.

He’d spiraled out of control not long after she left, drinking and experimenting with drugs, until even Dick had worried about him. One day, he’d paddled far out to sea on his surfboard and contemplated suicide.
“I thought about just rolling off the board and letting myself drift. Seeing if I could drown without too much effort,” he said.

A roaring began in her ears and dimly she registered Logan telling her about Dr. Galway checking him into rehab after his second overdose. Sudden tears spilled down her cheeks, as she realized how close she’d come to losing him. “Dumbass,” she spat, her voice quavering.

Logan didn’t flinch, just hunched his shoulders and shoved his hands in his pockets as he stared at the water. “Yeah, I know.”

Angrily, she swiped at her eyes. “Did you know that guy … Vincent Malubay - the one who died in the accident last year?”

Logan turned his head in surprise. “Yeah, Bilbo was a friend. How’d you…?”

“It was in the news. I knew it was your ship. They didn’t release his name at first, and for a while I thought …”

The 27 year-old lieutenant had miscalculated his descent during a nighttime landing on the U.S.S. Truman. His plane had hit a ramp, careening across the flight deck and bursting into flames. He’d left behind a wife and son, not quite two years old.

“I was devastated.” Her voice softened. “There’s no way you could’ve known that, but now you do. You can’t die on me, Logan, or I swear I’ll never forgive you.”

At a loss for words, he lifted his hand and gently stroked her cheek. He raised his eyes to meet hers. “I won’t. I promise.”

They stood there for several, long moments, the water lapping at their feet. His hand was warm on her neck, and she suddenly felt her body respond instinctively to his touch. Flushing under the intensity of Logan’s gaze, she held her breath and for a fraction of a second, she thought he was going to kiss her.

She’d always had a finely honed flight response, and now she pulled back. It was barely perceptible, but he read her perfectly. Hastily, he dropped his hand and rubbed the back of his neck.

“Come on. It’s getting cold, and your dad is probably wondering where you are,” he murmured, leading her by the elbow back to the beach house.

Lying in bed that night, Veronica could still feel the pleasant tingle where his fingers had touched her skin.

She didn’t hear from Logan. It wasn’t unusual, but after the night on the beach, she wondered if he was purposefully putting distance between them. Maybe she’d just imagined their near-kiss. Maybe he was just interested in her friendship. It’s what she wanted - so why was the disappointment so acute?

A week later, Logan proved his own flight-fight response was equally evolved when a video of him having sex with Bonnie DeVille surfaced on the Internet, instantly going viral. Sean Friedrich hadn’t had the brains to hide his identity when he’d posted it, and Logan tracked him down at the ‘09er. The ensuing fight left Sean a bloody, but only slightly broken, mess on the floor of the club and was caught on video for all of TMZ’s viewers.

Veronica stared blankly at the computer screen. She was supposed to be going over the Geller’s financial papers, but she kept seeing the screenshot of Logan and Carrie. It wasn’t hard to imagine
what had happened: Logan had come running the moment Carrie needed him, one thing leading to another. Apparently, Carrie wasn’t the only one slipping into old habits.

Sitting at her old desk, Veronica realized she was just as guilty as Logan. *Maybe if you hadn’t ...*

The bell above the office door chimed, and she glanced up to see Logan’s familiar silhouette looming in the doorway. Folding her arms, she tilted her head and asked wryly, “So. What’s new with you?”

“I need your help, Veronica.”
Chapter 3

Veronica frowned, instantly concerned. Standing, she rounded the desk as Logan stepped further into the office. Once out of the dim light, she could see the beginnings of a bruise on his cheekbone. His knuckles were bleeding, and he had a split lip.

“It looks worse than it is,” he said, as she let out a small gasp.

Shaking her head, she locked the office and retrieved the first-aid kit from the closet-sized break room. Ushering him onto the couch, she began cleaning his cuts. “You want to tell me what happened?” she asked, as she bandaged his hand.

“Carrie totally freaked when that damned video hit the Internet, so I promised I’d get it taken down, but now she’s gone. No one can find her. She was a no-show for a rehearsal and her manager’s frantic.”

He started to pace. “She could be off somewhere shooting up. She could OD…”

“We’ll find her.” Veronica said, stopping him by placing a reassuring hand on his arm. “But you have to calm down. I’ll need some information. Do you think Carrie’s manager can get me her credit card numbers?”

Logan pulled out his phone while Veronica opened her laptop. He recited a series of numbers for three of the cards she used most, and Veronica entered them into the computer. “Now we just have to wait for any charges to show up, but there’s usually a delay. In the meantime, we can try tracing her phone. What’s the number?”

He shook his head. “Nah, that’s not going to work. I was just at her place and she left it sitting on the entry table. It looked like she packed some stuff, but she’s got so much crap who can tell?”

Veronica nodded, considering for a moment. She glanced at the computer screen just as a charge popped up on Carrie’s Visa Black Card. The missing popstar had booked a 2:30 flight to San Francisco out of LAX. Checking the clock, she knew there was no way they’d make the last flight out of San Diego.

“Your car or mine?” she asked, but Logan was already on the phone. He hung up a few minutes later.

“We can use Carrie’s private jet service,” he told her.

“Why didn’t I think of that?”

“Her manager’s sending a car to pick us up at my place in an hour.”

“Naturally.” Veronica shut her laptop and put it in her bag. “I have to go home, check on my dad. I’ll meet you there.”

He walked her to her car, and just as she was about to get inside, he touched her elbow. “Thank you, Veronica. I know this is above and beyond, but I didn’t know what else to do. I really appreciate …”

She stopped him with a shake of her head. “I’m happy to help. It’ll be okay. We’ll find her.”

Keith was hardly pleased to hear his daughter planned to jet off with Logan Echolls on a hunt for his
drugged-out, popstar, ex-girlfriend. It just added to the barely contained tension over Veronica’s decision to quit her lucrative job and join him on the streets of Neptune.

He stood in the doorway of the guestroom, leaning on his cane as he watched her.

“Do you know what you’re doing here? I know Logan has his qualities, but there’s a darkness to that kid. People don’t change, Veronica.”

“I know what I’m doing, Dad,” she said, barely pausing as she hastily packed an extra pair of jeans and a few shirts into an overnight suitcase. “You’re wrong about Logan. He has changed.”

“Tell that to the young man he beat up.”

“Dad …”

“Is there something going on with you and Logan?”

Veronica zipped the suitcase and put it on the floor, extending the handle. “We’re just friends.”

Keith sighed, disbelief written all over his face. “If I had a dollar …”

“… Gotta go. There’s food in the fridge, and I’ve asked Wallace to check in on you. I won’t be gone long.” She kissed him on the cheek. “Get some rest. I love you, Dad.”

“Love you too, sweetheart.”

She ran into Wallace on the way out, climbing the front porch stairs and carrying a six-pack of Coke. They hugged, and she thanked him for keeping an eye on Keith. She was halfway down the path, when he called after her.

“Hey, so when Logan said ‘jump’, did you actually say how high, or was there just an understanding that you would achieve maximum verticality?”

Veronica turned around, smiling as she gave Wallace the finger.

He grinned. “Love you, Vee.”

“Love you too, Wallace. Even if you are getting surly in your old age.”

Logan came out of the beach house as she pulled into the driveway. He grabbed her small, carryon suitcase from the trunk and shut the door, turning to face her.

“Are you going to ask me about the video?”

Veronica’s eyebrows shot up in surprise, but she shook her head, aiming for nonchalance. “You don’t owe me any explanation.”

Logan stared at her, the intensity of his gaze a disconcerting reminder of the night on the beach. “Don’t I?” he asked, softly.

She looked away, shrugging defensively. “Your love life is none of my business,” she said without a trace of malice. To further mask the jealousy that had roiled in her belly ever since the news broke, she lifted her eyes to his and offered a small smile.

He chuckled lightly. “Maybe. But you’re dying to know, anyway.”
Damn him. Her lips curled involuntarily into a genuine grin. “Fine. I admit, I’m curious. When have I ever not been curious?”

Logan smirked, as he carried her suitcase into the house. “It’s got to be a year old at least. Carrie had a party at her place, and we caught this nut job hiding in her closet the next day. Maybe she planted a camera … ”

Veronica followed him into the dining room, feeling extremely foolish. She hadn’t even considered when the video was shot. Some detective. All she’d seen was the two of them, half-naked, entwined in the doorway of a bedroom, and her knee-jerk response had been to assume the worst. And really, what was so wrong with him sleeping with a woman he once loved, and maybe still did?

She had no claim on Logan. She herself had made it clear they were just friends. Then why was she so relieved?

“Hey, is anyone else surprised I’m the only one in this room that does not have a sex tape?” Dick said, his mouth full of ice cream. “I don’t know why you’re freaking out so much, dude. All you can see are your legs.”

Ignoring him, Veronica turned to Logan. “I don’t suppose you bothered to ask Sean how he got a hold of the video before you beat him to a pulp?”

Logan strode into the kitchen and opened the freezer. “Funny, the question never came up.”

She let out an exasperated sigh, but Dick came to his friend’s defense.

“That fucker got what he deserved. If he’d kept his mouth shut, Logan never would’ve touched him.”

“Maybe there’s a lesson somewhere for you,” Logan growled.

Veronica looked at him sharply, but when he glanced away she fixed her stare on Dick instead. “What are you talking about?”

“Logan was walking away, but then the douche hinted he’d repost your cinematic snooze fest with Pez, and it was lights out for Sean.” Dick took another spoonful of ice cream. “It was awesome.”

She whirled on him as he was scooping chocolate ice cream into a bowl. He handed it to her along with a spoon, his face resigned. “Logan … ”

“… I know. It was a stupid thing to do. I already got an earful from my CO, so can we skip the lecture?”

Not about to be mollified by ice cream, she pushed it back across the granite counter. She breathed deeply, reigning in her temper. “There’s something admirable about your default chivalry, Logan, and I appreciate the thought behind it. But I don’t need you to slay my dragons for me.”

“That’s not what I … ”

“Shut up,” she interrupted him. “There are smarter ways to deal with assholes like Sean Frederick. Next time, come to me first. Maybe then we can avoid the bloodshed.”

Logan looked at her with amused skepticism. “So you can hack into his journal? I don’t know what they taught you at Columbia, but you do know the little stunts you and Mac pull are illegal, right? You two routinely commit felonies.”
They were at a stand-off of sorts.

“I haven’t been caught, while you’re all over TMZ.”

“Really? I seem to remember bailing you out of jail. I may even have photographic evidence somewhere.”

“That was years ago, and why the hell would you keep that picture?”

“To cheer me up when I’m feeling blue.”

Dick returned to the kitchen, pointing a spoon at Logan. “You know what your problem is? You have too many exes hanging around. You’re not even getting laid, so what the fuck’s the point? If you’d just love ‘em and leave ‘em, like I do, I wouldn’t have to break up this little love fest, you two got going.”

Logan opened his mouth to say something and seemingly thought better of it, but Veronica narrowed her eyes as she stared at Dick. “You know, he kind of has a very small …”

“Hey! There’s nothing small about Dick,” the towhead protested.

“...point,” she finished. “Not that I’m saying you should take advice from your longtime companion over here, but maybe he’s right about this.”

Logan laughed humorlessly. “So miniature golf next week is out?”

“Honestly? If I thought our friendship caused the kind of misery and trouble you’ve had today, then … yeah.”

He considered, saying nothing as he cleaned her unused bowl. Turning to lean against the sink, he braced his hands on the counter. “You could’ve been gone another nine years, Veronica, and I still would’ve punched Sean. He deserved it.”

Veronica felt a small smile tugging on her lips, but she shook it off. Her dad was right - Logan hadn’t changed. And neither had she.

“Okay, but what about Carrie? I’m sorry, Logan, but you can’t keep doing this to yourself.”

“Yeah, well. I can’t just walk away, either.”

His phone rang and she could tell from the disappointment in his voice it wasn’t her. Dick turned on the TV and the same image Veronica had seen of Logan and Carrie entwined in a half-naked embrace flashed on the screen.

“In the wake of yet another sex scandal, Bonnie DeVille has disappeared. Hours after a steamy sex tape of Bonnie and her on-again/off-again lover Logan Echolls went viral, the popstar failed to show at an important rehearsal for an upcoming concert at the Hollywood Bowl,” said the shaggy-haired blond guy on TMZ.

“She’s just barely out of rehab. There’s no telling what she’s doing.”

“Well, we know who she’s doing.”

Logan glanced up and she could see his knuckles whiten as he gripped the phone. He started to pace.

“God, I wish Logan could just quit her,” Dick grumbled.
Veronica shrugged, her eyes worried. “You know Logan. He still loves her.”

The doorbell rang. Before he went to let the driver in, Dick snorted, “You really don’t know much, do you?”

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As soon as they were seated in the 7-passenger Cessna, Veronica opened her laptop and checked Carrie’s credit card charges again. “We’re in luck. She booked a room at the Hilton on Kearny. That’s …”

“…across from Portsmouth Square. In Chinatown. I know.” Logan took out his phone. Moments later he’d booked them two rooms. “We’ll have a rental car waiting for us. The flight’ll be a couple of hours.”

“Good. There’s time to drill home the ground rules.”

Logan smirked. “You did hear me say ‘two rooms right?’”

“I do the talking. You just stand there and look pretty. Keep your hands to yourself. No fisticuffs. Got it?”

“Sometimes when my CO is chewing me out, it’s your voice I hear in my head.”

“Logan.”

“Fine. I get it. You’re the boss.”

Satisfied, she settled into the comfortable, tan-leather seat and looked around the luxury plane. Logan sat across from her, a walnut panel table between them. “This certainly beats a road trip. Do you think they serve food? I’m starving.”

He hit the call button, and a few minutes later they were silently munching on sandwiches and chips, which they washed down with bottles of Orangina. Veronica finished her bag of chips and looked at Logan thoughtfully. “What did Dick mean about only being able to see your legs?”

Logan was trying to get into Carrie’s phone, but he paused and raised his eyebrows questioningly. Deciding to indulge her, he explained, “You see us going into the room, but the camera angle doesn’t change and so all you can really see is our legs when we’re lying on the bed.”

Veronica considered that bit of information for a moment. “So why did Carrie freak out? I mean, I get that it was an invasion of your privacy. Believe me, I get it. But it’s not like there was anything that could damage her career. Celebrity sex tapes are almost ubiquitous these days.”

“I tried telling her that, but she was … inconsolable. She kept saying something about how people were watching her, and that they were everywhere.”

She frowned. “I can see how it would certainly feel that way, but …”

“I know. She sounded fucking paranoid. She usually has a thicker skin …”

His voice trailed off as he studied something on her phone. “Weird. Someone texted Carrie a picture of her dad’s boat.”

Veronica looked up, and he showed her a photo of a boat docked at what she assumed was the Neptune Marina. No one appeared in the picture, but the boat’s name Serendipity, scrawled on the
helm in a red, scripted font, was clearly visible.

She took the phone from him, and scrolled through the texts. “Whoever sent these did it shortly after Sean posted the video. Did Carrie ever talk about what happened that day?”

About a year after Veronica left for Stanford, Carrie and some ‘09ers, including her best friend Susan Knight, Gia Goodman, Luke Haldeman and Dick, had taken the Serendipity out to sea. Sometime during the night, Susan had fallen overboard and no one realized she was missing until the next morning. Her body had never been found.

Logan frowned and shook his head. “I asked her about it once. She curled up in a fetal position and stayed that way the rest of the night … I always thought it was the reason she could never get clean.” He chuckled mirthlessly. “Would you listen to me? I sound like an armchair psychiatrist.”

“You might not be far off the mark. Someone sent this photo to her for a reason. What did you think it was?”

He shrugged, tapping his fingers on the surface of the table. “I thought there might be something more to the story, so I asked Dick. He said the last thing he remembered before passing out was Susan drinking champagne with everyone else. He woke up when everyone was looking for her.”

“That corroborates the official version,” she said. “But assuming Dick told you the truth, it doesn’t mean something didn’t happen while he was passed out.”

Veronica suddenly realized something. “You said you thought the video was an old one because you caught that crazy fan, but what if she didn’t plant the camera? The video could’ve been taken more recently. Why are you so sure it’s from a year ago?”

Logan winced. “This is a fun conversation. If I tell you, can we please change the subject? It’s starting to get weird …”

Veronica flushed. “Sorry, I tend to get caught up in cases.”

“It’s all coming back to me.” A wry grin tugged on his lips before he let out a resigned sigh. “I might not know when someone is recording me having sex, but I do know if I’ve had sex. I haven’t slept with Carrie since we broke up over a year ago.”

She stared at him, thinking out loud. “Okay. Say you’re right …”

“And Veronica, I know you think I’m some sort of manwhore, but …”

“Not that. I’m talking about what happened on the boat. It might explain the timing of the video. I mean, why post it now? It would be different if it were new footage, or if it were more explicit, but who cares about some year-old leg erotica?”

Logan thought for a moment. “You mean the video was some sort of message?”

She nodded. “Maybe Carrie wasn’t being paranoid.”

Chinatown was still bustling with activity when they checked into the hotel despite the late hour. Shopkeepers stood on their stoops watching customers pick through bins of Alcatraz t-shirts, sandalwood fans and plastic cable car toys. Tourists wandered through the streets looking for the perfect chop suey joint and noodle shops were filled with locals slurping big bowls of steaming wonton soup.
Even Portsmouth Square, a community park across the street, was still bumping with balding Chinese men playing mah jong and an outdoor Zumba class.

There was no answer when the clerk phoned Carrie’s suite, and even Logan’s disarming smile wouldn’t persuade her to give them the room number. “If it helps, I did see her leave the hotel about an hour ago. I couldn’t swear by it, but I don’t think she’s come back yet.”

They tipped a porter to bring their bags to their room and settled into the lobby bar. They picked a table with a clear view of the escalator to the mezzanine where a bank of elevators led to the guest rooms. A waitress came by and they ordered two coffees. Logan quickly gulped his down almost before Veronica had even finished adding cream and sugar to hers.

Over the rim of her cup, she watched him fidget restlessly, first tapping a finger to a steady, internal beat on his knee, then pulling on the cuff of his sleeve, his eyes darting over the lobby. When he signaled the waitress, presumably to order another coffee, she cut him off before he could get the words out.

“He’ll have herbal tea,” Veronica said.

“God you’re annoying,” he muttered, after the waitress left.

“And you’re a jackass.”

“Some things never change,” they said in unison, exchanging grins.

The waitress returned with his tea, and he let it steep for a few minutes before pouring himself a cup. “We’re going to find her,” she said, putting her hand over his to still the tapping finger.

“Sorry,” he murmured, a corner of his mouth lifting in a grim smile. “I guess this is feeling a little too familiar, ya know? Staking out a hotel lobby. With you. Waiting for …”

“… your mom,” Veronica finished, realization dawning. She could’ve kicked herself for being so stupid. Determined, she took a deep breath.

“Look, I don’t really know how to say this without sounding like a jealous ex-girlfriend, but I swear that’s not what this is about … I don’t care about Carrie. I’m worried about you. I know what it’s like. For years, my dad tried to help my mom, and she rewarded him by having an affair and breaking his heart. Even when I … she stole from us. I had to cut her out of our lives, or she would’ve taken us down with her.”

She waited, half-expecting Logan to explode in anger, but he just stared at his hands before finally meeting her gaze.

“I get what you’re saying, but I don’t know what else to do. She has no one else to pull her out. Her parents just throw up their hands and say they can’t control her. Her friends want to bask in her glory, either that or take her money. I can’t stand by and let her destroy herself.”

He paused, looking away again. “I just don’t want to have any regrets.”

Veronica leaned forward, covering his hand with hers. “There was nothing you could’ve done to save Lilly or your mom, and you might not be able to save Carrie. I don’t want her to destroy you, too.”

Logan smiled softly, giving her hand a gentle squeeze. “I’m not worried. You’d never let that happen.”
Returning the smile, she sat back and once again surveyed the lobby. It was virtually empty this late at night, and she started to wonder if they should rethink their plan of attack as she stifled a yawn. She couldn’t hold out much longer, and judging from the exhausted look on Logan’s face, he wouldn’t be able to either.

“You should get some sleep,” he said, as if reading her mind. “I’ll get some coffee or a soda and …”

Suddenly, he was out of his chair and sprinting across the lobby. Veronica grabbed her bag and ran after him. When she caught up to him, he was embracing a woman with long, red hair, wearing baggy jeans and a grey hoodie. If he hadn’t told her about the wig she’d once worn to the Neptune Pier, Veronica would never have guessed it was Carrie Bishop.

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Veronica managed to discreetly usher Logan and Carrie up the escalators and into a waiting elevator to her one-bedroom suite with its view of Coit Tower and San Francisco Bay. For her part, the popstar seemed sober and coherent, enough not to make a scene and cause someone to recognize her.

Once they were safely ensconced in her room, however, she turned on Logan. “What the hell are you doing here? And why’d you bring Veronica Mars?”

“You’re fucking kidding me, right? You were out of your mind over that video, convinced someone was following you, and the next thing I know you’d disappeared. I never would’ve found you if it weren’t for Veronica.”

Carrie pulled off the wig, fluffing her hair as she flopped onto the sofa. Pouring herself a glass of water from the pitcher on the coffee table, she took a long sip. “I’m sorry. I would’ve called, but I lost my phone. I needed to get away… I have something I need to take care of, and I wanted to do it away from Neptune.”

Logan was looking around the suite, and when he spotted the designer purse she’d been wearing, he grabbed it and dumped the contents onto the table. A wallet, tin of mints, keys, makeup and paper receipts spilled out, but Veronica didn’t see any sign of drug use.

“You won’t find anything,” Carrie told him. “I’m really sorry I made you go on a wild goose chase.”

He disappeared into the bedroom, and they could hear him opening drawers and riffling through Carrie’s suitcase. “It’s funny, really. Neptune’s most notorious bad boy is really just an overprotective dad.” Her words were teasing, but there was only fondness in her tone.

Veronica took a seat in a leather armchair across from the singer and studied her. It had been more than a decade since she’d last seen Carrie Bishop in person. Her once chestnut hair was now jet-black with streaks of purple, its edges cut in straight, severe lines that framed a thin, pointed face. But even without the cat eye makeup, her heavily-fringed eyes were arresting.

She hadn’t known Carrie very well, but she remembered an outspoken, rebellious girl who’d been willing to go to extreme lengths in defense of her best friend. She could easily understand why Logan had been attracted to her.

"He was frantic,” Veronica said.

Carrie glanced up, holding her gaze for a moment, before flickering away. “He’s a good egg … I don’t deserve him.”
Veronica secretly agreed, but she said nothing. When Logan returned a few minutes later, she glanced up and their eyes met. He gave a small shake of his head, looking irritated, but relieved.

“Well, since everything seems to be okay, I’ll give you two some privacy,” she said, standing.

Logan followed her, opening the door. “I’m so sorry …”

“Forget it,” she said. “I’m glad she’s okay. Look, I’m gonna crash for at least eight hours. Call me and let me know about getting home. I can always catch a commercial flight if you need to stay …”

He shook his head. “No. Thank you, Veronica. For everything.”

She smiled and left, making her way down the hall to her room. Exhausted, she started stripping off her clothes as soon as the heavy door clicked shut. Only after she’d slipped on an old Hearst t-shirt did she stop to survey the room. It was small, the decor done all in shades of beige with light wood furniture, but there was a balcony, and like Carrie’s suite, it looked out over Coit Tower and the bay.

Veronica climbed into the spacious king bed and snuggled under the plush comforter. But instead of sleeping, she strained to hear the sounds of Logan entering his own room next door, wondering if he and Carrie were talking or … not. Even when she shut her eyes, all she saw was that damned screenshot - Logan bare-chested with his mouth over Carrie’s and his hand cupping ...

Throwing off the covers, she switched on the light and grabbed a sweater to sit on the balcony. It wasn’t often she stayed in a room with such a gorgeous view, and Veronica figured she might as well enjoy it.

It was a beautiful night. The air was cold and briny, and in the darkness she could see white tufts slowly blanketing the bay as the low drone of the fog horn sounded across the water. Below, Chinatown was finally shutting down, but the lights from the red lanterns strung across the main drag were still visible even from twenty storeys up.

She’d always loved San Francisco. All that art and culture in a city ahead of its time. L.A. was all glitz and glamour without much substance, the surrounding communities bleeding into one another. San Francisco was unique, setting trends on public policy and not just fashion.

The frigid, salty air helped clear Veronica’s head. It had been years since she’d felt this way - her stomach twisted in knots in a ridiculous fit of jealousy - for no reason whatsoever. She wasn’t about to spend two hours on a private plane with Logan and Carrie, and resolved to use some of her frequent flyer miles to book a flight in the morning.

Just as she started to go back inside, Veronica thought she heard a faint knocking. She walked to the door, peering through the peephole, but the hall was empty. Puzzled, she heard the knock again and realized it was coming from the door to the adjoining room.

“Logan?” she asked, making sure the door guard was secure before opening it a crack. He was leaning against the jamb, still dressed in the same clothes, his face weary. “That was fast.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Just feeling a little punchy. Hold on.” Veronica closed the door and unfastened the security guard before letting him into her room.

“I saw the light and figured you were still up,” he said, running his hand through his short hair and glancing around the room.
“Couldn’t sleep. Guess I should’ve had the herbal tea, too,” she said, sheepishly. “So … what’s up?”

“I know it’s late, but my head’s spinning - can we talk? It’s just … Carrie told me something … “

After she’d raided the minibar - brewing the complementary coffee and opening a package of shortbread cookies dipped in Ghirardelli Chocolate - she sat cross-legged on the bed, her back against the pillows. Logan sat on the edge of a leather armchair, a replica of the one in Carrie’s suite, and rubbed his temple as the whole sordid story spilled out.

“Do you remember Stu Cobbler from high school? Everyone called him Cobb? Total weirdo, who had a thing for Gia. He had the good drugs though, and the night they went out on Carrie’s boat, they tried hitting him up for product, but he insisted on going along…”

They got shit-faced on booze and pills until Susan disappeared below deck. Carrie found her later, barely breathing, but Cobb convinced them to leave her alone so she could sleep it off.

“And they believed him?” Veronica asked.

“He told them he’d seen it a hundred times before. Luke’s dad was already grooming him for politics, and Gia’s grandparents had been threatening to give away her inheritance if she didn’t toe the line.”

Later, when Carrie went to check on Susan, she was dead. Cobb told them to weigh the body down with an anchor and concocted the story they’d told the cops - that Susan must’ve fallen overboard in the middle of the night. But while the others were dumping Susan’s body, no one had noticed Cobb taking photos with his camera phone.

“He’s owned them ever since. They bankroll him, pal around with him” Logan said.

Veronica stared at him. “Dick, too?”

He shook his head. “No. He told me the truth, or at least what he knew. He passed out before anything ever happened.”

“What about the video?”

“You were right - Carrie wasn’t being paranoid. Cobb’s sleeping with Gia. He rents an apartment across from her loft so he can spy on her. When Carrie saw the video of us, she knew he was behind it.”

“That’s why she wanted to get out of Neptune.”

He nodded. “She met with an attorney here, and I guess the news wasn’t good. She could be charged with involuntary manslaughter. It was her boat and she bought the drugs. As for Cobb, basically it’ll come down to her word against his, and given her history of drug abuse…”

Veronica tilted her head thoughtfully. “We might be able to weigh the odds in Carrie’s favor.”

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The next morning, over coffee and a hearty breakfast in Carrie’s suite, Veronica outlined her plan. Freshly showered, her hair still damp, she sat across from Veronica at the dining table, one knee propped on the chair as she picked her toast and listened intently. Logan loomed nearby, hands on his hips, shaking his head in disbelief.
“How did I become the only voice of reason?” he asked, throwing his hands in the air. “You don’t know what Cobb’s capable of, and you’re putting yourself in his crosshairs. I say we skip this madcap caper, and let the lawyers handle it.”

“Where’s the fun in that?” Veronica scoffed.

Carrie ignored them. “I was upset after I saw my attorney, and I spent most of the night just walking around the city, trying to decide what to do,” she said finally, a sudden, fierce gleam in her eyes. “I wanna nail Cobb to the wall.”

Veronica smiled slowly. “Come on. Let’s go make him sweat.”

They spent the next few hours fine-tuning details and gathering the necessary gadgets and supplies. With Mac’s help, Veronica figured out how Cobb spied on Carrie by installing special hardware in her tablet. They reasoned he’d done it not long after she started seeing Logan.

“He flashes the photo any time he thinks one of us needs a reminder, and I needed a lot of reminders,” Carrie told them, looking at Logan. “Cobb knew I’d fallen hard for you - that we were close and it wasn’t just a fling - and he was afraid I’d tell you what we’d done.”

But she hadn’t known about the spy cam.

“I’ve already sicced Mac on it. If there’s a way we can use it against him, she’ll find it,” Veronica said. “You remember what to say?”

“Child please,” Carrie scorned. “It’s Gia Goodman. The day I can’t handle Gia Goodman…”

It was Carrie’s idea to use Gia as the go-between. She’d convinced them Cobb would be more apt to buy their story if it was coming from his panic-stricken lover rather than Carrie herself. Picking up the hotel phone, she took a deep breath and dialed the number.

“Hey, it’s Carrie. Such a punk-ass bitch…”

All in all, Veronica had to admit the popstar gave a masterful performance of a strung-out druggie. Of course, she did have first-hand experience … Still, she was sure Gia was convinced her so-called friend was spiraling out of control from her guilt over Susan’s death.

“I ruin everything - my career, Logan … I have to come clean, or I’ll never be happy. Well? Speak girl, speak.”

Carrie finished her call and threw them a triumphant grin. She gave Gia thirty minutes before phoning Cobb and asking him to meet her in front of the carousel on Pier 39. “Don’t forget the drugs,” she slurred before hanging up. “He’ll be here at two o’clock.”

“Oh kay,” Veronica said, digging through the bag of loot she’d picked up earlier. “Time to get dressed.”

Carrie went into the bedroom and came back out wearing black jeans and the same hoodie she’d had on the night before. She quickly pinned her hair into a tight bun and pulled on the red wig so she wouldn’t be recognized by fans. Veronica fitted her with a Giants baseball cap bedazzled with orange and black rhinestones. She rigged it with a tiny hidden camera she’d bought for $27 at a mom-and-pop electronics store on Grant Street.

“It transmits over Wi-Fi, and lucky for us there are free hotspots all over the city,” Veronica said. “Let’s see if this thing works.”
She turned on Carrie’s small, white tablet, flashing Logan a come-hither smile. “Hey, sailor. Stand there and look pretty for the camera,” she said, jerking her chin towards a spot in front of Carrie. She studied the tablet’s screen. The camera captured Logan’s handsome face and gold-flecked brown eyes with perfect, high-definition clarity, right down to the annoyed expression on his face.

She winked at him. “Camera loves ya, baby.”

Rolling his eyes, he started to walk away, but she stopped him with a whistle. “Not so fast, lieutenant. It’s your turn now. Here, put these on.”

Veronica handed him a moppy brown wig, green windbreaker, baseball cap and sunglasses. “I’m supposed to blend in by dressing like Shaggy? Please tell me you’re gonna be Scooby.”

Laughing, she shook her head. “No. I’ll be watching from afar with my camera.” She’d remembered the spot from a trip into the city while she’d been at Stanford. She could observe from the second floor through her telephoto lens, where she’d be virtually unrecognizable from such a distance. Even so, a few precautions were in order, such as sunglasses, ponytail and black Giants hoodie.

They were in place well before the appointed meeting time. Carrie was slouched on a bench in front of the carousel away from the cotton candy and popcorn booths. Logan sat at a cafe table near a breezeway between the sea lions’ dock and main pier, where he was keeping watch for Cobb while pretending to eat fish and chips.

Veronica had found a perch with the perfect bird’s-eye view of Carrie, Logan and the two remaining entry points - the main thoroughfare and another breezeway onto an observation deck overlooking Alcatraz Island. She’d balanced her camera on the wooden rail, making sure the strap was around her neck, and feigned interest in the San Francisco Bay coastline that could be seen through the pier’s shops.

The sun beamed down, reflecting off the water on the warm, sunny day - highly out of character for the usually chilly, grey City by the Bay.

“You couldn’t have picked a more apropos lookout.” Logan’s voice rumbled low in her ear. They were both wearing Bluetooth earpieces so they could be in constant contact over their phones. She chanced a quick glance behind her at Neptune’s Palace Seafood Restaurant, which from the looks of the shuttered windows had been closed for business.

“So if you’re not Scooby - who are you? Velma?” he continued.

Veronica huffed. “No, silly. Mac is Velma.”

“Daphne’s hot.”

“That dingbat. Please. I’m Fred, obviously.”

“Does that make Wallace Scooby?”

“Well, yeah.”

Logan chuckled, and she couldn’t help enjoying its sexy timbre. Abruptly, he broke off, and when he spoke again his voice was calm, but urgent. “Head’s up, Freddie. The Dickless Phantom just walked by.”

She smiled. “Oooh code. Whoever could you mean? Okay, just remember, stay back. If he recognizes you, our little sting operation is a bust. You just …
“...Yes, I know.”

“Well, if the shoe fits …” Veronica pulled out Carrie’s tablet and tapped the screen just as Cobb came into view walking towards the carousel.

He was looking around, shielding his eyes from the sun. His dark hair was combed back and held in place with gel. The five o’clock shadow gave him a roughed-up preppy look that he accentuated by wearing tailored jeans and a waxed canvas field jacket straight out of the J. Crew catalog.

He looked past the redhead in the glittering baseball cap, and even walked by once, before Carrie called out to him. Veronica trained her camera on the pair, pressing the shutter and taking several shots.

She’d lowered the volume so the conversation was only audible to her and not people passing by.

“You bring the stuff?” she asked, without bothering to greet him.

“How are you doing, Carrie? Gia said you were freaking out,” he said, sitting next to her on the bench. “It was just a little sex tape. Missionary, no less. Kinda boring if you ask me. I always thought Logan was more … inventive.”

“Shut up! You don’t get to talk about Logan. I know it was you.”

Cobb shrugged. “I do what it takes to keep you in line, Carrie. Just like Gia.”

“Lucky her - she’s the one you love. Don’t you get tired of blackmailing people into hanging with you, Cobb?”

“Not when it pays for my lifestyle.”

“Well, fuck this. I’m tired - I can’t live like this anymore.” Carrie started sobbing quietly. “Susan’s dead and it’s our fault.”

“She was a drugged-out loser who OD’d. It was just our bad luck she did it while we were all out on your dad’s boat.”

“We could’ve saved her if you hadn’t insisted she’d sleep it off! And we just made it worse by dumping her body - also your idea.”

“I was the only one with the brains to come up with a solution to our problem. Do you really think you’d be the great Bonnie DeVille if I hadn’t?” Cobb paused, glancing furtively around. “You tell Echolls about what we did?”

“No. You think Saint Logan could keep something like that a secret? Look, I don’t give a fuck anymore. Where’s my stuff?”

“I know he’s asked you and Dick about that night. He’s been hanging around with that nosey bitch Veronica Mars, lately. Think he’s fucking her again?”

Veronica clucked her tongue. “It’s called curiosity.”

“What?” Logan asked.

Veronica shushed him, straining to hear Carrie’s response.

“I don’t fucking care! Where’s my stuff?”
Cobb hesitated. “You have the money?”

She held out the envelope, and Veronica could see him reaching for it. “It’s all there - ten grand for the drugs and to keep your mouth shut.”

As Veronica watched, Cobb opened the envelope halfway, silently counting the contents. “Gotcha,” she whispered, peering into the lens of her camera and shooting several frames.

“Update please,” Logan hissed in her ear.

“He just took her money and she got him to admit what happened on the boat, so he’s on the hook for involuntary manslaughter, blackmail and dealing drugs,” Veronica said in a hushed voice. “Go Carrie.”

She glanced back at the tablet screen just as Cobb started to tuck the envelope into his pants pocket. The black field jacket he was wearing flapped open and for a split second Veronica caught the glint of metal jutting from the waistline of his jeans.

“Shit! Logan, he’s got a gun!”

But it was too late. On the tablet screen, she saw Cobb’s menacing face hovering inches from the camera and suddenly Carrie was propelled up and forward, as she was hurried past throngs of people, colorful shop displays and fast-food restaurants.

“Which way did they go, Veronica?” Logan’s frantic voice screamed in her ear.

She looked over the rail and quickly spotted two rushing figures heading towards the observation deck. Cobb appeared to be pulling Carrie along, gripping her by the arm. Logan was standing several yards away, but he couldn’t see them through the crowd. She leaned forward and caught his attention, shouting as she pointed toward the end of the pier.

Logan took off in a sprint and she followed, pushing past tourists as she ran down the stairs, racing past the table Logan had abandoned and through the breezeway in the hopes of cutting Cobb off somewhere between the sea lions and observation deck.

She was in luck. They were heading right for her with Logan close on their heels.

“Cobb!” Logan’s voice rang out, and people stopped, turning to stare.

Cobb looked over his shoulder, swearing venomously, but not stopping. Veronica hurried forward in time to see him jab something into Carrie’s side. He spun around, unknowingly walking backwards towards Veronica. His free arm was draped around Carrie’s shoulder in a seemingly friendly gesture, and he shouted something into the wind, causing Logan to come to a sudden halt.

Slipping her hand into her bag, Veronica’s fingers touched the familiar hard plastic of her taser. She pulled it out and when she’d reached Carrie’s captor, pressed the stun gun to his neck, squeezing the trigger.

Stu Cobbler crumpled to the ground in a spasming heap.

Logan rushed over, kicking the gun away as he folded a sobbing Carrie into his arms. Veronica’s eyes met his, and they exchanged wan smiles over Cobb’s still-twitching body. The man at their feet groaned, and Veronica took out her phone, dialing 911 even as two private security guards suddenly made an appearance.
Cobb started to get up on his hands and knees as if to crawl away, but Logan planted his foot firmly on his back. “Don’t fucking move,” he growled. “Or she’ll hit you with pepper spray next.”

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It was dark by the time Logan and Veronica emerged from the Central District Police Station several hours later. Carrie was still ensconced with the high-priced San Francisco lawyer she’d retained, and it was likely she’d be whisked back to Neptune for another round of police interrogations as soon as SFPD was through with her.

They’d already turned over the photos and video Veronica had shot, signed their statements and were free to leave. Logan had also arranged for them to take Carrie’s jet back to Neptune first thing in the morning.

“I have to admit, you were right,” Logan said, toeing the cement pavement with his shoe. “You really are Fred.”

Grinning, she replied scornfully, “As if Daphne could’ve pulled that off.”

“Thank you, Veronica,” he said, his tone achingly earnest as he locked onto her eyes. “Somehow I know, deep down, I can always count on you.”

“No matter what,” she confirmed.

Smiling, he took her elbow and jerked his head in the vague direction of their hotel. “Come on, let’s feed you. I know a place.”

By unspoken agreement, they walked back to Chinatown instead of getting a cab, enjoying the mild evening air after hours of being cooped up in a small, windowless, interrogation room. Logan took the lead, guiding them through North Beach and further into Chinatown.

“Did you get a chance to talk to Carrie?” Veronica asked.

“Yeah, while the cops were taking your statement. She’s handling things pretty well. I think she’s relieved it’s all out in the open. I’m actually optimistic she’ll be able to stay clean this time.”

“That’s great, Logan. I’m … happy for you.”

His step slowed, and he looked at her curiously. “For me?”

“She obviously still cares for you. Now that she’s sober, you’ll have a second chance to make it work.”

Logan said nothing, slipping his hands into his pockets. “I care a lot about Carrie,” he said slowly. “But I don’t love her, anymore. I haven’t for a long time.”

They walked past the hotel, turning onto Washington Street and going up one block before he stopped at a restaurant with a green marble facade and the traditional upturned roof of Chinese architecture. He held open the door and led her into the dimly lit bar, where they were seated at a corner booth. The tufted, faux red leather upholstery was surprisingly comfortable, and they quickly scanned the menu.

The waiter, who turned out to be the bartender, was a dapper, friendly man in his 70s with pomade slicked hair, dark pressed pants and crisp white shirt. Weary, they decided to stick to soda, and ordered several of the house specialties.
“You seem to know your way around the city,” Veronica commented, taking a sip of her Coke, which was in a tall, slender glass and topped with maraschino cherries.

“My mom had a part in a play here, and I spent the whole summer at the Hilton,” he explained. “I love this city, but after growing up in SoCal, the water is a little cold for surfing.”

Their food was served, and they quickly dug into the chicken wings and fried dumplings, generously stuffed with meat, water chestnuts and minced vegetables.

“My roommate is from San Francisco,” Veronica mentioned, pinching a stalk of Chinese broccoli with her chopsticks. “She grew up not far from here.”

“I thought you lived with Piz.”

“I did. I meant my roommate from Columbia. She took a residency in Seattle after med school, which is how Piz ended up moving into my apartment.”

Veronica had spoken with her friend only a few days earlier, when Christina called to ask if she’d be free for a visit around Thanksgiving. Her whole family had booked a two-week cruise to the Caribbean and she’d been unable to go because of work.

“What are your Thanksgiving plans?” Veronica asked Logan suddenly.

He shrugged. “I usually work the holidays so the guys with families can spend it with them, but so far I’m not on the schedule.”

“That must be lonely.”

“I prefer it, actually,” he replied. “Keeps me busy and out of trouble. I hate the holidays.”

On impulse, she blurted out, “Spend Thanksgiving with us.”

Logan laughed before realizing she was serious. “Your dad’ll love that.”

“You can meet Christina, and Mac and Wallace will probably join us later.”

“My whole fan club? Nah, I don’t think so … but thank you.”

Veronica fished the cherry from the bottom of her soda glass and ate it. “I can’t believe my oldest friend in the world won’t spend Thanksgiving with me after I just did him a huge favor.”

He shook his head, grinning wryly. “Veronica Mars stooping to emotional blackmail. How low will you go?”

“You owe me big time. I just got your girlfriend off murder charges.”

“You know perfectly well she’s not my girlfriend, and it was involuntary manslaughter. Seriously, did you actually pass the bar, Veronica? It’s a moot point, anyway, because your dad will never agree to it.”

“We’ll see about that. So it’s a yes?”

Logan took a long sip of his soda and studied her. “Why do you care so much?”

Flustered, Veronica shrugged. She couldn’t bear the thought of him working a lonely shift at the base and returning to an empty home to eat takeout for one. But even if he did have a place to go, she
wanted to be the one he spent the holiday with. *So what the hell does that say about your feelings for him, Veronica?*

“I guess I don’t, really,” she answered, suddenly defensive.

Logan raised his brows slightly, but said nothing, dropping the subject. After a few minutes passed, he broke the silence. "So, how 'bout them Giants?"

She flashed him a knowing smile. "I heard they beat the Cubs. Pulled it out, bottom of the ninth."

They finished their dinner, keeping the conversation low-key, then walked back to the hotel, saying goodnight in the hallway outside their rooms.

Despite the long, exhausting day, Veronica tossed and turned for a second night. It was still early, only 9 p.m., so she got up and opened her laptop to do some work. Mac had sent her several emails with attached word documents that appeared to be drafts of stories Adam Geller had been writing.

There were still a few more files Mac had to decrypt, and they had the hacker intrigued.

It’s a pretty sophisticated encryption he’s set up, which makes me think it’s not gonna be porn. What guy goes through that much trouble to hide Playboy?

Veronica read Geller’s stories and finished going through his financial records. The only item of note was a charge for coffee at a cafe right there in San Francisco, in North Beach, not far from where she was staying. Puzzled, she looked back through his stories, and found one about a multi-million dollar building project in the Tenderloin area being run by Neptune-based Trident Development, Co.

*Couldn’t hurt to check it out,* she thought, reaching for her phone.

“Hey are you awake?” she asked when Logan picked up.

“I am now.”

“I need a favor...Two actually.”

“Um, okay.” She heard rustling, and she guessed he was sitting up in bed. “What’s going on?”

“I know we’re supposed to go back in the morning, but can we delay the flight a few hours? I want to check something out for another case. It’ll save me a second trip,” she said.

“Sure. No problem. I’ll take care of it in the morning.” He yawned. “What’s the other thing?”

“You have to bring mashed potatoes to Thanksgiving.”

Momentarily confused by the abrupt change in subject, he didn’t answer immediately. “I don’t suppose there’s any point saying no.”

“Smooth and creamy. No lumps.”

“Veronica …”

“I’ll text you the recipe.”

“Fine,” he said with a groan. “Can I go back to sleep now?”

Smiling into the phone, she said softly, “Good night, Logan.”
“G’night, Veronica,” he replied, and she swore she could hear him grinning back.
Chapter 4

She woke the next morning to a persistent knocking, and when she opened the adjoining door, Logan was holding two steaming cups of coffee and a brown paper bag. He shouldered his way in, depositing the bag and cup carrier on the round end table next to the arm chair. He was sweaty and breathless, wearing running shorts and a long-sleeved, grey Navy shirt.

She yawned and rubbed her eyes, glancing at the clock bemusedly. Logan had gone for a run and bought coffee and breakfast all before 8 a.m.

“Carrie is flying back this morning, but we can have the plane in the afternoon,” Logan told her, gingerly sipping the hot beverage and handing her a cup.

“You could go with her.” She pried open the plastic lid. Someone had already doctored it with cream, so she reached for the sugar packets and added four, stirring it absently with a wooden stick.

“And leave you to get into trouble on your own? Carrie’s got her entourage. She’ll be fine.”

Veronica was secretly glad for his company, and considering the area they’d be venturing into, it certainly wouldn’t hurt to have a male escort, particularly one as formidable as Logan.

“I don’t know what you mean by ‘trouble.’ I’m just going to check out a building project in the Tenderloin,” she said, looking into the bag.

He rolled his eyes, shaking his head. “I’m going to take a shower. Don’t go anywhere without me, and save me some lox.”

She didn’t bother closing the door behind him, leaving it ajar while she showered. Wrapping her hair in a towel, she pulled on jeans, a grey and white striped henley, black boots and an old, olive-green military jacket she’d dug out of her closet at Keith’s. It had been nearly two months since she’d rushed home with just an overnight suitcase, and she was getting tired of wearing the same clothes day in and day out.

Business had begun to slow, and even though she’d been able to put some money aside, she’d hoped to use it for a place of her own, not a shopping spree. Between hospital visits, shuttling Keith to his physical therapy and doctor appointments, not to mention her caseload, there’d been little time for a trip to the mall, anyway. She would have to make arrangements to have some of her things sent from New York until she could go back herself. In the meantime, she’d improvised by scavenging what she could of the clothes she’d left behind a decade ago.

Using the mirror above the bathroom sink, she applied the barest hint of taupe eye-shadow, a few swipes of mascara and pale pink lip-gloss. She was fastening the necklace Lilly had given her years ago when she heard Logan knocking lightly.

“Door’s open,” she called out, hurriedly unwinding the towel from her head and pulling her hair back into a low ponytail.

When she walked into the room, Logan was examining the bag’s contents. “Garlic or sesame?” he asked without looking up. He was clean-shaven, his close-cropped hair still damp from the shower, and he was wearing grey jeans and a black button-down shirt with a well-worn pair of black
Converse sneakers.

“Sesame, please.”

He sliced into a sesame bagel with a plastic knife, adding cream cheese and paper-thin slices of lox. Glancing up, he handed her the bagel, then did a double-take. Straightening, he studied Veronica more closely and gave her a lazy smile.

“You should only wear this,” he said.

Her cheeks grew warm under his appraising gaze, and she felt the same, irresistible pull she always did around Logan. He was utterly charming and utterly impossible, and of course she couldn’t help but smile back.

“So what exactly have you got cooked up for today?” Logan asked as they ate.

Veronica filled him in on her case, summarizing Adam Geller’s unpublished series on urban redevelopment. “One of the projects he wrote about is right here in the city, and I think he must’ve come here to see it because he went to a cafe nearby,” she told him.

As luck would have it, the project site was only a couple of miles away, so they decided to walk.

“You’re convinced he wasn’t cheating on his wife?” Logan asked as they made their way down Kearny Street.

She nodded. “Mac found some deleted files that we’re still going through, but so far they’ve all been word documents. Most men don’t write about their affairs and then encrypt those files, ya know?” Veronica paused. “Frankly, even if they’re inclined to make a sex tape, I’ve never known one to have the foresight to code and hide them.”

They cut through Maiden Lane, passing Union Square and a slew of designer shops including Gump’s and Shreve & Co., San Francisco’s answer to Tiffany’s. Hoping to cash in early on the busy shopping season, retailers already had their holiday window displays up.

Veronica paused to snap photos of several windows showcasing costumes from the San Francisco Ballet’s classic production of *The Nutcracker*. The stiff tutus were elaborately embellished with lace and glittery sequins, while dresses from the opening party scene featured rich velvets and silks. Many of the displays also included the squared-off pointe shoes worn by dancers then discarded after a single performance.

Logan leaned against the building, folding his arms as he grinned crookedly at her. “I don’t believe it. Veronica Mars wanted to be a ballerina when she was a little girl,” he teased. “Sometimes I forget you weren’t always such a badass.”

“Ballerinas are badasses,” Veronica retorted, lowering her camera. “Have you seen Misty Copeland?”

When they reached Macy’s, Veronica gasped with pleasure at the puppies romping in the SPCA holiday window. She rested a palm against the glass, and a tiny black dog with floppy ears, too-large paws and honey-brown eyes jumped up and tried to lick her hand.

Logan leaned in close behind her, murmuring low into ear. “Your hardboiled persona is in serious jeopardy, Mars. But go ahead - squee. Your secret’s safe with me.”

They continued on to O’Farrell Street, where Logan turned to Veronica and asked who was coming
to Thanksgiving.

“Wallace and Mac eat dinner with their own families, so they’ll be there later,” she told him. “You’ll meet my roommate, Christina. She’s … well, you two will get along great.”

She’d known Christina since shortly after arriving in New York, when they’d both worked at a cafe near campus. They’d taken to each other immediately and lived together for four years while Christina went through medical school and Veronica studied law.

A third-generation Chinese American, Christina was bright, quick-witted and driven to succeed. Like Veronica, she was slim and petite with an expressive, heart-shaped face, but with thick, black hair she wore long and straight with wispy bangs. She’d grown up in a very loving, but very traditional family with an imperious grandmother who disapproved of her career choice and was hell-bent on finding her a wealthy Chinese husband.

Despite the cultural differences, they were very similar in many ways, but there were moments when Veronica could swear she heard Lilly’s voice instead of Christina’s.

“You’re gonna love her,” she repeated.

They walked by a block of new buildings with signs advertising luxury condominiums and lofts for sale. Veronica knew from Geller’s articles they were part of the city’s effort to revitalize a blighted area.

But gradually, the high-end shops and modern urban housing gave way to liquor stores, empty storefronts and seedy bars. Graffiti marked most buildings and Veronica counted no less than three illicit drug transactions taking place out in the open.

She’d read the Tenderloin was one of the few neighborhoods yet to be touched by gentrification, which could stimulate the local economy but also uprooted many low-income families and shut-out small mom-and-pop businesses. Some residents were given vouchers or low-interest loans to relocate, according to Geller’s articles.

“Oh, if you’re in Neptune, you just rough people up,” Logan murmured. “There’s rumors Lamb sends his minions to oust people so developers can go in and build their projects without the expense of moving anyone.”

“How do you know all this?” she asked.

“My friend’s wife. Remember, she works at Bittersweet? She’s pretty tight with the owner, who’s been in Neptune forever,” Logan explained. “She’s under a lot of pressure to move out. Some company refurbished the building next door, and now they’ve got their sights on hers. Well, it’s actually owned by a co-op of small business owners.”

Logan told her the cooperative that owned the building was struggling with its maintenance. Simply put, the nearly 100 year-old, former warehouse, was falling apart. The plumbing failed on a regular basis, the air-conditioning needed replacement and heating was non-existent. Even if the business owners could pool enough money together, they needed permits from the county.

“The Planning Department isn’t being very helpful, if you know what I mean,” Logan said. “The county is trying to take over the property by eminent domain, which would mean the co-op would only get fair market value for the land, since the building itself isn’t worth much.

“But once the developers get a hold of it, the value will skyrocket.”
Veronica considered for a moment and realized Bittersweet, Geller’s office and Mars Investigations were all located within a few blocks of one another.

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure the same developer was responsible for all those projects,” Logan said. “A local company, actually.”

She stopped. “Let me guess. Trident Development?”

Logan nodded. “Yeah, I think that’s it. I remember seeing their signs with a trident logo.”

The proposed redevelopment site was a vacant, three-story building situated next to an empty lot. Both properties were surrounded by a boarded-up, chain-link fence. Nearby, there were dilapidated apartment buildings with young children playing on the sidewalk and homeless men sleeping on the stoops, along with a grocery store, bars and an aging Catholic church.

Logan glanced around. “And you wanted me to go back to Neptune with Carrie. You know, sometimes I think you’d be safer on the mean streets of New York City.”

Rolling her eyes, she scoffed lightly. “You look like Logan, but you sound like my dad. I can’t imagine why you two don’t get along better.”

She tried to peer between the wooden slats, but all she could see was a bulldozer and pick-up trucks emblazoned with the trident symbol. She noted several security cameras mounted on nearby telephone poles, as well as some unsavory characters watching them from across the street.

“Now that you’ve mastered pretty, think you can look tough?”

“I feel so objectified,” Logan deadpanned, but he adopted an appropriately stern scowl she was certain would intimidate most men.

She surreptitiously snapped a few shots without raising her camera, but stopped when a grey pick-up truck turned into the driveway and a burly, dark-haired man got out to unlock the gate into the property. When he saw them standing by the fence, he stalked toward them, raising a fist menacingly.

“What are you doing here? This is private property. Get the hell away,” the man shouted.

Logan stepped in front of Veronica, keeping her behind him with one arm. “Back off,” he spat. “We’re on a public sidewalk.”

Trying to push his arm away, she stepped around him when he wouldn’t budge and plastered an innocent, friendly smile on her face. “Tone down the testosterone, sweetie,” she hissed through her teeth, turning to the man and holding up her camera.

“Sorry. My boyfriend can be such a Neanderthal, sometimes. We were just taking pictures for my photography project contrasting light in the city versus the country. We didn’t mean to trespass. Come on, honey.”

She linked her arm through his, tugging him in the direction they came until they were out of earshot. “I said ‘look tough,’ Logan, not challenge the locals to a brawl.”

Later, at a Union Square cafe, he stared thoughtfully at her over a half-eaten pear tart. “I’ve wondered for years if you make up your little scenarios before leaving the house every day, or do you pull them out of your ass at the spur of the moment?”
She flashed him a secretive smile. “You wouldn’t ask a magician to give up his tricks of the trade, would you?”

“Just what I thought - you wing it.”

Not bothering to respond, she pulled out her camera and began scrolling through the photos, frowning when she reached the end. “Wish I got a picture of that guy,” she murmured to herself.

Logan reached into his back pocket. He fiddled with his phone, and a moment later they heard a muffled tweet coming from Veronica’s bag. Absently, she took out her phone then looked up, gaping at him.

The photo was crooked and taken from an upwards angle, but the man’s face was clearly visible down to the tiny mole in the corner of his eye.

“How did you …?”

He grinned and sipped his water. “You wouldn’t ask a magician to give up his tricks.”

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It was late by the time the plane touched down at the private airport outside Neptune, and Veronica could barely keep her eyes open. The jet hadn’t been available until evening, so they’d checked out of the hotel, leaving their bags with the concierge before spending the day wandering the city.

It had been months, closer to years really, since Veronica had taken a vacation, and the brief interlude in one of her favorite places was a welcome respite, especially after all the weeks of worrying about her dad and scrambling to build her client list.

They’d taken a walking ghost tour of Chinatown, and Veronica had jumped in fright when a stray cat brushed against her leg during a particularly chilling tale. Logan had laughed so hard, tears leaked from his eyes.

For a change of scenery, they’d hopped on a bus across town to the old Sutro Baths, where they’d meandered along the cliffside paths at Lands End, explored a few caves and strolled on the beach. They’d eaten dinner at the Cliff House, where they were given a corner table by the floor-to-ceiling window overlooking the water.

“I’m glad you stayed,” Veronica had told Logan, as the sun began to set behind him.

“Always glad to provide a little muscle,” he’d replied, giving her a fond smile.

“No. I meant …“

But she’d been interrupted by a waiter, informing them their private car was waiting. Less than an hour later, they were soaring high above the city, and the moment had been lost.

Typical Logan had slept on the plane, while Veronica worked on her laptop. By the time they landed, she was feeling the effects of the last couple of days. They were getting into the black Mercedes sent by Carrie’s manager, when a limousine pulled up in front of them. The chauffeur jumped out and opened the door.

They watched as Jake Kane emerged from the limo. His temple was noticeably greyer while the rest of his hair had thinned. Crinkles around his eyes and mouth were further signs that time had not been kind to the man whose home they’d once spent as much time in as their own.
He stood, straightened his dark blue suit and spotted them. His gaze flickered over Veronica dismissively until resting on Logan, who he gave a small nod to before walking briskly across the tarmac to the waiting jet.

“You ever hear from Duncan?” Logan asked suddenly.

They were in the car, well short of the airport by then, and she’d nearly drifted off to sleep. When she looked over in surprise, he was picking at some imaginary lint on the knee of his jeans.

“No,” she answered firmly. “Have you?”

He laughed softly. “Come on, Veronica. If Duncan was going to contact anyone, it would be you.”

“He won’t contact anyone if he knows what’s good for him,” she said, yawning.

When she yawned a second time, Logan leaned forward and spoke to the driver, but she was too tired to listen. Thirty minutes later, the car stopped and she was startled to realize they were in front of her house.

“You’re exhausted. I’ll bring your car by first thing in the morning,” he promised when she protested. He carried her suitcase up the porch steps. “Thank you again, Veronica.”

“It was fun.”

“I always thought you enjoyed using Mr. Sparky a little too much,” he said with a crooked grin.

Veronica frowned slightly. His nimble deflection, the same joke and jab technique she’d mastered long ago as a way of avoiding the real subject, wasn’t something she was used to coming from Logan.

She wanted to tell him how much she’d enjoyed their day in the city together, but a flash of movement from inside caught her eye and a moment later Keith opened the front door. His expression was stoic and serious as he leaned on his cane.

“Dad! It’s late. Shouldn’t you be asleep?” she quipped, but he quelled her sarcasm with one of his patented fatherly looks.

“That’s my line, Veronica.”

“Uh, hi Mr. Mars,” Logan said. “Sorry to bring her home so late. Another client had to use the plane.”

Keith raised his brows. “Well, it’s more original than a flat tire, I’ll give you that.”

Logan flushed, and Veronica quickly interjected. “It was faster than taking a commercial flight. We’d still be on stand-by, and Carrie was footing the bill.”

“I’d ask how you were doing, Logan, but it’s all over the news. How’s your friend handling everything?”

“She’s got a team of high-powered lawyers handling her case, and since she’s cooperating fully, she’ll probably come out okay,” he answered. “Thanks to Veronica. She was amazing, Mr. Mars. You’d have been really proud of her. She took Cobb down virtually single-handed.”

Veronica knew Logan’s words were meant to reassure Keith she could handle herself, and she had to resist the urge to kiss him for trying. But they could both see her father’s face tighten with every
syllable until finally Logan’s voice simply trailed off.

He cleared his throat and tried a different tact. “How are you feeling, sir?”

“Recovery’s been slower than I’d like, but the docs say I’m healing right on time. Anxious to get back to work, but it looks like it’ll be a while, still,” Keith answered, his voice slightly less chilly, as if he’d realized Logan was trying to make an effort.

“You job is to get better. Let me handle work,” Veronica said.

One look at Keith’s face and Logan was quickly making his excuses, bidding them goodnight. As soon as he left, the fight that had been brewing for weeks commenced in full force.

“I think you’re wasting your talent, your brains, your entire life, Veronica,” Keith shouted. “I think you should get on the next plane to New York and get your job back.”

“How can you call what we do a waste? We help people. Carrie’s going to get her life back, and thanks to me, there’s one less low-life drug pusher on the streets,” she yelled back. “This is what we do, Dad. This is who we are – it’s in our blood.”

“Pretending like you just can’t help yourself is just an excuse for giving up on something better.” He paused as if trying to rein in his temper and failed. “Veronica, you could’ve been killed!”

“You came a lot closer than I did, Dad,” she shot back. “I spent nearly an entire day trying to get home, not knowing if I’d get to see you, if you were going to be okay. And it’s not like it hasn’t happened before. But for some strange reason, you keep going right back in. Like you just can’t help yourself.”

She took a deep breath, trying to hold back her tears. “You think I stayed in Neptune because of Logan, but the truth is - I stayed because of you … And me. I wasn’t happy in New York. I hated my job, and for the record, things weren’t right with Piz either.

“I know now law school was a mistake. I only went to please you and avoid who I really am. I could go back to New York and to that life you think is so much better, but I’d never actually be happy because that life? It’s just not me.”

Veronica could see the anger drain from Keith’s face, and instead it was replaced with sadness and regret. He pulled his daughter into his arms, hugging her tight as he kissed the top of her head. “I had no idea you were so unhappy, Veronica. I just wanted a better life for you … and I want you to be safe.”

He pushed her away and studied her face anxiously. “And now? Are you happy now?”

Veronica considered, thinking about Cobb and Carrie, the day she’d spent with Logan and the report she had to write-up for Beth Geller. She and Mac were planning a birthday party for Wallace, and there was a ton of baking and prep work to take care of before Thanksgiving.

Smiling, she answered confidently. “Yeah, Dad. I am.”

He nodded slowly, sighing as he did. “Okay, kiddo. I don’t know about you, but I could use a hot chocolate.”

“With marshmallows?”

“I think we can scrounge some up.”
“I love you, Dad,” she said, wrapping her arms around his waist and hugging him.

“I love you too, baby.”

Pulling away, she tilted her head, smiling sheepishly. “So, about Thanksgiving … there’s gonna be one more for dinner.”

Keith stared at her with dawning realization. “Noooo. Logan.” It sounded more like a groan than a name the way he dragged it out, but Veronica’s dad gave in with a long sigh of resignation. “Of course…”

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A few days later, Veronica and Mac were hard at work rearranging office furniture. It was a Friday afternoon, and she’d closed the office early so they could move her old desk into the private office next to Keith’s and make room for Mac.

The computer programmer had finally decided to quit her job at Kane Software after spending too many nights working into the wee hours of the morning for Veronica, then trudging into work half-asleep the following day.

The timing couldn’t have been worse. Work at Mars Investigations had suddenly slowed. Aside from the pro bono favor she’d done for Logan, Beth Geller was her only client, and Veronica had begun to remember the feast-or-famine nature of the PI business. She was stretched thin. Mac had been gracious so far, and had picked up a few side jobs to make ends meet, but Veronica felt awful nonetheless.

She comforted herself by remembering the two appointments she’d set up for Monday. Although her phone wasn’t quite ringing off the hook, there’d been an uptick in calls since news of the Bonnie DeVille case had broken and the potential new clients had all mentioned her involvement in Stu Cobb’s takedown.

Maybe another high-profile case is just what she needs to bump up business.

“How’s the Geller case going?” Mac asked.

Veronica shook her head and shrugged. “I looked through the photos you encrypted and didn’t find anything particular incriminating, certainly nothing that would explain his state of mind before his accident. I had to call Beth yesterday and tell her there was nothing more I could do. I couldn’t keep taking her money when I wasn’t getting anywhere.”

They’d arranged to meet the following week so Veronica could give her a final report and get her last check. It should be just enough to pay Mac.

“Where’s Wallace, anyway?” Veronica wondered aloud. “He should’ve been here by now. We could use some extra muscle to move this ancient relic my dad calls a desk.”

Mac shrugged, suddenly intent on setting up a new Wi-Fi router she’d insisted the office needed. “I’ve been working on updating the Mars Investigations web site,” she said, changing the subject.

“I want to add some press clippings - you and your dad solved some major cases and it could lead to more business. I also think new clients could do some of the initial paperwork online, and some of the easier one could be dealt with over the ‘net - simple background checks, you know what I mean.”
It was a good idea. Veronica had been after her dad for years to keep up with the times, but he’d never gotten around to it. He had pretty up-to-date tools of the trade, but tended to be lax when it came to self-promotion. Then again, maybe he never had the money to pay for a web designer.

A mixed bag of scholarship money had paid for most of her expensive, private-college tuition, and she’d taken out student loans for Columbia. Even though she’d worked her way through school, there’d been plenty of incidentals - car repairs, airfare home, spending money not to mention medical and dental expenses - that Keith had insisted on paying. He’d done so much for her, all on his own.

Now it was Veronica’s turn to help Keith.

“I knew there was a reason I hired you,” she said, grinning at her friend. “Thanks Mac. That would be would be great.”

There was a quick rap on the outer office door, and Veronica looked up expecting to see Wallace. But even through the frosted glass she recognized the tall silhouette in white, and she couldn’t stop the sudden smile spreading across her face.

True to his word, Logan had dropped off her car the morning after they got back from San Francisco. Veronica had been asleep, but Keith told her he’d parked in front of the house and slipped the key in the mail slot. Her father had just woken up and gone to retrieve his paper from the front porch when he caught a glimpse of Logan jogging down the block.

They hadn’t spoken since their return. He’d been working extra shifts at the base, but they’d bantered via text, and she’d even laughed out loud once or twice, causing Mac and Wallace to exchange knowing glances that Veronica ignored.

She hurried across the room, unlocking the door and throwing it open. Logan stood tall and erect, his lanky body filling the doorway, and Veronica wondered vaguely if the uniform somehow made him stand straighter. He was wearing his summer whites again, the crisp, clean lines clinging to his lean build, highlighting the toned musculature, and she wanted to pull him down by the neck and kiss him senseless.

Mentally shaking herself, Veronica glanced at Mac, whose eyes had also widened as she took in the grown-up, Navy version of Logan.

Veronica tilted her head and looked at him askance. “Tell the truth. You rent that get-up so some cute blonde in a bar will throw herself at you.”

“Right. ‘Cause that always happens.”

“Have you been to Fleet Week?”

“Totally overrated.”

They stood, grinning at each other, until they heard a small cough. Realizing they weren’t alone, Logan greeted Mac over Veronica’s shoulder and she moved aside to let him in.

“What brings you by, Logan?” Mac asked, but her tone said she already knew.

“I just got off work, but I wanted to stop by and give you this.” Reaching into his back pocket, he pulled out an envelope and handed it to Veronica.

“What is it?”
“Why don’t you just open it and find out?”

She pried open the flap, taking out the slip of paper inside. It was a check made out to Mars Investigations for $5,000. Shoving it back inside, she held the envelope out to him.

“Logan, I’m not going to take your money.”

“It’s not my money. It’s Carrie’s.”

“Then tell her to consider it a friend-of-a-friend discount.” Veronica’s arm was still stretched towards him. “It’s too much, anyway.”

But he refused to take the envelope. “You deserve every penny, Veronica. Carrie can afford to pay you. Believe me, this is nothing compared to what you did for her.”

Under his earnest gaze, Veronica felt herself wavering. Mac finally decided the issue by snatching the check from Veronica’s fingers. She glanced at the amount and her eyes widened.

“We’ll take it. Thanks, Logan,” Mac said with a pointed look at Veronica.

“I gave Carrie’s manager your contact information,” Logan told them. “He’s got a roster of celebrity clients who get into all kinds of situations you may be able to help with, so it could end up being a cash cow for Mars Investigations.”

“Next time can I ride the private jet?” Mac pleaded, clasping her hands together. “Preferably with Benedict Cumberbatch?”

Reluctantly, Veronica acquiesced, realizing she’d be able to pay Mac, make rent and still keep the nest egg for her own apartment.

“Thank you, Logan,” she said, while Mac went to put the check in the private office safe. “We needed a cash infusion.”

“You did me a huge favor. This was the least I could do.”

He paused, glancing around the office at the moving boxes filled with Mac’s computer gear and unassembled pieces of furniture sticking out of their packaging. “It looks like Dashiell Hammett discovered Ikea in here. What’s going on?”

The door chimed and they turned to see Wallace stride in. He hung back when he saw Veronica wasn’t alone. “Sorry,” he said, apologetically. “Didn’t know you’d be with a client.”

A beat later, he realized his mistake. “Oh. It’s just you.”

Logan arched one brow, smiling crookedly. “Yeah. Just me. How’re you doing Wallace?”

As Veronica spent more time with Logan at an increasing frequency, she’d seen Wallace less and less, but it had more to do with her best-friend’s recent unavailability than anything else. Even though Mac had run into Logan often enough, this was the first time Wallace had seen him since they’d graduated from Hearst.

There was a definite chill coming from the high school math teacher.

“Logan,” Wallace said by way of greeting. “You’re looking … different from the last time I saw you. If I remember right, you were passed out on the quad.”
Logan smirked. “Ah, the hedonistic days of my youth. Can’t say I miss ‘em.”

“‘Probably ‘cause you don’t remember them.”

“That too.”

Although she thought Logan was handling Wallace’s ill-concealed animosity rather well, she decided to interject before relations took a turn for the worse. “You’re just in time,” she purred. “Grab an Allen wrench. We’ve got furniture to build.”

Taking the hint, Wallace gave her a kiss on the cheek. “Sorry I’m late. The game went into overtime. Where’s Mac?” he asked, looking around.

“Staying clear of the testosterone,” their friend called from the other room.

Veronica put the guys to work moving her heavy wooden desk into the inner office she’d share with Keith, while the women started assembling Mac’s new ergonomic computer desk and rolling chair. She ordered pizza, and they worked while they ate, keeping the door between them propped open so Logan could update them on Carrie.

“She and her friends made a deal with the DA. They’re gonna plead out, but with their testimony against Cobb, they’ll only get probation. It’s only been a few days, but she seems to be doing okay, all things considered. She has a live-in sober coach now, just to make sure she doesn’t slip.”

They finished an hour later, and Veronica stood back to admire the redesigned office. Mac’s desk took up less space than the old one, leaving room for a coffee table by the leather sofa. The other room was a little more cramped, but Veronica’s desk fit easily beside Keith’s.

“We’re going to try out this snooty new coffee place Mac’s been raving about,” Veronica said. “You’ll join us, right?” It was framed as a question, but she clearly expected Logan to fall in line, so he did.

“They hand pour hot water over coffee grounds and charge $3 a cup,” Wallace groused, shaking his head. “I don’t get it.”

“You drink instant,” Mac retorted.

They walked the short distance to the cafe, which was crowded with hipsters, college students and couples on dates. They stood in line and ordered, but Veronica swatted Logan’s hand when he tried to pay. She and Mac searched for a table, leaving the guys to wait for their drinks.

They sat at two outdoor tables next to a large, open window, and even from a distance, Veronica could see Logan and Wallace standing in awkward silence near the barista.

She caught a glimpse of Logan’s face, and he looked like he’d rather be back on his floating tin can than the coffeeshop with her hostile friend.

A few minutes later, they brought over the drinks already treated with cream, and Logan tossed a generous pile of sugar packets next to Veronica’s.

She glanced at Logan, a ghost of a smirk playing over his face. “What?” she asked, nudging him.

“Nothing,” he said, suddenly all innocence.

The conversation drifted to Thanksgiving less than a week away. Mac volunteered to bring vegan
cupcakes, eliciting a horrified cringe from Wallace.

“Yeah, about Thanksgiving …” Logan began.

“You’re bringing the mashed potatoes. You can’t bail on me now.”

Logan chuckled nervously. “No, seriously. I’m not trying to bail, but a buddy of mine just found out he has to work Friday, so he can’t go home. He’s actually a really good cook, so he’s gonna fry a turkey, and we’re just gonna hang out. Maybe go surfing …”

“You can bring him.”

“Veronica …”

“The more the merrier. My dad’s invited his lady friend so it’ll be a typical Mars Family hodgepodge holiday.”

As much as Veronica loved Keith, her mother’s defection and their community shunning had made for bereft holiday meals during those initial years. Then slowly, their little family of two had expanded to include an eclectic band of friends, and while Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners at the Mars house bore zero resemblance to a Norman Rockwell painting, she’d grown to love their gatherings.

Which was probably why she wanted Logan to be a part of them, even if he did seem to prefer his solitude.

She studied the slightly pained expression on his face. “Unless, you really don’t want to …”

“It’s not that …”

“Hey, maybe your friend can cook the turkey this year,” Wallace interrupted. “Veronica always makes these poor baby pigeons.”

“Cornish hens. And I don’t know why you’re complaining,” she retorted. “You eat at your mom’s before coming over to my place for your second dinner.”

She glanced at Logan, and they all looked at him expectantly. Finally, he laughed and raked his hand through his hair. “Okay. We’ll be there. Mashed potatoes, right?”

“And turkey, like a real turkey,” Wallace added. “So what movie are we gonna see? Guardians of the Galaxy, right Logan?”

“Gone Girl” Mac and Veronica chorused.

“Thanks for the invite, but I worked two shifts at the base and I’m beat,” Logan declined. “Sorry, Wallace. I think you’re outvoted.”

“So it’s for real? You actually fly fighter jets?” Wallace asked.

Logan laughed. “Yeah, I know. I’m not exactly poster boy for the Navy, but the answer is: yes. Right now I fly F/A-18 Hornets for the Fleet Readiness Center. Basically, I try to help them find out what’s busted before it’s too late to fix it.”

Veronica frowned. She didn’t exactly love that job description, but it was better than flying clandestine missions over enemy territory. Throughout the evening, she couldn’t help noticing other customers giving Logan second glances, including several, openly admiring women. At first, she’d
thought they recognized him as Aaron Echolls’ son or Bonnie DeVille’s ex-boyfriend, but when a man wearing a Navy baseball cap saluted him as he walked by, she realized it was the uniform that drew everyone’s attention.

Later, the three friends sat on Keith’s front porch after returning from a late-night showing of Guardians of the Galaxy. Veronica handed Wallace a beer, draping an arm around his shoulders and giving him a quick hug. “Thank you for being nice to Logan,” she said.

“So that’s why you changed your vote.”

“Maybe.”

“No fair,” Mac protested. “I was always nice to Logan.”

Wallace huffed. “Well, he does risk his life to keep our country safe.”

Veronica knew he was trying to make light of the situation, but her chest tightened with dread as she thought of Logan’s tendency to rush headfirst into dangerous situations. She shook off an image of him in the cockpit of his plane.

“In case it slipped your mind, Piz is the one without the baggage and drama.” Wallace’s voice interrupted her thoughts.

“Speaking of drama, I can’t believe we’re watching this rerun again,” Mac said.

“Piz is the caring, supportive one,” he continued.

Waving her beer, Veronica objected. “Guys, it’s a moot point. Logan and I are just friends.”

“Logan is caring and supportive,” Mac argued, not bothering to acknowledge Veronica’s protest. Both friends stared at her in surprise. “What? You saw what he did for Carrie - and they’re not even together anymore.”

Veronica turned to Wallace and flashed him an I-told-you-so look, but he was still eyeing Mac.

“Oh, so it’s like that, huh?” He shook his head. “Had to be the uniform.”

Their laughter rang out, and they clinked bottles as they talked well into the night.

**********

Veronica spent a few hours in the office working alone the morning before Thanksgiving. She was due to pick Christina up at the airport around noon, but first she had an appointment with Beth Geller, and she wanted to get a head start on a few new cases that had trickled in.

The widow arrived a few minutes early. “You must want to close up early for the holiday, and I didn’t want to keep you,” she explained. She was wearing a pair of dark, slim-fitting jeans and a cream colored blouse with a taupe cable-knit cardigan draped over her shoulders and black ballet flats.

Veronica thanked her and led her into the private office, where she offered Beth a seat across from her desk.

“Here’s your check,” Beth said, placing it on the desktop. “Thank you. You have no idea how much you helped. I was driving myself mad for a while there.”
Veronica picked up the check and examined it, frowning. “You gave me $500 too much,” she said, handing it back.

“Actually, I - I was hoping you’d do something else for me. If you need more money, I’m happy to pay.”

“Why don’t you just tell me what you need first, and then we’ll discuss money.”

Beth reached into her purse and took out a small, silver flash drive, placing it on the desk in front of Veronica. “I found that in our TV after we spoke the other day. We keep a few flash drives with movies and cartoons for Eva plugged into the USB ports on our TVs. I went to add a new movie to one of them, when I saw this,” the woman explained. “I don’t remember seeing it before, and when I tried to open it, the files were locked or coded.

“Can you unlock them and tell me what’s on them? There’s no hurry, but I’m a curious person and a little obsessive compulsive, so I can’t let it go.”

Veronica took the flash drive and hooked it to her own key chain. “I’ll have my colleague take a look. The $500 should be fine, but I’ll let you know if it turns into something more.”

When Beth was gone, Veronica plugged the drive into her laptop and tried to open the files, but they were encrypted just like the deleted files Mac had found on Adam Geller’s computer. From the size, she guessed they were more text documents, probably drafts of his stories, as well as photos and maybe even video files.

She closed the windows and shut her laptop. They were probably just more material for his stories that he’d put on a flash drive and forgotten about when he’d wanted to transfer a movie for his daughter.

She picked up the phone to call Mac, but her friend didn’t answer, so she left a message. Next she called Wallace and when he didn’t pick up, she texted him asking when he planned on arriving. By then it was time to head to the airport.

Veronica and Christina spent several hours shopping before stopping at a sidewalk restaurant near the marina, where they ordered fries and iced tea.

“So have you boinked him, yet?”

"You should learn to say what's on your mind," Veronica answered, biting into a fry.

Thanksgiving turned out to be a typical, sunny, warm Southern California day, so Keith decided to serve dinner on the backyard patio. Michelle Yamamoto was the first guest to arrive, and he greeted her with an affectionate kiss before disappearing outside to dust off the furniture and set the table.

Michelle made her way to the kitchen and began chopping veggies. “I’m handling the Stu Cobbler case, and I’ve conducted some preliminary interviews with your friends. I know your dad disapproves, but I have to say, you did a helluva job, Veronica,” she said as she rapidly sliced onions.

The deputy district attorney had been divorced for many years and had two grown children, who were spending the holiday with their dad. She and Keith had met while working a case together, but bonded over a mutual adoration of baseball and ballroom dancing.

“There’s no future for us, though,” she called out as Keith passed by the kitchen. “I’m a Giants fan. When they’re in town, we have to sit in separate rows at Petco Park or it gets ugly.”
Veronica laughed. As always, the idea of her father dating unsettled her, and she tended to view any potential stepmother through a highly critical lens. She knew she hadn’t made it easy for her dad to move on from Leanne, and the older she got the more the guilt weighed on her. But she genuinely liked Michelle, and hoped Keith had found someone he could share a life with, clashing baseball allegiances notwithstanding.

The doorbell rang promptly at noon, and when Veronica opened the door she was surprised to find an Asian man, holding flowers and a large casserole dish, standing on the porch. A good head shorter than Logan, he was around the same age with faint laugh lines and a warm, friendly smile.

“You gonna let us in, or are we supposed to eat these mashed potatoes out here?” Logan snarked, clutching a bottle of wine in one hand and a large, insulated, shopping tote in the other.

He introduced his squadmate, Chang, and she stepped back, throwing open the door to let them by. “I thought for sure Logan made you up to get out of Thanksgiving,” Veronica said to him, taking the dish.

“I’d never …” Logan began.

“Mouth talks with his tongue out of his shoe,” Chang said, revealing a gentle Southern drawl. “He tried bribing a squid into giving up his shift, but I 86’d it.”

Veronica threw Logan a puzzled glance as she led them into the backyard, where the others were. “I only got about 70 percent of that, but you must be Mouth,” she whispered to him.

Outside, Keith was listening to a football game on the radio and sweeping leaves from the flagstone patio while Christina arranged chairs and Michelle laid out the snacks. They all looked up and greeted the newcomers.

Logan shook Keith’s hand, proffering the wine. “Thank you for having us, sir,” he said, quickly making the introductions.

“We certainly do appreciate the hospitality, sir,” Chang added, also giving Keith’s hand a firm pumping. “No disrespect to the Navy, but it’s hard to celebrate the birth of our country with powdered taters.”

Veronica introduced Michelle and Christina, noticing her friend’s eyes widen when Chang turned his warm smile on her and offered a half-salute.

“Pleasure to meet you, ma’am.”

“Um, yeah. You too,” she stammered.

Dinner was served shortly after, and to Veronica’s pleasant surprise, conversation flowed smoothly, and everyone appeared to be enjoying themselves. Logan earned well-deserved props for his take on her mashed potatoes recipe, heavily laden with sour cream, butter and cream cheese. Chang had also brought a small turkey he’d brined overnight then fried in the morning.

Later, everyone cleared the table and Logan helped Veronica and her dad clean up the kitchen.

“Leave some for turkey for Wallace,” Logan told her.

“Where is Wallace?” her father asked, drying a platter. “He’s going to miss UCLA’s kick-off.”

Veronica frowned. “I don’t know. He never got back to me. I couldn’t reach Mac yesterday, either. I
don’t know what’s going on with those two.”

She glanced at Logan, who was looking down at the serving bowl in his hand, a small smirk curving his lips. “What?” she asked, but he just shrugged.

“When No. 1 daughter was young, her skills were sharp like blade of sword,” Keith sing-songed. “Now brain dull like blade of blah…”

Logan sniggered, and Veronica turned on him. “Oh, like you know what he’s talking about.”

“I think I do, actually.”

Arms akimbo, she looked at him expectantly, but his smirk merely widened. “Well?”

“I think I’ll savor the moment. It’s not every day I crack a case before the great Veronica Mars.”

She tilted her head, fixing him with a hard stare. “You done, Smartypants?”

“That’s Lt. Smartypants to you,” he said, popping a chip into his mouth. “Fine. I believe your dad is alluding to the fact that Mac and Wallace were unavailable because they were on a date.”

He looked to Keith for confirmation, and the older man smiled, nodding.

“No. You’re wrong. Mac broke things off with her mystery date months ago, and Wallace hasn’t gone out with anyone in ages.”

They made their way back to the living room, where the others were watching the UCLA game.

“Not dates, honey. One date,” Keith clarified. “As in, Mac and Wallace are on a date together.”

Veronica stared at her dad, then looked over at Logan, slowly shaking her head. “What? Noooo...they would’ve said something. Why would they keep it a secret?”

Logan was leaning against a Craftsman column, smiling absently, as he murmured almost to himself, “’Cause secrets are kinda hot.”

He looked up, suddenly realizing everyone was staring at him and straightened, clearing his throat. “Maybe they just don’t want She Who Must Not Be Named sticking her nose where it doesn’t belong.”

Chang, who was scooping a corn chip through Keith’s famous seven-layer dip, paused to raise a brow at his friend. “Did you just compare Veronica to Voldemort?”

“She’s not as sweet as she looks,” Logan said.

The subject was dropped for a touchdown, and conversation turned to the Neptune mayor’s latest bid to bring a professional sports franchise to the small, but wealthy and influential, seaside town. Michelle and Keith were hoping for a minor league baseball team.

“A home team could bridge our divide and bring peace to the baseball world,” Michelle intoned somberly, and everyone laughed. “But the mayor in his infinite wisdom wants something much bigger.”

“You mean like an NBA team?” Chang asked, his eyes brightening.

“That hardly seems likely being so close to L.A.” Christina said.
When the chip bowl was empty, Veronica announced it was time for dessert even as she wondered again where her friends were. She stood up and headed for the kitchen, motioning for her father and Logan to follow.

True to form, she couldn’t let the issue of Mac dating Wallace drop.

“They’ve known each other for years. No, I would’ve noticed something …” she said, brewing a pot of coffee.

“So you didn’t notice the weekend Wallace was mysteriously unavailable, Mac was too?” Keith asked.

“You know how weird she was acting when we ran into her at Bittersweet? She kept texting someone, and I think it was Wallace,” Logan added. “They were probably supposed to meet there, and she warned him off when she saw us.”

“Pure conjecture,” Veronica said.

“Maybe. But I remember parking behind a car with a Neptune High basketball sticker. I saw the same car the other night at Mars Investigations - it was Wallace’s car.”

“Circumstantial.”

He followed her back into the dining area, carrying the insulated coffee pot.

“I’m just saying … Wallace knows how Mac takes her coffee.”

Chang grinned and nodded, but everyone else turned to stare at Logan. “Explain please,” Veronica said.

“The other night at the cafe, I saw Wallace pour like a splash of soy milk in her coffee.”

“So?”

She poured the steaming beverage into six mugs and put them on a tray next to a ceramic creamer, matching sugar bowl and several tiny, silver spoons. Logan carried the tray into the living room, depositing it on the coffee table.

Watching the others reach for a mug, then prepare their own drinks, Logan said, “He asked me what you put in yours, and he’s known you just as long as Mac, if not longer.

Veronica looked at him skeptically, and Chang interjected, arguing Logan’s case.

“If a friend buys you coffee at Starbucks, he’ll give it to you to fix yourself. But when you spend the night with someone, you find out how that person takes their coffee the next morning.”

“Well, that’s a crackpot theory if I ever heard one,” Veronica snarked.

On auto-pilot, she handed Logan a mug, and he took a sip of the unadulterated drink. A slow smile spread across Chang’s face and he nodded towards them. “Did y’all used to go out?”

Christina laughed out loud, and even Keith chuckled grudgingly.

“I think I’m with the lieutenant on this one, honey,” her father said.

Logan grinned smugly, but Veronica was not convinced. “I’m going to need more than some
She picked up the creamer, and Logan muttered into his mug. “Half-and-half, lots of sugar.” When a flush spread up her neck, he smirked. “I’m right about Mac and Wallace.”

The doorbell rang, and Mac and Wallace strode through the unlocked entry, each carrying a brown paper bag. All eyes turned on them, and Christina snickered.

“What?” Wallace asked.

**********

“I got the goods to nail Mac and Wallace,” Christina announced two nights later.

They’d gone to see The Grand Budapest Hotel at a theater in Downtown Neptune with Logan and Chang and ended up walking to Bittersweet for dessert and drinks. They were seated at an outdoor table on the newly refurbished loading dock turned courtyard deck.

She slapped something down on the center of the table, and they all leaned forward to peer at two ticket stubs torn in the exact same place, one stained with coffee and the other slightly creased. The stubs were from the same downtown theater they’d just gone to, for an indie flick Veronica remembered had created a lot of buzz because it had been entirely funded by a Kickstarter campaign.

“Where’d you get these?” Logan asked.

“I saw Wallace toss his at Veronica’s house, so I fished it out of the trash. Mac was cagier, probably from working with Veronica, but she let it slip that she’d seen the same movie,” Christina explained breathlessly. “I nosed around a bit when we were at her place earlier today. Her ticket stub was in the recycling bin sitting in plain sight.”

She rapped the stubs with her finger. “They’re both for the 2 o’clock showing on Thanksgiving Day. I believe that’s what’s called the smokin’ gun,” she crowed triumphantly.

Logan quirked his brows across the table at Veronica. “Your handiwork?” he asked, but she raised her hands in denial.

“Wait. You went through your friends’ trash?” Chang asked, perplexed. He glanced between his squadmate and Veronica. “Is that some Internet thing? Are people doing that now?”

Logan shook his head. “Just Veronica … and apparently, her friends.”

“Well butter my butt and call me a biscuit,” Chang said.

Christina stared at him, smiling bemusedly. “You are the strangest Chinese man I have ever met.”

“Well, thank you, miss.”

“Ms. Or better yet, Christina.”

Sparks were flying, and Logan and Veronica were smart enough to stay clear. At the end of the night they trailed well behind their friends as they walked back to the theater.

It was late and the streets were all but deserted, but it was a warm night and they could hear the sound of the nearby ocean, pounding onto shore.

“She’s a terrifying combination of you and Lilly. I like her,” Logan said. “But I pity poor Chang.”
Veronica giggled, nudging him with her elbow. She’d had a little too much prosecco and was still feeling the bubbly after effects.

Her phone rang, and she stopped to answer it. The voice on the other end was muffled, and she couldn’t quite make out the words, so she gestured to Logan to keep going, mouthing, “I’ll catch up.”

Straining to understand the caller, she heard a loud motor somewhere further back down the street and she covered her ear. Logan was getting further and further away, when she saw him turn around.

Suddenly, Logan sprinted towards her, shouting her name and waving his arm. She spun around to see a pair of high beam lights barreling towards her. Seconds before the truck hit the curb less than five feet from where she stood frozen, Logan’s body careened into hers.

They caught air and strong arms nearly crushed her to him as he twisted their bodies mid-flight, so when they crashed to the hard ground of a vacant lot, skidding over gravel and broken bits of glass, it was Logan who bore the brunt of the impact.

Veronica scrambled off him, and he jumped up as if to chase after the truck, his head bleeding.

“Sit down, Logan!”

He swayed, and she steadied him, gently easing him back to the ground.

Dimly, she heard someone shouting and looked up to see Chang running full speed after a white work truck that was already disappearing into the distance.

********

Three hours later, Veronica was pacing in the hospital’s ER waiting area.

Surrounded by police cars, Christina had examined Logan while they waited for the ambulance, and he hadn’t appeared to have any broken bones, just several abrasions that she declared would need stitches.

“This kind of thing happen a lot around here?” she’d asked Logan.

“Only when Veronica’s around.”

“That’s what I thought.”

He’d felt dizzy and vomited once, and Veronica had insisted on accompanying him to the emergency room. They’d only been there a few minutes when a woman, Veronica recognized as one of the clerks from the billing office, spied Logan and came over to greet him.

“Nice to see you again, Lt. Echolls, although it looks like you’ve got a nasty bump there. Don’t worry. The docs here will fix you right up,” she’d said.

“You’ve been to the hospital recently, Logan?” Veronica asked, alarmed.

“Work injury,” he mumbled, just as his name was called. He’d been whisked behind the double doors and she hadn’t seen him since.

Christina sat next to Veronica, trying to ease her friend’s anxiety by explaining Logan’s probably condition. “I’d say he has a concussion, and with some rest and a few pain pills, he’ll be right as rain.”
Meanwhile, the amiable Chang had morphed into a fierce guard dog, standing watch just inside the automatic sliding doors, legs apart, his arms folded across his chest.

When Keith burst through the doors, visibly shaken and accompanied by Michelle, Chang sprang forward, relaxing only when he recognized Veronica’s father. “Veronica?” he called loudly, and Chang led him to where she was sitting.

Keith wrapped her in a hug, and she let out a deep, shuddering breath, willing herself not to cry. “It was on the news,” he explained, now suddenly angry. “They said it was a hit-and-run. You told me there’d been an accident.”

“Dad, I’m alright. Just a few scratches.”

“Thanks to Logan. If it hadn’t been for him, you’d be a pancake,” Christina pointed out. Something caught her eye, and she nodded toward the corridor. “Speak of the devil.”

Logan emerged from the double doors, his head and upper arm swathed in white gauze bandages. Logan looked tired and pissed off. Spotting Veronica, he strode over, a hospital orderly trailing after him pushing a wheelchair.

“You want to tell me what the hell’s going on? You fucking promised me you wouldn’t go near the Sacks investigation,” Logan said angrily.

Keith turned on her. “Veronica!”

Her temper flared. Hand on hip, she jabbed a finger in the air at him. “Uh, first of all, you’re not the boss me, Logan …”

“What are you - twelve?” he shot back.

“… and secondly, I haven’t touched Sack’s case.”

But Logan wouldn’t be put off so easily. “Bullshit! I know what I saw, Veronica! A white work truck, just like Wallace described, nearly plowed you over. It was heading straight for you. It never stopped.”

Logan swayed, and Veronica caught him, all her bluster instantly fading. “Logan, calm down before you burst your stitches,” she said gently.

With Chang’s help, Keith persuaded Logan to sit in the wheelchair, and Michelle ushered everyone out of the hospital. Veronica had spoken with Logan’s doctor. Christina had been right about the concussion. The doc had given her a bottle of oxycodone and strict instructions for Logan to rest.

Not wanting to leave him alone in Dick’s empty beach house, they’d all ended up back at Keith’s house. By then it was nearly six o’clock in the morning, and Christina’s plane was due to leave in a few hours, so Chang offered to take her to the airport.

In the guest room, Veronica gave Logan his pills and helped him ease off what remained of his torn shirt before tucking him into the pull-out sofa bed she’d been using.

Clearly exhausted, his eyes drifted south, and she started to leave when he grasped her hand. “Wait. Don’t go.”

“Okay,” she whispered after a beat, perching on the edge of the bed beside him.
“Sorry … fer yelling …”

Veronica shrugged, even though she knew he probably couldn’t see her through his rapidly drooping eyes. “I guess I can forgive you. You did save my life after all.”

“’Cause we’re epic.”

The corners of her mouth tugged. “Spanning years?”

“Continents…”

His breathing evened out, and she thought he was asleep until she heard a faint, low mumble. “Love you, V’ronica.”

Her breath caught and she froze.

Of course Logan couldn’t possibly know what was he was saying. He’d suffered a head injury, and he was doped up on drugs. Veronica knew full well, he wouldn't remember anything come morning.


*No one writes songs about the ones that come easy.*

*Bygones.*

Blinking back tears, heart pounding, her thoughts scattering wildly in her head, one thing remained perfectly clear.

“I love you too, Logan,” Veronica whispered, and she held his hand until his light snoring told her he was finally asleep.

*********

She found Keith in the kitchen, putting away the remains of his dinner with Michelle, who’d gone home after dropping him off. From the carefully measured way he was tearing off foil, she could tell he was fuming.

Logan had insisted he’d seen a white truck, the kind construction workers used, charging purposefully towards Veronica at full-speed, and Chang had backed up his story.

Keith’s memories of his so-called accident were still fuzzy, but Wallace was consistent in his description of the white construction truck he’d seen turn around and smash into Sacks’ car a second time.

The facts were irrefutable, and they made no sense.

“Dad, I swear, I haven’t gone near Sacks’ case. I honestly have no idea what tonight was about.”

Keith stopped wrapping the garlic bread and fixed her with a hard stare. After several, long moments searching her face, he came around the kitchen island, and grasped her by the shoulders.

“Allright Veronica. I’ve accepted the fact that you're not going back to New York to your nice, safe, prestigious career as a lawyer. But if we’re going to make this partnership work, I have to be able to trust you.” He bent to look her straight in the eyes. “So I’m going to choose to believe you.”
Not quite the same thing as actually believing me, but I’ll take it, Dad, Veronica thought. Her hackles had started to rise, but she realized she’d given him good reason not to trust her in the past.

“Okay. So, what’s next?” she asked.

“We get some sleep.” Keith straightened, his face resolute. “Then regroup and get to work.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was a bit long, but I really wanted to give Keith, Mac & Wallace more attention, and I really, really had to bring Christina and Chang together ’cause that was the original plan for "Fleet Week Fling" but it dragged too much in that story. As it was, I ended up taking out a few details in their backstories. For instance, Chang is technically Chinese, but he was adopted as a baby by a Virginia woman and her Navy husband, who is half Caucasian and half Filipino. Chang's real name is Beauregard Lopez, (in Southern tradition, kids are given their mother's maiden name) but everyone calls him Chang after his favorite Chinese restaurant back home. And Christina didn't really have to work Thanksgiving - she was bailing on her family's vacation because she knew it was really a cruise for ABCs (American Born Chinese) and her grandmother's attempt to marry her off to a rich, Chinese businessman. :)

P.S. I nearly forgot to give a shoutout to Heavenli24 for reminding me that Logan needed a hero's moment 'cause it just wouldn't be a LoVe story without him swooping in to save the day.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the long delay. Back-to-back birthdays, plus the holidays, kicked my butt this year. But it's almost done!

Veronica was awake by noon. She’d been exhausted by the time she’d slipped between the sheets of the fold-out couch in the living room, but events from the long night - the near-miss with a hurtling truck, her father’s reluctant partnership, Logan’s drug-induced confession of love - swirled in her tired brain along with a single, burning question: Why did someone want her dead?

It was dawn by the time she’d finally fallen into a dreamless sleep, only to be awakened several hours later by the bright light of the midday sun pouring through the curtain less windows. Groggily, she reached for her phone to check the time and immediately saw several missed messages from Mac and Wallace. She was about to send a quick, reassuring text, when she heard footsteps on the porch and looked up to see her friends peering inside.

“Two months, Vee. That’s how long it takes to get your skinny butt in trouble.” Wallace said, greeting her with a fierce hug.

“Nine years and two months,” Mac corrected, joining in with a one-armed embrace. A moment later, she raised the other arm to indicate the laptop she was holding. “I figured you might need me today.”

Grinning, Veronica hugged her back. “Thanks, Q. I do.”

Later, after Veronica had showered and dressed, they sat at the dining table sipping coffee. Wallace explained he’d seen an early morning news report on the hit-and-run and immediately recognized Logan’s huddled figure even though their names hadn’t been released. When he couldn’t reach Veronica, he’d called Mac.

While Veronica recounted the previous night’s harrowing events, they could hear Keith rummaging around in the kitchen, and soon the comforting smell of pancakes and sizzling pork wafted through the house.

“I smell bacon.”

Logan squinted blearily at them from the doorway. He was shirtless and barefoot, wearing only the rumpled and blood-specked jeans from the night before. His naked torso showed off impressively-hardened muscles marred only by several ugly bruises and cuts. She couldn’t see them, but Veronica knew his back sported more scrapes as well as old scars. The bandage on his arm stood out starkly against the gold tan of his skin.

“Hubba, hubba,” Mac whispered into her coffee cup so only Veronica could hear.

Wallace threw a surprised glance at Veronica before greeting Logan. “Hey, man. You okay? You don’t look so good.”

Veronica walked over to him and peered into his eyes, pressing her hand to his forehead. “How’re you feeling? Do you remember what happened?” she asked, her anxiety ratcheting up several
notches when he failed to immediately respond. “Logan. Do you know what year it is?”

“Head hurts. 1984.” Logan put his finger to his lips and narrowed his eyes at her. “Wait. Who are
you?”

Mac snickered, and Veronica rolled her eyes. “Logan …”

“I’m fine, Veronica. I was a little groggy when I woke up. Took me a few moments to figure out
where I was, but it all came back. You. Me. The white truck.”

She reached up to feel his forehead again. “Are you hot?”

With a smirk, Logan replied, “Some women seem to think so, but you always say I’m pretty.”

The kitchen door swung open, and Keith came out carrying a tray laden with food. “First we eat,
then we work.” He set the tray down on the table, rubbed his hands and looked up. “Logan. How
are you feeling?”

“He’s fine. Overweening ego and all.” She gestured to a chair. “Well? Are you going to sit?”

Logan hesitated. “Sure, but I was hoping to find my shirt first.”

Brushing past him, she made her way down the hall and into her room, Logan following close
behind. “I threw it out. It was torn and … bloody.”

He watched as she dug through a drawer. Scoffing, he said, “I don’t think any of yours will fit me,
Veronica.”

She pulled something out of the drawer and tossed it to him. He caught it and unfurled a large, grey,
cotton t-shirt emblazoned with the Hearst emblem. Holding it against his chest, he shook his head.
“Ten years later and I’m still wearing your old boyfriends’ castoffs.”

Veronica’s lips parted, about to protest, but thought better of it as he pulled it over his head. “The
good news? It fits.”

They returned to the dining room, where the others had already started eating. Keith stacked
pancakes onto a plate along with several slices of bacon and handed it to Logan. “Thank you, Mr.
Mars,” he said, reaching for the maple syrup and letting the amber liquid sluice over his plate.

Wallace was already attacking his own stack as if he hadn’t eaten in days. “Man, this sure beats
gluten-free, vegan muffins. Your pancakes are epic, Mr. Mars.”

Logan raised his head, and Veronica caught the sharp glance he gave Wallace. His brow furrowed
slightly as he pushed his food around his plate.

“You okay?” she asked, her voice low and concerned.

He turned, offering a slight smile. “Yeah. My head’s still a little foggy from the meds. I had a really
weird dream …”

“About last night?”

He shook his head, squinting as he tried to remember. “No … We were at senior prom.”

“You mean Alterna-Prom?” Mac asked, feigning a shudder. “I have nightmares about that, too.”
He laughed half-heartedly. “It wasn’t a nightmare. It was just … weird. I was in my uniform.” Logan stared at Veronica, and she held her breath until he glanced away and seemingly shook off the fleeting memory.

“I need coffee.” He started to stand, but Keith put a restraining hand on his shoulder. “Sit. Eat. I need to brew a fresh pot, anyway.”

“I’ll get it Dad,” Veronica said, getting up from her chair. She returned a few minutes later with and handed Keith his medication, then gave Logan a glass of water along with two small, white pills.

“Take them with food, every six hours. No operating heavy machinery.

Shaking his head, Logan pushed the pills away. “Those make me groggy. I’ll take Tylenol if I need to.”

Veronica slid the pills back. “Your doctor said you should take those before the pain gets too bad.”

“First of all, you’re not the boss of me,” he said with a smirk. “Secondly, they’re just a few stitches. Tylenol will be fine.”

“Now who’s being childish?”

He pointed at her with a piece of bacon. “You started it, Mars,” he said, crunching down with flourish.

Pursing her lips, she disappeared into the kitchen and came back with Tylenol, which she held out to him. “Take these. Now.”

Logan eyed the palm of her hand, starting to protest until he saw the determined set of her jaw. “God, you’re bossy,” he murmured under his breath, but took the Tylenol.

Satisfied, she sat down. “Just for the record, I wasn’t lying about my dad’s case. I haven’t gone near it.”

“Assuming Veronica’s telling the truth …” Keith began, eliciting an indignant huff from his daughter. “… I want to know everything you have been working on.”

Veronica pushed fruit around on her plate as she considered. “Nothing, really. I finished up a couple of background checks you started, pretty run-of-the-mill stuff. Since then, a few cheating husbands, one cheating wife and an identity theft that Mac helped out on.” She paused as if to take stock. “Carrie’s manager called about one of his clients who’s being harassed by a crazy fan, but I haven’t even gotten started on it, yet, and that’s about it. Your basic P.I. bread and butter.”

Logan paused mid-bite. “What about that thing we checked out in San Francisco? Didn’t seem so bread and butter to me,” he said.

The others looked at her in surprise. “I thought you were there to look for Carrie,” Wallace said.

“We were, but there was a local angle to one of my cases so we stayed behind to follow it up,” Veronica explained. “Turned out to be nothing. It was a basic cheating spouse case except …”

There was an abrupt clatter of metal and porcelain as she jumped up, nearly tipping over the chair in her rush. After locating her laptop in the living room, she sat on the couch and began tapping on the keyboard. Several long moments of silence passed, and the others got up to follow her.
“Veronica, what’s going on?” Keith asked.

“While you were still in the hospital, a woman named Beth Geller came into the office looking for you. She wanted to hire you to find out if her husband was cheating on her. But there was a twist - she was a widow.”

Veronica told them about the strange charges on Adam Geller’s credit card, his odd behavior just before he died and how she had to reconstruct the last few weeks of his life.

“Turned out he wasn’t cheating, but I never discovered what was bothering him before he died. I turned in my final report a few days ago.”

“What's so special about this case?” Wallace asked.

Logan and Keith exchanged knowing glances. “How did Adam Geller die?” Keith asked, but from the expression on his face it was clear he already knew the answer.

Veronica looked at her dad. “Car accident. That was all Beth told me, and I never thought to dig any deeper. I never made the connection to you or Sacks.”

Keith put a reassuring hand on his daughter’s shoulder. “I wouldn’t have, either, honey. No one would.”

Her eyes flitted back to the computer, and she scrolled down the screen, her worst suspicions confirmed. “Adam Geller was killed by a hit-and-run driver. The case is still unsolved.”

The local press didn’t cover the story, just ran a news obituary since the freelance writer had been of some renown. The cause of his death was glossed over as a simple auto accident.

Veronica found more details in a short article that ran in The San Francisco Chronicle.

A Southern California man crossing Jones Street in the Tenderloin was killed by what police are calling a hit-and-run driver shortly after midnight Saturday.

Adam Geller, 41, of Neptune, a small, coastal town south of San Diego, was walking east on Eddy Street near Boeddeker Park when he was struck by an unknown vehicle as he crossed Jones Street.

Witnesses reported hearing the impact and a squeal of tires as the driver fled the scene, but were unable to give a description of the vehicle or driver, according to the San Francisco Police Department public information office.

Geller, a freelance journalist, is survived by a wife and young daughter.

“Jesus, Veronica. That’s just a few blocks from where we were,” Logan said in hushed horror. “Your daughter has an uncanny ability to find trouble.”

Keith nodded grimly. “You wanna tell me what you were doing there, Veronica?”

She launched into an explanation of the encrypted files that led her to the construction site. “Aside from a grumpy contractor who chased us away from the property, everything seemed kosher. Mac and I pored over those photos, and believe me, there was nothing shady.”

Suddenly, she smacked her forehead with the palm of her hand. “I’m such an idiot.” She stood and retrieved a set of keys from her bag. “Beth Geller gave me this the day before Thanksgiving, only she said there was no rush and, well, I forgot about it until now.”
Veronica handed Mac the flash drive from the Gellers’ TV. “How long do you think it’ll take to crack it?”

Mac shrugged. “If it was as sophisticated as the last one, a few days.”

“Meanwhile we need to know more about Adam Geller,” Keith said.

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Less than an hour later, father and daughter were standing on the front steps of a modest California ranch-style house located in one of Neptune’s oldest neighborhoods. Veronica noted the Gellers’ home was within walking distance of his office, in an area developed during the post-war Baby Boom to fulfill the housing shortage caused by returning soldiers.

Over the years, families migrated further and further away to brand-new, pristine suburbs on the outskirts of Neptune, leaving aging neighborhoods to languish and eventually fall into disrepair. The last decade, however, saw young professionals flocking back to city centers where they could live closer to work, cutting out long commutes on Southern California’s snarled freeways.

Soon, grocery stores, cafes, restaurants and shops began popping up, and the resurgence of neighborhoods like the Gellers’ ultimately led to interest in redeveloping abandoned buildings and vacant lots in downtown areas nationwide.

Adam Geller must have appreciated the irony.

Veronica had called ahead to make sure Beth was home, and now the young widow greeted them warmly, if not warily. “Mr. Mars, I’m so glad you’re better,” she said, shaking his hand after Veronica made the introductions. “Please, come inside.”

She wore black leggings and a grey, over-sized t-shirt with black flip-flops. Her dark hair was swept into a low ponytail, revealing the same pearl stud earrings Veronica remembered from their previous meetings.

She served coffee in a tiny, but comfortable living room, sending her daughter, Eva, to read in her bedroom.

“Beth, there’s been a … development, and we need to ask you some questions about your husband,” Veronica began.

Beth touched her finger to her lips, craning her neck as she looked in the direction of her daughter’s room. Satisfied, she turned back to her guests. “What development? Have you … learned something?”

“No, not about Adam,” Veronica said quickly. “I mean, that is, we don’t know for sure …”

She looked helplessly at Keith, who placed a quieting hand over hers. He reached into his pocket and took out a photograph, which he showed to Beth, who was trying to remain composed.

“Mrs. Geller, did your husband know a man named Jerry Sacks?” he asked. “He was a deputy in the Sheriff’s Department.”

Beth peered at the photo, frowning as she slowly shook her head. “I can’t say I remember Adam ever mentioning him, but if he was one of his sources or knew him through his work, then he wouldn’t have.”
Pausing, she studied the photo more closely. “I recognize him from the news. Wasn’t he killed in a car accident a few months ago?” Her head shot up, as she glanced quickly from Veronica to Keith.

“Wait. Are you saying Adam’s death is connected to this deputy? I thought it was an accident …”

Keith replaced the photo and folded his hands together. “I was with Deputy Sacks when he was killed. Veronica’s friend pulled me out of his car, right before the white construction truck that hit us turned around and struck Jerry again.

“Last night, a truck matching the same description deliberately tried to run over Veronica.”

Beth looked at Veronica, horrified. “That was you?”

Veronica nodded. “Did you know your husband was working on a series of articles about urban redevelopment when he died? I checked out one of the project sites he was researching in San Francisco. It was very close to where he was killed … by a hit-and-run driver.

“I’m sorry to dredge this up for you again, but what can you tell us about what happened.”

A single tear slipped down the woman’s cheek, but she quickly swiped it away and raised her chin.

“He was there working on a story. He was only going to be gone overnight,” Beth said haltingly.

“The police said it was an accident, a drunk driver, probably some kid.”

“Why did they think that?” Keith asked.

“They found the vehicle that hit my husband abandoned and torched in some vacant lot in the city. The owner was an 89 year-old woman who’d driven the car to her weekly Bingo game. She reported it stolen from the church parking lot. There’d been several car thefts in the area, and police suspected kids.”

The glance between father and daughter did not go unnoticed by Beth.

“You think whoever did this stole a car from a place known for car thefts.” It was a statement, not a question.

“Do you know what he was researching? Why was he out walking so late at night?” Veronica asked.

A faint smile appeared on her lips. “He liked to walk. At all hours of the day, but especially at night, and especially when he was bothered by something.” The smile faded. “But I don’t know what specifically he was doing in San Francisco.”

“He didn’t talk to you about his work?” Keith asked.

She shrugged. “I know he was working on a series of stories for a magazine about redevelopment in urban areas, but he was a throw-back, an old-school journalist. He was protective of his work and didn’t like to talk about what he was working on until after it had been published.

“I hadn’t realized the extent to which he protected his files until after he died and I couldn’t open any of them. But I wasn’t surprised.”

Beth stood abruptly. “More coffee?” she asked, walking into the kitchen without waiting for a response. Several minutes later she returned, automatically refilling their cups. Veronica noticed a slight tremble in the woman’s hands and knew she was near her breaking point.
She and her father quickly got through the rest of their questions and stood to leave the widow to her fresh grief.

They managed to learn Adam Geller grew up in Dixon, a small farming community a couple hours east of San Francisco. The longtime journalist had a habit of shooting photos while researching his stories so he could refer to them as he was writing to extract details he might’ve missed. It explained all the images Mac found on his computer.

Before they made their goodbyes, Beth wrote down the name and phone number of Adam’s closest friend, Scott Havers, who owned the British pub next to Bittersweet.

As they were leaving, Keith turned to Beth. “Why did you come looking for me, Mrs. Geller? There are other private investigators in the book - how’d you come across my name?”

Startled, she frowned, as if trying to remember. “I found your card in Adam’s things. I think it was on his desk at his office. I-I assumed you’d met at some point. He was always going to community meetings, mixers, that sort of thing.”

Veronica pounced on her dad as soon as they were in the car. “You never said you met Adam Geller.”

Keith looked back at the Geller home and shook his head. “I didn’t. I think Sacks gave him my card.”

“She was from Dixon, too. I know because he was my deputy for over a decade, and we used to talk about home. Dixon is only a half hour away from Sacramento. There’s no way it’s a coincidence both Adam and Sacks grew up there.”

Veronica sat back, her hand still resting on the keys in the ignition. “Beth seemed pretty sure he didn’t know Sacks.”

“They knew each other, trust me. They’re the same age, and Dixon only has one high school. Maybe they weren’t drinking buddies. Maybe they were just casual acquaintances, but if Adam knew something incriminating, who do you think he’s going to go to? Someone he knows.”

She had to admit it made sense. Turning the ignition, she pulled away from the curb. “Okay, where to next, Pops?”

But Keith was already punching a number into his phone. He left a message for Scott Havers, then turned to his daughter. “Home, Jeeves.”

“Certainly, sir. You are looking a bit peaky,” she said in a British accent. Her tone was light, but she glanced worriedly at her father. “How’re you feeling, old man?”

Keith heaved a small sigh. “A little tired. Docs say it’ll be a while for me to get up to full-speed.”

“Full speed, Dad? Should you be working at all?”

The peal of his phone spared Keith from answering. It was Scott Havers returning his call. As she listened to the conversation, she began heading towards the warehouse district.

Ten minutes later, they were seated in a worn, wooden booth at The Eagle and Child. While they waited for Havers, Veronica absently ran her fingers over the scratched surface of the table where
patrons had etched their marks. A placard at the entrance proclaimed the pub had been in business for over twenty years, serving traditional English breakfasts in the morning and room temperature beer and ale in the evenings.

The Eagle and Child was in an old warehouse owned by the same cooperative that owned the building Bittersweet was in. From what Beth told Veronica and Keith, Havers was facing the same pressure from developers who wanted to raze the aging buildings and build a boutique hotel and shopping center.

Several minutes passed before Adam Geller’s best friend emerged from the kitchen. Scott Havers was wearing a white chef’s jacket, stained with brown gravy and tomato sauce, over a pair of jeans. His wavy, brown hair was held back in a ponytail, his brow peppered with grey. Veronica noted he wasn’t wearing a wedding band.

He greeted them politely, placing a dish of bread, cheese and English charcuterie on the table, motioning them to eat. Despite the hospitality, however, he soon made it clear he was only talking to them because Beth had asked him to.

“You know, I have to say, I think Beth is way off base here,” Havers said, sliding into the bench across from them. “Adam was a good man, and he loved Beth with all his heart. She and Eva were his whole world. He’d never risk that life for … “

“Mr. Havers, that’s not why we’re here,” Keith interrupted. Once again, father and daughter explained how they’d come to believe Adam Geller’s death might not have been an accident and how it was connected to Sack’s murder as well as the attempt on Veronica’s life the night before.

Scott stared at them, open-mouthed. “I was working last night. I heard the truck peeling down the street. I was the one who called the cops. That was you?”

“Did Adam ever mention a Sheriff’s deputy named Jerry Sacks?” Keith asked, showing him the photo.

He studied the photo, shaking his head. “No. Not that I can remember, but I’m pretty sure I’ve seen him before.”

“His photo was all over the news a few months ago,” Veronica suggested.

Scott frowned. “No, I don’t think that’s it. I don’t pay much attention to the news. Damn! I’m sorry, I just can’t remember right now.” He paused, looking first at Keith then Veronica. “If you’re right about this, and I’m not saying you are, does this mean Beth and Eva are in danger?”

“I don’t think so, Mr. Havers, but just to be on the safe side, I suggested she and her daughter get out of town for a while.”

Circling back to his friend, Veronica asked the pub owner how he knew Adam Geller.

“We all went to Cal together. We lost touch until about ten years ago when he and Beth moved to Neptune, and we ran into each other at some Chamber of Commerce ribbon-cutting. He was working the business beat for the local rag back then,” he told them, rubbing his chin, lost in his memories.

“Damn. I knew something was bothering him, but I figured he was just overworked. Afterwards, when Beth came to me asking if I knew anything about another woman … I didn’t want to encourage her snooping, so I denied knowing anything.”
Veronica leaned closer. “But you do know something.”

Scott nodded slowly. “He had a run in with a couple of shady-looking guys right out front,” he said, jerking his chin towards the street outside. “Adam was leaving when they got in his face about something, but they took off as soon as me and a couple of my line cooks came out.”

“What did they look like?” Veronica asked.

“I didn’t get a good look at them, but they were both tall and thin - but cut, like they spend a lot of time at the gym,” he replied. “One of them had dark hair, and the other one wore a cap.”

He paused, considering. “The thing is, I think they were cops. My dad worked the streets for 30 years, I grew up with cops. I know one when I see one.”

Keith looked the man thoughtfully. “Did Adam say what the beef was about?”

Scott shrugged. “I asked, but he wouldn’t talk about it, which made me think it had to do with work. Adam was notoriously closed-lipped about his stories.”

They thanked Scott Havers for the nibbles and information, shaking hands before they left. It was late afternoon by then, so Veronica steered the car towards home. They found Mac working at the dining table and Logan napping on the couch.

Quietly, the three investigators moved into the kitchen, where Veronica began heating Thanksgiving leftovers. She left Keith to assemble turkey sandwiches, while she made grilled cheese for Mac and filled the computer programmer in on what they’d learned from Beth and Scott.

“You know,” she said, flipping Mac’s sandwich onto a plate. “There’s rumors some of Lamb’s henchmen are going around beating up homeless people living in the abandoned buildings earmarked for redevelopment.”

Keith regarded her as he chewed his sandwich. “Sacks wanted to talk to me about some of our beloved sheriff’s shadier dealings, but we never got into specifics. He said he had something to show me. How do you know about these rumors, Veronica?”

“Logan told me.”

Mac and Keith look at her, surprise on their faces. “Logan was at sea half the year, and small business owners aren’t exactly in his social circle. How’d he hear about it?”

The kitchen door swung open and Logan walked in. “I know the pastry chef at Bittersweet, Marie O’Brien. She’s married to my squad mate,” he answered.

“Hey sleepyhead. How’re you feeling?”

“The headache’s mostly gone, although the rest of me is starting to feel some aches and pains.”

Veronica reached into the cupboard and got out the Tylenol, handing him two pills, which he took gratefully and without complaint. Between bites of his sandwich, he again explained what Marie O’Brien had told him at a going-away barbeque she threw for the squad before their last deployment.

Keith listened, nodding thoughtfully. “Could you introduce us to your friend’s wife? Maybe swing a meeting with her boss?”

“Sure,” Logan said, taking out his phone. “I’ll text Boots, but it might be a while before he gets back
to me. He’s probably still at the base.”

“Boots?” Mac asked.

“Guy’s got a shoe fetish.”

“Ahh.”

Keith, looking tired after the long night and busy afternoon, said goodnight and retired to his room after taking his medication.

After he left, Veronica turned to Logan, examining his head. He’d removed the bandage, revealing a two-inch gash on his right temple just above the eye, the pink skin sewn together with nine stitches. His right eyelid drooped slightly.

She dug through the bag of medical supplies the hospital had given her and set about applying a clean bandage. “That’s gonna leave a scar,” Veronica murmured, but Logan just shrugged.

While she was changing the bandage on his right arm, her gaze fell on a pale, jagged line extending above the stretched collar of her old t-shirt just below his collarbone. She ran her fingers over it lightly, frowning.

“Your work accident?” she asked as he nodded. “Don’t you have enough scars already, Logan?”

Before he could respond, Mac remarked almost absently, “Women are attracted to men with scars. Makes them look more rugged or something.”

Logan and Veronica exchanged amused glances before turning to Mac.

“What did I tell you about reading *Cosmo*?” Veronica teased. “That rag will rot your brain.”

“Says the woman who secretly devours tabloids.”


Realizing her mistake, Mac hurriedly tried to cover it up. “For your information, I read it in *Psychology Today*. Women find men with facial scars more appealing than men with unflawed skin, but only for casual hook-ups, not necessarily marriage material. Sorry, Logan.”

“I’ll cancel my subscription to *Martha Stewart Weddings*,” he deadpanned.

Mac pursed her lips, suppressing a smile. “Course now women will be throwing themselves at you,” she added, mischievously.

Logan responded with a rakish grin, prompting Veronica to roll her eyes.

“What else is new?” she muttered, smacking the bandage on his arm a tad too hard.

“Ow!” Logan glowered indignantly. “Your bedside manner needs work, Mars.” He stood, taking his plate to the sink and rinsing it off, before neatly stacking it in the dishwasher. “I should go. Thank your dad for me?”

Veronica paused, her brow furrowed as she studied him. “Are you sure? Maybe you should stay another night.”

He reached out, squeezing her arm in an effort to reassure her. “I’m fine, Veronica. Just a little
soreness. I’m sure it’ll be gone in a couple of days.”

“Well, I’ll give you a ride. You’re not supposed to be driving. Your car isn’t here, anyway.”

Mac hopped down from her perch on one of the kitchen stools. “I’ll be heading out, too, then. I’ll keep you posted on those files and whatever else I can find.”

“Thanks, Mac.”

Ten minutes later, they were walking up to the beach house. They were halfway up the path, when Veronica noticed the front door was ajar. Suddenly, a loud crash sounded from inside. Logan was racing through the doorway before she could protest.

Following close behind, she rounded the corner to see Dick standing outside the kitchen, a broken bottle at his bare feet, clad only in a pair of too-snug British flag briefs.

“Hey, Lo …” Dick slurred, his eyes widening with shock as he took in his friend’s bandaged face. “What the fuck happened to you?” His gaze flickered to Veronica, and he rolled his eyes. “Never mind … This has Veronica Mars written all over it.”

“Don’t move. There’s glass everywhere,” Logan said, retrieving a broom and dustpan from the kitchen.

He quickly swept up the broken glass, while Dick got another beer from the fridge. The towhead took a long swallow, then pointed to Veronica. “I told Logan when you blew into town, you’d bring trouble, and I was right. You owe me a thousand bucks, dude.”

“I’ll give you a thousand bucks if you put some clothes on,” Veronica sniped. “I’ll have nightmares for the rest of my life.”

“Hey, this is my house, Ronnie.” He flopped onto a dining chair, draping his arms over the back and spread his legs wide before flashing her a grin.

Veronica turned away, joining Logan in the kitchen where he was throwing out the glass shards. “You didn’t really bet a thousand dollars on me?” she asked him.

“Course not.” He poured a glass of wine and handed it to her, watching as she took a sip. “I know a bad bet when I see one.”

She threw the cork at him, and they laughed, staring at each other. For a single, insane moment, Veronica felt on the verge of laying open her heart and letting her feelings pour out. But a loud belch from the living area brought her crashing back to reality.

“Sorry. He always gets like this after spending a few days with his mom. He still calls her husband ‘the new guy’ and they’ve been married well over ten years. You can imagine what Thanksgiving must’ve been like.”

“So he gets drunk and walks around in his underwear?”

“Sometimes he skips the underwear.”

“Ew. On that note, I’m gonna skedaddle before he decides it’s too warm.” She fished in her purse for his bag of meds and repeated the doctor’s instructions.

“Got it. Thanks.”
He followed her into the living area, where they found Dick passed out face down on the table.

“We could just leave him there,” Veronica suggested, eyeing the slumbering man distastefully.

“We could.” Logan replied. “But Dick nursed me through much worse plenty of times, so I owe him.”

Together, they managed to get him to his feet and the three of them staggered down the hall to the bedroom. “No sampling the family goodies, Ronnie,” Dick slurred.

“Just the thought makes me want to hurl.”

They dropped him on his bed, and Logan pulled a blanket over him. As Logan started to close the door, Dick called out drunkenly. “Love you, bro.”

Logan chuckled. “Love you, too.”

Veronica wasn’t fast enough to wipe the startled look from her face. Logan simply shrugged. “What? I know Dick’s an … acquired taste, but he’s the closest thing to family I’ve got.”

He’d misunderstood her surprise. She’d realized long ago Dick was like a brother to Logan, and she had no doubt he’d put his life on the line for his BFF, even if Dick was an overgrown ape in designer duds. It came as no shock Logan loved Dick.

It was the blithe way the sentiment had been exchanged - in a drunken, sleep-addled stupor - much the way Logan had professed his love for her. Suddenly, it occurred to Veronica that he hadn’t meant it the way she’d assumed. Maybe Logan loved her the way an orphan cobbling together a makeshift family would love his oldest friend.

Now Veronica really did feel sick.

“Um, yeah,” she said, flashing a small smile. “Of course.”

He followed her out of the house, scanning up and down the quiet street as he gently led her by the elbow to her car. Satisfied the coast was clear, he stood by as she unlocked the driver’s side door and slid in. “Text me when you get home, okay?” he said, shutting the door.

She nodded, but registered her protest with a roll of her eyes. As Veronica drove away, she could see him in her rearview mirror, standing on the sidewalk watching her car fade from view.

Later, just as she was letting herself in the front door, her phone chirped. She knew it was Logan without even checking the screen.

You home?

Quickly, she texted him back.

Just got in.

Boots can set up meeting with wife and boss tomorrow. Noon OK?

Perfect. Pick you up 11:30.

She hit send, waiting a beat for his response. When none came, she quietly checked on her dad, who was snoring in his room. After washing up, she slid into bed, glancing again at her phone. She was debating whether to call him, when it suddenly buzzed in her hand.
“Did I wake you?”

His warm, low voice made her heartbeat quicken, and she shook her head even though she knew he couldn’t see her. “No,” she whispered, a smile in her voice as she curled up on her side. “What’s up?”

“... Nothing. Can’t sleep.”

Her smile faded at the hesitation in his voice, but she strove to keep her tone light. “You say ‘nothing’ but I definitely hear something.”

He sighed. “I never could hide anything from you. No matter how hard I tried.”

“So spill. What could’ve possibly happened in the last twenty minutes?”

“Nothing happened. I-I just got a call from ADA Yamamoto … Michelle.”

“What’d she say?”

“She wanted to schedule a deposition” he hedged.

“Logan …”

“... She told me the cops searched Cobb’s place and found a bunch of incriminating evidence - against me.”

“What?”

“Seems he planned to kill Carrie and frame me.”

“Oh my god.”

He gave a bitter laugh. “With my history, you think Lamb would’ve done any real investigating? It would’ve been an open-and-shut case. God Veronica … I could’ve lost everything.”

Veronica’s protest died on her lips as she visualized the tabloid headlines crucifying Logan, whose on-again-off-again love affair with Bonnie DeVille was fodder for the media. Not to mention the video of his violent outburst at the ‘09er that had gone viral barely a month ago.

“If you hadn’t … “ Logan’s voice shook, breaking into her thoughts. He let out a long breath, and this time when he laughed, there was a faint trace of mirth. “I guess it has been a charmed life.”

“I never would’ve believed it,” Veronica whispered fiercely. “And I never would’ve let Cobb get away with it.”

Logan was silent, and she thought he was brooding until he finally spoke in a voice so low she could barely make out the words. “Thank you, Veronica … it … means a lot to me. More than you can know.”

Once again she found herself smiling into the phone as if he could see her. “I got you off murder charges before. I could’ve beaten another rap,” she said, her teasing tone fueled with a bravado she didn’t necessarily feel, but she was determined to bring him out of his funk.

It worked.

Logan chuckled. “Not to diss your detecting skills, but I’m glad we didn’t have to put them to the
test.” He paused. “So … tell me about New York.”

“You want me to bore you into unconsciousness? ‘Cause let me tell you, some nights my work literally put me to sleep.”

“Is that really all you did in New York? Work?”

“No, of course not. First I studied. Then I worked.”

“Why am I not surprised?”

Still curled on her side, Veronica’s gaze fell on the Homecoming photo, which sat in a silver frame on a side table next to the sofa bed. Logan stared back at her with his trademark cocky grin, his youthful face still round with baby fat and his artfully tousled hair with those ridiculous frosted tips.

She smiled. “Because you know me.”

“Are you happy, Veronica?” he asked, his voice hushed. “Living back here in Neptune? You always used to hate this place.”

“Yeah,” she replied. “I am.”

Logan was quiet for a moment, and she thought she could hear him nodding. “Good. ‘Cause I’m really glad you’re back.”

“Me too.”

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It was shortly after dawn, the sun was just coming up over the eastern hills, and the salt air hung with the smell of mildly rotting seaweed. Except for a few surfers, they had the beach to themselves.

They sat side by side on an old plaid bed sheet, the remnants of their picnic scattered around them. She rested her head on his shoulder, and he slid an arm around her waist.

Together, they watched a tiny, black puppy with floppy ears and large paws scamper through the waves.

Veronica was jarred from a deep sleep by the blaring alarm on her phone. She shut it off with a groan. Two hours later, Keith and Veronica were winding down their interview with Catherine Baker, owner of Bittersweet, who confirmed everything Logan had already told them.

They were in the kitchen, and she was talking to them while icing a three-layer cake. Slowly turning the rotating cake stand, she dragged an offset spatula along the sides before topping it with an intricate chocolate flower.

“I wish I could tell you more, but I don’t know anything concrete,” Baker said. “I’ve only heard rumors and innuendo, which isn’t to say I don’t think they’re true. I just can’t prove any of it.”

She wiped her hands on her apron, and pushed a platter of breakfast pastries towards them. Keith reached for a scone, but Veronica refused politely, drifting back to the dining room as the restaurateur poured Keith a cup of coffee.

Logan was sitting at one of the tables, chatting amiably with an attractive Hispanic woman in her early 30s while they both filled sugar dispensers. He looked up as she entered the room, and introduced her to his squadmate’s wife, Marie.
The woman smiled warmly at Veronica even as she studied her curiously. She arched her brows questioningly at Logan.

“Veronica and I went to high school together. We’ve been friends for years,” he explained.

“Really? How is it we’ve never met?” Marie asked, shaking her hand.

“We lost touch,” Veronica supplied quickly. “I was living in New York until a couple months ago.”

Marie’s dark, intelligent eyes darted between them. “Does that mean you’re still single, Logan?”

“Marie …”

“... Our new hostess is just your type. She’s lovely, very sweet. Studying medicine at Hearst. She even models a little on the side to pay for school.”

“I don’t …”

“Please tell me you’re not still hung up on that Bonnie character,” Marie demanded.

_Seriously? A modeling med student?_ Veronica suppressed an eyeroll, and when her phone buzz she was grateful for the distraction. Until she glanced at the caller ID and saw who was calling.

It was Piz.

He’d texted her the day after the attempt on her life, but she hadn’t replied. Deciding to bite the bullet, she excused herself to take the call. They exchanged awkward pleasantries, and she quickly reassured him that she was unharmed despite the attack on her life.

“Yeah, I know. Wallace filled me in,” Piz said, and Veronica wondered if their friend had mentioned Logan. “I’m glad you weren’t hurt, but I’m actually calling for another reason … I’m gonna be in town for a few days, and I was wondering if we could meet.”

For the last couple of months, Piz had been a frequent guest on Pop Culture Happy Hour, an NPR podcast, to weigh in on the latest music releases. Now he and two of the regular hosts were going on tour, starting in L.A. in just a few days.

“I don’t know if I can make it down to L.A. right now …” Veronica began.

“I’ll be in Neptune to see Wallace.”

“Oh. Well, sure, how does lunch sound?”

After they hung up, Veronica decided to chat up the other business owners, but after hitting several storefronts, she still had nothing.

She’d just left the tea shop when she almost collided with a casually dressed man heading inside. With barely a glance, she apologized and began walking briskly back to Bittersweet.

“It’s Veronica, right?”

Startled, she turned back, studying him more closely. He was tall and good-looking with wavy blond hair and green eyes. A blue cotton t-shirt and faded jeans showed off a trim, well-muscled physique. He looked to be in his late 20s.

“Do I know you?” she asked, warily.
He grinned, rubbing the back of his head sheepishly. “I guess you don’t remember me. We had criminology with Landry freshman year. I’m pretty sure I tried asking you out, but you were dating Logan Echolls. Hard to compete with the son of a movie star.”

A vague memory of Logan sauntering over and placing a possessive arm around her waist niggled in her brain, but she couldn’t remember the guy.

“I’m Brett, by the way. Brett Smith,” he added hastily.

She hesitated slightly before taking his extended hand. His grip was cool and firm.

“Do you work here?” Veronica asked, scanning the lineup of specialty shops, cafes and galleries.

“Sort of. I work for a developer, but I live nearby.”

“Really? Which developer?”

“Trident. They’re pretty big throughout the state. I’m basically a glorified errand boy,” Brett said. “Everybody’s got to start somewhere, right?”

Sensing a potential source, Veronica tilted her head. Casually, she commented on the all the construction and new businesses opening.

“Tell me about it. I moved here ‘cause rent was cheap. Now it’s doubled. But the tradeoff is having cool restaurants and bars within walking distance.”

“No need for Uber,” Veronica commented.

“Exactly.” Brett grinned. He paused, glancing away. “I should get back to work … Listen, I know this might sound crazy, but my company is having this big reception at the Neptune Grand this weekend. You wouldn’t want to go, by any chance?”

Veronica was torn. She didn’t want to lead the guy on, but an opportunity to mingle with Trident big wigs and maybe score some dirt was too tempting to resist. Then Brett made the decision easier.

“No pressure. We won’t even call it a date. You can let me know in a day or two, and if it’s cool, we’ll just meet there, okay?”

Slowly, Veronica nodded. “Yeah, okay. I’d like that.” They exchanged numbers and parted ways.

Logan threw her a look of relief when she strolled back into the restaurant. Keith had joined him in the dining room, where he was listening intently to an animated Marie, amusement on his face.

“Where have you been?” Logan hissed under his breath.

“Just talking to some locals,” she said. “What’s up?”

“I was telling your dad how Logan got his call sign,” Marie said.

“Really? Do tell …”

“… Maybe some other time. We gotta go. I have that depo with the ADA, remember?” Logan said, sternly.

They had just dropped Logan off at Michelle’s office, when Keith’s phone rang. He mouthed Scott Havers’ name when Veronica looked over, then listened to Adam Geller’s best friend for several
minutes. He thanked the man, then hung up.

“Scott remembered something. It was a while back. He was taking out some trash, and he noticed two guys talking behind the building looking kind of suspicious.”

“Sacks?”

Keith shook his head. “Lamb,” he said, grimly.

“So? He was Sacks’ boss.”

“He wasn’t talking to Sacks. It was some guy in a suit. Scott doesn’t know who. He saw Sacks having a smoke around the other side of the building.”

“Sacks didn’t smoke,” Veronica said.

“Nope. But his phone was out, and Scott said he appeared to be taking photos.”

**********

Veronica stared at the desktop computer screen, scanning through a series of photos Mac had encrypted from Adam Geller’s flash drive. So far, they’d found dozens of images featuring Lamb in clandestine, back alley meetings with a tall man in a black leather jacket. Some of the pictures clearly showed Lamb accepting a thick envelope, and others had off-duty cops rousting the homeless from their squats.

But they’d yet to find photo clear enough to identify the mystery man.

She sat back, rubbing her eyes with a sigh. Leaning forward, she forced herself to finish this last batch of photos. She was meeting Logan for drinks that night and wanted to close the office a little early.

“I hear Piz is in town.” Mac walked into Veronica’s office and placed a travel carrier with two coffee cups on the desk, handing one to her friend. Taking a seat across from the detective, she took a sip from her own cup.

Veronica prised open her lid, adding cream and sugar. “Your boyfriend tell you that?” she asked casually.

“They’re planning a boys’ night out …” Suddenly realizing the implication of her words, Mac pursed her lips. “Damn it, Veronica. How …?”

“Years of training. Keen observational skills. Finely honed, deductive … Okay fine. It was Logan.”

“Logan knows?”

“He’s the one who figured it out. The only mystery is why you and Wallace have been hiding it for so long.”

Mac groaned. “I don’t know. It was an accident …”

“An … accident?” Veronica’s brows rose, but when Mac shot her a glare, she hurried to add, “No judgment.”

“It was … unexpected. Right before your dad got hit, we went to see a band, had a few drinks and commiserated over our non-existent love lives. And then, it just sort of happened. I-I didn’t even
know I liked Wallace that way.”

Veronica jabbed the air with a wooden stirring stick. “Actually, I seem to recall you saying he was cute …”

Ignoring her friend, Mac continued. “The next day, we decided it would be a one-time thing. That’s why we never said anything.”

“And you just kept falling into bed?”

Mac’s eyes narrowed again, and Veronica stifled a grin. “You came home, and Wallace and I ended up hanging out a lot …”

“…Oh, so it’s my fault you’ve been sleeping with my best friend?”

“No. We decided to keep quiet about it because everything so was crazy, and you know, it was just a momentary thing. And then … it wasn’t,” Mac finished with a hapless shrug.

Veronica sipped her coffee, considering. “That night Logan and I ran into you at Bittersweet …?”

“It was supposed to be our first date.”

“It still could’ve been, if you’d come clean and joined us.”

“You’d just broken up with Piz, remember? Wallace was convinced it was all Logan’s fault so I did you a favor and texted him to stay away,” Mac retorted. “I swear you two have been friends too long. He had the bright idea to spy on you and Logan.”

Damn, Logan was right, Veronica thought. Out loud, she said, “You and Wallace, huh? Very cool.”

Mac flushed, but grinned into her cup. “We’re thinking about, maybe, moving in together.” She raised her head, a worried look on her face. “Do you think it’s too soon?”

Veronica waved her hand dismissively, but just then, her phone chirped and she glanced at the screen. “Piz,” she said, by way of explanation.

“You gonna see him?”

“I’m meeting with him later.”

“Any chance you two … ” Mac’s voice trailed off, but the implication was clear.

Veronica shook her head. “No,” she said firmly. “We’re better off as friends.”

Mac gathered their empty cups, tossing them in the trash as a soft knock sounded. The women turned to see Logan standing in the doorway of Veronica’s office.

“Hi,” Veronica said, smiling as she stood to greet him. “Did I know you were stopping by?”

Logan avoided her gaze, staring down instead at an envelope in his hand. “Marie gave me a couple tickets to this tasting event at Bittersweet Saturday night.” He paused, proffering the envelope almost reluctantly. “I can’t go, but I thought you or Mac might want them.”

“Oh,” Veronica and Mac exchanged curious glances. “Um, I - I have a … thing I have to go to Saturday.”
Logan’s eyebrow quirked, and something flickered across his face. “How ‘bout you, Mac?”

The computer programmer grinned and took the tickets. “Thanks, Logan. I’ve been wanting to go back there.”

He nodded, flashing her a quick smile as she left the room, then he turned to Veronica. “Something’s come up, and I have to cancel drinks tonight. Raincheck?”

Veronica struggled to keep her face passive. “Sure. Anytime.”

“I’ll let you get back to work,” he said, turning to leave.

“Wait.” Veronica started towards him. “Are you alright? Did the depo go okay?”

Meeting her eyes for the first time, Logan smiled reassuringly. “I’m fine. I’m even off Tylenol. The depo sucked, but … it felt good not to be in the defendant’s chair for once.”

She smiled, but before she could add anything else, he started for the door. “I should go. I’ll call you, okay?”

And with that, Logan was gone.

Standing at the window, she watched him slide into his midnight blue convertible and check the side mirror before pulling onto the road and driving away.

For a moment, she’d thought Logan was asking her out, or at least inviting her to go with him to the tasting. Setting aside her disappointment, she puzzled over his standoffish demeanor.

“Well, that was … awkward.” Mac’s voice broke into her brooding. “It was like a how-not-to video on getting together with the love of your life. Finally. After nearly a decade apart.”

Turning from the window, she looked inquiringly at Mac. “So, are you and Wallace gonna keep sneaking around after you move in together?”

**********

Veronica surveyed the lobby of the Neptune Grand and nervously rechecked her phone. She was meeting Piz for lunch, and he was late.

An elevator dinged, and she turned her head to the bank of lifts. A woman in a light wool suit, Jimmy Choo stilettos and diamonds at her ears and on her fingers, strode out. Her chestnut curls bounced on her shoulders, her finely tailored clothes clinging to curves and a body honed by a personal trainer, intensive Pilates and extreme dieting.

There was something vaguely familiar about her, but before Veronica could place the woman, her gaze fell on the man leaving the elevator with her. Their eyes met across the lobby, and Veronica found herself staring, open-mouthed at Logan Echolls.

She watched the woman turn to say something just as she heard a voice calling her name. Groaning inwardly, she steeled herself as Piz jogged over.

They hugged quickly, awkwardly, and when Piz straightened he was peering past her.

“Is that Logan … with Petra Landros?”

*Of course.* She and Lilly spent hours poring over expensive lingerie catalogs, and Petra Landros had
been all over them, flaunting her voluptuous body in barely-there silk and lace. Then, at the height of her career, she’d married a hotel tycoon, taking over his business interests when he’d met an untimely death on the ski slopes.

Now, the sultry, former underwear model leaned forward and pecked Logan on the cheek before bidding him goodbye.

“She’s hot, but kinda long in the tooth for him. She’s old enough to be his mother,” Piz said.

Logan started towards them, and Veronica forced herself to unclench her jaw.

Folding her arms, she tilted her head at him. “Did you forget?” she asked by way of greeting. Logan faltered, clearly puzzled. “You don’t live here anymore.”

His mouth twisted into a wry smile, shrugging as he cast his gaze around the cream colored walls and marble floors. “Just reliving fond memories.”


They looked at him, and Veronica cleared her throat. “You two remember each other, right? Piz is in town for work.”

“So how do you know Petra Landros?” he asked.

Logan glanced away, looking uncomfortable. “I don’t … not really. She’s planning some sort of Fourth of July shindig and wants me to be a part of it.”

“It’s not even Christmas,” Piz said dubiously.

Logan’s eyes narrowed, and Veronica quickly interjected. “She owns the Neptune Grand. That ‘shindig’ is a huge community event that raises thousands for childhood cancer research. Are you going to do it?”

“Nope.” He shrugged. “I put her in touch with the Navy Public Affairs Office.”

A phone trilled, and Piz hunted in his pocket before pulling it out. He walked away to take the call, leaving Veronica and Logan alone.

“So is that all Petra wanted?”

Logan’s head jerked up, and he fixed her with a hard stare. “What are you asking me, Veronica?”

She shrugged. “I can see why you cancelled drinks.” Instantly, she regretted her words. Something about Logan brought out her worst jealous tendencies.

Anger flashed in his eyes, but he just pressed his lips together. “I’m not the one with a big date on Saturday.”

“How …? It’s not a …”

But he waved away her protest with a flick of his hand. “I don’t give a shit who you go out with. Petra Landros and my mom were old friends. That’s why I agreed to see her.”

He glanced at Piz, who had finished his call, and turned back to Veronica. “Have fun on your date.”

“Logan …”
But he was already walking away.

Veronica forced herself to smile and keep up her end of the conversation during lunch with Piz. He was his usual amiable self, and didn’t seem to harbor any lasting ill will towards her. He’d even been gracious enough to pack a suitcase full of her things and bring it with him.

She apologized again for the way things had ended, and he’d looked at her for a long time before nodding and changing the subject.

They parted ways on good terms, and she promised to clear out the rest of her belongings as soon as she could.

She returned to the office, but after hours of getting nowhere, she closed up early. Later that night, lying in bed, she took out her phone and sent a quick text.

*I’m sorry.*

Three minutes ticked by before Logan texted back.

*Me too. Must be world record.*

Brow furrowed in puzzlement, she hit the call button.

“What’s a world record?” she asked without saying hello.

“Three months before our first fight.” They laughed together, and Veronica felt the day’s tension easing away.

“About Saturday,” Logan began.

“It’s not a date,” she interjected.

“That’s not … You still have a target on your back. Promise me you’ll be careful.”

She paused, sighing softly. “I promise.”

**********

Veronica pulled up in front of the Neptune Grand and handed the keys to her new silver RAV4 to the valet. Tightening the cranberry shawl she’d thrown over the black lace cocktail dress, she pushed through the enormous revolving door and strode into the lobby, her heels clicking on the stone floor.

She made her way to the Grand Ballroom, faltering when she saw the blond woman in a skintight green dress sitting at the check-in table.

“Name?” asked the devil otherwise known as Madison Sinclair.

“Veronica Mars,” she replied, sweetly.

“No way. You look so … different. I barely recognize you.”

Veronica rolled her eyes, as Madison pretended to scan the guest list. “Sorry. Your name isn’t here. Check with the concierge. Maybe he has another job for you.”

“Pretty friendly with him, are you?”
Suddenly, a warm hand clasped her elbow and she looked up to see Brett.

“She’s with me,” he said, tapping the name tag pinned to his dark grey suit and steering her into the ballroom.

Before disappearing through the doors, Veronica caught a glimpse of Madison, staring intently at their retreating backs, a look of alarmed surprise on her face.

“Do you know her?” Veronica asked Brett, as he grabbed two champagne glasses from a passing waiter and handed one to her.

“Uh, yeah. I think she’s some low-level flack in our PR department. Why?”

She just shook her head and flashed him a smile. “So, tell me again what you do at Trident.”

An hour later, she was standing at one of the high, circular tables, nursing a soda. Brett had been called away to deal with set-up for a video presentation, so she was passing time scanning the crowd for a Trident heavyweight to interrogate … discreetly.

A large stage had been constructed under the ballroom mezzanine between two curving staircases. A live band was playing a safe mix of eighties, nineties and top 40 hits.

“Veronica Mars. I heard you were back in town.”

“Weevil.” Veronica gasped, giving Eli Navarro a hug. “What are you doing here?”

“My cousin’s in the band,” he said, jerking his chin towards the stage. “His van broke down, so I gave them a ride. Why are you here?”

“Working a case.”

“So the rumors are true.”

“Well, just some of them. How are you? What have you been doing?”

Weevil had left the motorcycle gang and his old life of crime behind, and for the last several years, he’d been the proud owner of a small, but successful, auto repair shop. But perhaps most surprising was the news that he’d married and was the father of a lively four year-old girl.

“Isn’t she beautiful?” he gushed, scrolling through several photos of his family.

They spent several minutes catching up, before Veronica spotted another familiar face at the bar. It’s like I never skipped the reunion, she thought.

Dick was leaning against the bar, a glass tumbler half-filled with an amber liquid. He scowled at her as she approached.

“Does Logan know you’re here, trying to snare another unsuspecting, rich fool?”

Veronica pursed her lips. “It’s not what it looks like.”

“Yeah, right,” he said, pointedly looking her up and down. “Logan can’t say I didn’t warn him.”

“What are you doing here, Dick? Corporate parties aren’t exactly your scene. Everyone here has a job.”
“If they do, it’s because of me - or people like me. I’m thinking of becoming an investor.”

Veronica’s interest was immediately piqued. “Do you know the other investors?”

“Sure. So do you. Didn’t your boyfriend tell you?” Dick rattled off several Neptune High alumni she remembered. One or two had also gone to Hearst, but they’d all been Tritons, members of the secret society Veronica had discovered junior year.

Suddenly she remembered Logan’s $20,000 spending spree. She frowned. “Did Logan give Trident money?”

Dick looked momentarily confused. “Logan? Nah. He never liked those guys.” He knocked back the last of his drink, plunked his glass on the bar and walked away.

Veronica knew from the background Mac dug up that the Anderson family started Trident Development in San Francisco more than 40 years ago. The company eventually expanded into Southern California, and although it still had an office in the Embarcadero, its headquarters were now in Neptune. It wasn’t a stretch to think local millionaires - and their sons - would look to expand their wealth by tossing money at a lucrative development company.

But if Logan knew the investors were old classmates, why hadn’t he mentioned it?

She was still puzzling over the pieces a half hour later, only half-listening to her date and his colleagues discussing Neptune’s chances of scoring a professional baseball franchise. Brett had introduced her to a couple of his fraternity pals who’d all gotten jobs with Trident right after graduating from Hearst, while he’d spent a few years traveling and working odd jobs here and there.

“Our head honcho is Hearst alum,” one of them said.

Veronica drifted away, idly milling through the crowd. Aside from the information she’d gotten from Dick, the night had been a wash. She would stay through the presentation then make her excuses.

Movement on the staircase to her right caught her attention. She looked up to see a tall, thin man in a black leather jacket whispering in the ear someone Veronica recognized as a Trident vice president.

She watched as the suit issued a directive before turning to go back down the stairs, while Leather Jacket stood at the mezzanine rail, scanning the room from above. Quickly, she turned away, nearly colliding into Madison.

“Logan’s looking mighty fine these days. Those tabloid photos don’t do him justice.”

Ignoring the catty sneer, Veronica tried to sidestep Madison, but the woman blocked her path.

“We had a lot of fun at the reunion, strolling down Memory Lane, or didn’t he tell you?”

Madison’s implication was clear, but this time Veronica wasn’t going to rise to the bait. It was a blatant lie, and she knew it.

Veronica shoved past Madison. All she needed was a few pics of Leather Jacket, maybe even a name to go with them, and she was out of there.

Glancing over, she saw Brett and Leather Jacket heading purposefully toward the stage. They were joined by burly man with dark hair and a mole in the corner of his eye - the same guy she and Logan had seen at the construction site in San Francisco.
But it was the person directly in their path that stopped Veronica cold. She stared, hoping it was a trick of the light, but she knew she hadn’t made a mistake even before he turned his head.

“Logan!” Her cry of warning fell on deaf ears in the packed ballroom. Veronica started toward them, but once again Madison blocked her way.

“You are still a total loser with no class . . .”

“...I’d stop there.” Veronica’s steely tone issued a clear threat even she looked past Madison.

A throng had begun gathering by the stage, and she’d momentarily lost sight of Logan. She spotted him again just as Leather Jacket grasped his arm, the glint of metal sending a chill through her heart. She tried to follow, but Madison made a grab for her.

Enraged, Veronica turned and swung, her clenched fist striking Madison’s cheek with a satisfying thud.

“Fuck off, bitch!”

Veronica rushed forward, leaving Madison clutching her face and whimpering. Frantic, she tried pushing through the crowd. She couldn’t see Logan or Leather Jacket. She heard someone call her name and turned to see Dick, trailed closely by Wallace, Mac and Piz.

“Logan’s looking for you…” he began urgently.

“Never mind. He’s in trouble. A guy in a black leather jacket’s got him.” She pointed in the direction she’d last seen them. Dick had a better vantage point and began shouldering his way across the ballroom with Wallace and Piz in tow.

“What do we do?” Mac asked her.

Veronica looked around, trying to find a faster route, when her eyes rested on a fire sprinkler that had been installed under the staircase. It was just low enough for her to reach, if she stood on one of the conveniently placed lounge chairs.

“Get to an exit,” Veronica replied.

Grabbing a lighter off one of the tables, she stepped onto a chair and reached up, flicking the striker.

Seconds later, water rained down on the ballroom, startling guests who began screaming and shoving their way to the doors. Amid the mayhem, Veronica spied Logan, flanked by Brett and Leather Jacket, who had stopped and were looking around in surprise.

Taking advantage of their momentary confusion, Dick quickly caught up and, grabbing Leather Jacket’s shoulder, took a swing at him. Logan drove a hard elbow into Brett’s ribs, knocking him out with a fist to the face as more henchmen appeared.

Soon Wallace and Piz were throwing punches, and moments later, Weevil joined the fray.

One by one, Veronica’s motley squad took down the Trident goons.

They each sported numerous cuts and bruises. They were drenched, their clothes clinging to their bodies as if they’d competed in a male wet t-shirt contest.

Logan swiped a hand across his bloody nose and looked up at Veronica. Their eyes met across the room, and they exchanged small, knowing smiles.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Veronica surveyed the water damaged ballroom from her perch on the mezzanine. Shattered glass and broken furniture littered the floor alongside sodden clothing and purses. Wallace stood next to her, wrapped in a hotel towel as Mac handed him a cup of something hot.

“Wow. It really is Hellmouth,” a bemused Piz commented from behind a towel cocoon.

Logan and Dick were downstairs, huddled on chairs, giving their statements to the cops. A few Trident lackeys were holed up in another corner with more Sheriff’s deputies, no doubt trying to spin a version of events that didn’t land them in jail for attempted kidnapping.

Although her friends faced assault charges, she doubted anything would come of it given the circumstances leading up to the brawl, and she was fairly certain Trident wouldn’t be pressing the issue.

Veronica draped her arms across Wallace and Mac’s shoulders. “Is this how our reunion went down?”

Wallace’s face broke into a broad grin. “Nah. You weren’t there, Vee.”

They went downstairs, joining Logan and Dick as they watched Brett hobble onto a stretcher, both eyes blackened and face mottled with ugly bruises centering around his bloodied nose.

“Looks like you beat up Veronica’s date pretty good,” Dick chuckled.

“There’s a shocker,” Piz muttered.

“It wasn’t a date,” Veronica and Logan said in unison, and she didn’t need to look at him to know he was smirking.

“Thanks for jumping in, Piz,” he said in all sincerity.

Taken aback at first, Piz semi-saluted. “Oh sure. That’s what men do, right?”

Later, Veronica and Logan sat side by side on bar stools. “So how ..?” she began.

“Dick texted me. Said he saw you with his old frat buddy - another ‘rich dude’ whose uncle owned Trident Development. Didn’t really sound like Piz.”

Everything clicked together. The look on Madison’s face when Brett - her boss’ nephew - swept Veronica into the ballroom. Dick had been referring to Brett, not Logan, when he talked about her boyfriend knowing Trident investors.

Veronica paled. “He told me he was an errand boy.”

“When I couldn’t reach you, I called the cavalry,” he said, nodding at her friends. “They brought Piz. I don’t know how Weevil got mixed up in this.”

“He was already here.”
Logan fell silent. He turned to her, his expression grave. “I’m sorry about the other day … I was a jackass. You tried to tell me …”

“It was my fault.”

He glanced down, frowning as his gaze fell on her bruised and swollen knuckles. “What the hell happened to your hand?” he demanded. But his touch was surprisingly gentle, when he picked it up to examine.

“Oh. Nothing. I punched Madison Sinclair.”

Eyebrows shot up. “Why?”

“Sexual jealousy would be my guess,” Dick piped in, reappearing to help himself to bottled water then sauntering away again under Veronica’s scathing glare.

Logan stood and walked behind the bar, searching until he found some ice which he wrapped in a towel and placed carefully on Veronica’s hand. “So what did Madison do this time?”

Veronica’s chin lifted. “She got in my way … But it was a long time coming.”

**********

Veronica sighed in frustration, pulling a green dress over her head and reaching for a pair of jeans. She was supposed to have dinner at Logan’s and she’d been getting dressed for half an hour. The last time she’d tried on so many outfits, she was sixteen and headed to Fleet Week with her best friend.

*If you could only see me now, Lilly.*

She slipped on a pale pink blouse and fastened her necklace, freeing her hair from its ponytail. She kissed her dad goodbye and left him heating leftover meatloaf.

“Hey, wait! What time are you gonna be home?” he called after her.

“Don’t wait up.”

“Who are you going out with again?”

“Good night, Dad.”

Dick’s silver Mercedes SUV skidded to a halt beside Veronica as she walked up the driveway to the beach house. “Condoms are in the cookie jar, Ronnie!” he leered, waggling his eyebrows before speeding off down the street.

Logan was in the kitchen taking a pizza out of the oven with a large metal peel. He slid it onto a wire rack to cool on the counter.

“In New York you can get those things delivered in cardboard boxes. Already cooked,” Veronica said, dropping her purse on the entryway table.

“Big city folks and their harebrained ideas.”

Grinning, she opened the fridge and took out a beer. “You should fire your real estate agent,” she said, leaning against the kitchen island.
“What?” Logan asked, his brow furrowed in confusion.

“It’s been months, and you’re still living with Dick in a room with no door.”

He concentrated on spreading a layer of mozzarella evenly over another pizza. “Um, yeah, I’ll think about it. Can you slice some mushrooms?”

Over dinner, Veronica updated him on the week’s developments. Since the Neptune Grand debacle, several low-level Trident Development employees, including Leather Jacket and Mole Guy, were behind bars facing serious prison time, but had yet to talk. Michelle had assured Keith and Veronica they’d likely rollover on their bosses in exchange for a lighter sentence.

Meanwhile, the DA’s office was trying to put together a case against Sheriff Dan Lamb. Adam Geller’s photos provided a sketch of the corrupt lawman’s activities, but not enough hard evidence to convict him. They couldn’t prove there was money in the envelope, so a team of investigators - including Veronica and Keith - were piecing together a paper trail.

“We had it backwards,” Veronica said. “Sacks was the one passing incriminating files to Adam.”

If by some miracle Lamb escaped criminal charges, he was likely going to lose his job. Marcia Langdon, a Neptune native who’d risen steadily within the U.S. Army’s Criminal Investigation Command during her 30 year career, had just announced her intent to run for Sheriff.

“A fascist bully versus a strong, female leader. Should be an easy win for her,” Veronica said.

“Never underestimate the stupidity of voters.”

Logan was elbow deep in soapy water, when a phone began to trill from the direction of his bedroom. “Can you grab that for me?” he asked her.

She found his phone lying on the sill of the interior window behind his bed. As she reached over, her gaze fell on a piece of paper on the floor, half hidden beneath the bed. She picked it up, briefly noting the Neptune Memorial logo on the letterhead before placing it on the table next to his laptop.

She started back for the kitchen, sweeping away the curtain that served as a makeshift door, then abruptly came to a halt. Spinning on her heel, she grabbed the letter and scanned it hurriedly, her heart pounding.

It was a final statement from the hospital showing the $20,500 bill for patient Keith Mars had been paid in full. When she checked the dates, she saw the payments began two days after her father’s accident, long before she and Logan were even speaking again.

I’m always here, if you need me.

Tears burned her eyes. His generosity was unfailing even after years of silence, and the enormity of what Logan had done for her hit Veronica full force.

He was in the kitchen, head bent studying the DVDs she’d brought.

“Frozen, Veronica? Are you nine?” He glanced up, his smirk fading the moment he saw her face. “What’s wrong?”

Wordlessly, she gave a vague shake of her head, her eyes imploring. He rounded the kitchen island, cautiously moving toward her. “Jesus, Veronica. You’re scaring me.”
“...I love you,” she blurted.

He stared in mute shock - awe, disbelief, confusion flickering across his face. She quickly closed the distance between them, not giving him a chance to speak. Reaching up, Veronica grasped the nape of his neck, pulling him to her, and this time he didn’t hesitate.

Logan kissed her with a fervent urgency that matched her own nine years of longing. His hands were on her waist, dragging her against him and effortlessly lifting her so she could wrap her legs around his torso.

The room spun, and Veronica realized it was Logan, turning them in the romantic way that always made her feel as if she was being swept off her feet. He steered them to the nearest, available hard surface - the kitchen island - and when he pulled away, a question in his eyes, she answered by tearing at his shirt.

Veronica barely registered the buttons clattering on the floor as she lost herself in the exhilarating joy of being with Logan at last.

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Sunlight shone in Veronica’s eyes, and she stirred, trying to escape the bright rays as she slowly remembered where she was.

They’d managed to make their way to Logan’s bed - eventually - where they’d fallen asleep, her head pillowed on his shoulder. Sometime in the wee hours of the morning, he’d reached for her again, only this time, it was slow and tender.

“God you’re beautiful,” Logan had whispered, gazing at her with such adoration, her eyes welled with tears.

The memory brought a blissful smile to Veronica’s lips, and she turned to face Logan only to find an empty space.

He was gone.

She sat up, checking her phone. It was even 7 o’clock. She looked around and saw the clothes they’d flung off in the kitchen folded neatly on a nearby chair.

Grabbing his shirt, she tugged it on over her panties, buttoning it as best she could, and went in search of him. She looked past the entryway into the kitchen, then warily made her way into the living room, but the little house was empty.

She walked onto the back patio, scanning the beach, but couldn’t make out any familiar figures. She was debating her next move, when she thought she heard the front door open.

“Logan?” she asked, going back inside, hurrying through the living area.

Veronica peered around the corner, relieved to see Logan, not Dick, stride into the kitchen and place a white paper bag on the counter. He was wearing a grey Navy t-shirt and running shorts, and he was listening to an old iPod mini clipped to his collar.

*I’m a shot through the dark, I’m a black sinkhole. If it weren’t for second chances, we’d all be alone.*

Logan was humming when she entered the kitchen.
“Hey,” she said, feeling suddenly tentative and awkward.

Startled, he looked up, pulling out his earbuds. “Hey,” he said, apologetically. “Sorry, I thought I’d be back before you woke up. I couldn’t sleep, so I got us breakfast.”

“And went for a run. What time do you wake up, anyway?”

Logan shrugged. “Five, maybe five-thirty.”

“Who are you, and what have you done with Logan Echolls?”

He grinned and started to make a pot of coffee. “You’d be surprised how strongly the Armed Services feels about punctuality.”

She sat on a stool and watched curiously as he took several pastries out of the bag, arranging them on a plate before chopping fruit. He was surprisingly domestic, but then again, they’d never really done the Morning After thing. When they were at Hearst, she’d usually slip out during the night to make curfew, and even when she had slept over, she was always in a hurry to get to class.

A mug of hot coffee appeared in front of her, and she accepted it gratefully, blowing on the hot liquid before taking a cautious sip. It was exactly the way she liked it - strong and rich with just enough cream and sugar to temper the bitterness.

“You okay?” he asked.

She nodded, looking up as she searched his face. “Are you? I mean … about last night?”

Logan let out a breath. “Honestly? I’m … confused.”

“Oh.” Veronica’s throat tightened. Her face felt suddenly flushed as she fought an overwhelming urge to flee. Avoiding his gaze, she lifted a shoulder defensively.

“Look, there’s no pressure, okay? It doesn’t have to be a big deal. Just one of those … momentary things,” she managed to choke out.

Logan reached over and gently caressed her cheek, tilting her face up until she met his eyes.

“I love you, Veronica.” His quiet declaration was firm and clear. “I’m not confused about that.”

She squeaked out a watery “oh” and offered a sheepish smile. Logan grinned back, leaning his forehead against hers. He started to kiss her, but she pulled away.

“Then what are you confused about?”

Reluctantly, Logan expelled a long breath. He stepped back, letting his hands rest on her hips. “I wasn’t eavesdropping … but I overheard you telling Mac we were better off as friends. You seemed pretty certain.” He studied her face. “So what changed?”

Veronica frowned, trying to remember the conversation. “Nothing,” she said, shaking her head. “I was talking about me and Piz.”

“Oh.”

They both laughed as Veronica wound her arms around his neck, nuzzling his nose. “So … I guess we’re really doing this.”
“Hell, yeah,” he whispered back.

His head dipped, and their mouths met. The kiss was soft and sweet at first, but it quickly became more urgent. Logan slipped his hand under her shirt.

“Dude, you lose some buttons?” a voice called from the entryway.

They broke apart just as Dick bopped into the kitchen. Logan’s longtime companion nodded at them as he strode to the coffeemaker and poured himself a cup. Turning around, his eyes lit up at the sight of the pastries on the counter, and he eagerly grabbed a chocolate croissant.

“What? No snide comment, rude innuendo?” Veronica finally asked as Logan kissed the top of her head.

Dick shrugged, taking another bite of the croissant. “Foregone conclusion.”

**********

Logan had to work, so after a lingering goodbye kiss on the driveway, he promised to drop by her place for dinner after his shift was over.

Veronica thanked her lucky stars Keith wasn’t awake when she crept home. She showered and changed before settling on the couch in her room to work on a few reports. A couple hours later, she was fast asleep.

It was well past noon when she woke up, hungry and bleary-eyed. She ventured into the kitchen, where Keith was chopping vegetables.

“Logan’s coming over. Please be nice,” she said, reaching into the fridge for a bottle of water.

He didn’t even glance up. “I’m not going to ask where you were all night.”

Veronica took a deep breath, bracing for a lecture as she turned to face her dad. “I was with Logan.”

“I know,” Keith said, putting down his knife and giving her a hairy eyeball. “Hence, I didn’t need to ask.”

She smiled, rolling her eyes. Stealing a cherry tomato, she started making herself a sandwich. Keith glanced over as he resumed slicing zucchini.

“I take it you and Logan are going steady again?”

“Going steady?” Veronica clasped her hands close to her chest. “He’s taking me to the sock hop tonight. Maybe he’ll ask me to be his girl at the soda fountain.”

“So that’s a yes.”

Veronica grew serious, nodding slowly. There were a hundred things she could say to defend her relationship with Logan. Nine years had passed, and they’d both grown up. He was a different person, and so was she. Nine years had passed, and nothing between them changed.

But in the end, only one thing mattered.

“I love him, Dad.”

Keith’s smile was wistful as he leaned forward to stroke his daughter’s cheek. “I know, sweetheart.”
He resumed chopping, then began spooning dollops of marinara sauce into a large, glass casserole dish. “I hope Logan likes lasagna.”

Keith had a late afternoon physical therapy appointment, so after he finished assembling dinner, he covered the dish with foil and left it on the counter with strict instructions to bake at 375 for until the cheese was brown and bubbly.

“I need to talk to Cliff about something. Can you drop me off at his place? Michelle can give me a lift home,” he said, leaning on his cane.

Veronica paused. “Uh, sure. What’s up?”

“Just a bit of housekeeping.”

She sighed. “Yeah … I think there’s something you need to know.”

**********

Veronica was finishing up her last report, when she saw Logan’s sleek convertible pull up in front of the house. Smiling, she shut the laptop and opened the door just as he was walking up the porch steps.

“Hey there, sailor,” she cooed, giving him her best come-hither smile.

He grinned, crossing the porch in a single stride and sweeping her into a heady kiss. “I’ve been thinking about doing that all day,” he murmured when they broke apart.

She led him inside, where they kissed in the foyer until a timer went off. Logan followed her into the kitchen, watching as she took out the casserole dish and left it to cool on the counter.

“Something smells good,” he said, coming up behind her and circling her waist.

“My dad made lasagna,” she said, turning in his arms. She looked at him apologetically. “I forgot it’s our daddy/daughter dinner night.”

Logan nodded, brushing hair from her face, his thumb gently caressing her cheek. “Are we going public already?”

“Well, I won’t alert my publicist, if you don’t call the Tattler, but I’m pretty sure Dick outed us on Twitter.”

“I meant, does your dad need to know just yet?”

“I was out all night. I narrowly avoided the Walk of Shame, but he was onto me anyway.”

Logan grimaced. “How bad did he take it?”

She kissed him lightly, her fingers tickling the nape of his neck. “He took it pretty well, actually. So relax. Everything’s going to be fine.”

“When have I heard that before.”

“I promise.”

They moved to the couch, and Veronica sat back against the armrest, laying her legs across his lap as she ticked off his attributes.
“You fly jets over Afghanistan to defend our country. You saved my life a couple of times.” She clucked her tongue regretfully. “But I gotta be honest … that twenty grand might backfire on you.”

Logan froze, shaking his head in resignation. “I don’t know what the fuck I was thinking. You were never gonna let it go. Look, in my defense, it’d been nine years …”

“... And what? You forgot I was a detective?” she asked, indignantly.

“It did take you three months to figure out.” Veronica punched his arm, prompting a deep chuckle. He glanced away, his smile slowly fading. “At the time, I didn’t think I was even on your radar, so I figured I was safe.”

Veronica sobered, thinking of all the times she’d scanned tabloid headlines for news of Logan, or started an email but never hit send. One hellish night, she’d lain awake ‘till dawn, checking her computer obsessively, not knowing if he was the pilot killed on the U.S.S. Truman.

Slipping her arm through his, she rested her head on his shoulder. “What you did means the world to me, but we can’t take your money.

“And just so you know …” she added, silencing his protest. “You’ll never be off my radar, Logan.”

He answered by pressing a tender kiss to her temple, and Veronica smiled, content and at peace for the first time in nine long years.

Chapter End Notes

Sometime after Logan spent Thanksgiving with Veronica and Keith, I decided to include an epilogue set around Christmas. It would've tied in perfectly with VMHeadquarters’ Holiday Fan Fic Challenge, but I got swamped with birthdays and the holidays and couldn't finish Second Chances in time. So I jumped ahead and wrote All I Want for Christmas, which can be considered as my AU version of LoVe’s happy ending tied up with a big, red bow.

Thanks for reading!

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