Summary

Veronica faces her feelings in the aftermath of the epic Food Court beatdown and makes some course corrections that lead her straight back to Logan's door. But even an idyllic summer can't change the past, which can reach out at the most unfortunate times.

Notes

I've been teasing this story for so long on Tumblr; hopefully it lives up to all those Sunday Sixes! Many of you have read the original version of this chapter so you know it's not long but trust me, they get longer after this. The story itself is complete and will be posted every Saturday through April 2017.

I have had a great deal of assistance working on this over the last year and thank Irislim and KMD0107 for all of their time and input. I truly appreciate both of you.
Chapter 1

September 4, 2007

It was the first day of school and already, Veronica was hiding. She’d parked the Saturn between a
monster truck and a full-sized van—who’s going to Hearst these days anyway?—hoping they would
obscure her smaller SUV from view. She’d made her way cautiously to the center of campus,
avoiding the Food Court, the pathway that led to Greek Row, and any other hangout spots she could
think of.

Her Sociology class started in ten minutes and she didn’t want to get there early enough to risk
bumping into Logan. Veronica was well aware of his position on their relationship and she had no
interest in hearing it again. A little distance seemed like the best idea until they could both calm
down. She’d been given some advice and, with no better ideas, had taken it, putting her thoughts
about their situation in writing since actual physical contact had been a disaster.

She’d written him a letter and made her arguments, all without fear of the conversation becoming an
unproductive snarkfest or worse, an emotional quagmire. She’d dropped the letter in the mail to him
a few days earlier but with the Labor Day holiday, Veronica thought she should give him another
couple of days before she attempted to talk to him again. In the meantime, she continued to practice
avoidance by pretending to read all the new semester postings on the kiosk two buildings away from
her class, moving slowly around the wooden structure whenever she spied someone she recognized
walking in her general direction. She had returned from Virginia a little over a week earlier. Her
conversation about "What I did this summer" with her father had gone better than expected but she’d
only had one actual encounter with Logan since returning to California and it had gone explosively
wrong, hence her current desire to stay out of his eyeshot for a while.

A glance at her phone showed she had five minutes until class should start and a three-minute walk
to get there. She hurried through the crowd, keeping her eyes open for anyone who might try to
engage her in conversation. As she entered the Sociology building, she played the same game she
had with her car and deliberately positioned herself behind a football player, or at least someone
sized like a football player, to continue to maintain her low profile. Veronica congratulated herself on
her forethought as she thought she identified the back of Logan's head further down the hallway. She
ducked into her classroom and breathed a sigh of relief. She should be safe here for the next ninety
minutes. She looked around the classroom to confirm and smiled when she found her most loyal
confidante, other than her dad, of course, sitting on the opposite side of the room. She grinned,
walked, and made her way around the circled desks.

"Q! So glad to see you this morning."

"Bond! I was starting to wonder about you. You're usually the early to class type."

"Not right now. I'm practicing my unpredictability. Trying to avoid awkward conversations right
now, you know. The middle of campus is not the place to hash this out with him."

"I'm really not sure you need to practice unpredictability. Seems to me you've pretty much nailed that
one. But, good call, he was outside the room earlier. Dick too."

"Ugh, Dick too? I'm extra glad now that I'm wily."

"I really hope you guys can work this out soon. I know that you'd rather I not get directly involved
but all this drama is really wearing thin."
"I know but it's for your own good. You've still got a business with him; I don't want that to be compromised by our issues." Veronica dropped her head onto the desktop and banged it in frustration. She laced her fingers across the back of her head and was still for a moment before sitting upright again and meeting Mac’s concerned eyes. "I'm also really sorry that you're ending up as the lone member of the Veronica support network since Wallace is still pissed at me. He told me at the start of the summer that he would be over the Piz break-up by now but it seems like no such luck."

Mac smiled sympathetically. "Well, if stupid Piz hadn't decided to transfer to NYU, things would probably be different." Veronica knew this was old news but she couldn't stop talking about the various messy situations that made up her life now.

"Yeah, so now Wallace is blaming me for having to break in a new roommate. Honestly, he never should have thought we were going to be a long-term thing. Piz followed me around despite my having a boyfriend for the better part of the year and then he pushed himself in as a rebound guy. No one in their right mind would do something like that and think a lasting relationship was going to come out of it. Hell, Wallace told me himself that he knew we were a bad idea."

"I think Wallace is still nursing his illusions about the whole thing. He'll settle down pretty soon, once things chill with you and Logan."

"I don't think chill will ever be the way to describe me and Logan."

"You know what I mean." Mac gave her a look that felt like a reprimand before turning to focus on the professor who had just entered the room.

"Welcome to Sociology 216, Family and Society. This class meets your General Education requirement for the Social Sciences and is a lower division requirement for both the Sociology and Human Development majors. I'm Professor Williamson; I've been a member of the Sociology Department at Hearst since 2003 and I am an alumnus of Stanford's Psychology and Sociology Departm..."

"Excuse me, I need to see Veronica Mars."

The familiar voice drawled through the room and Veronica groaned. Damn it, what is he doing? She raised her eyebrows and shook her head warily at Mac who was glaring at the door with a venom that should have been lethal. No such luck.

Veronica looked at the professor apologetically and stood to face the intruder.

"Dick. I'm in class. What do you want?"

He pushed his way between the desks so he was in the open section at the center of the circle of desks. The smirk on his face and the gleam in his eyes were actually a little frightening. Veronica glanced nervously at Mac again and then back up at Dick.

"Well?"

He threw a thick stack of paperwork down on the desktop in front of her and sneered. "You've been served." His eyes landed on Mac, apparently noticing her for the first time, and he blanched. "Mackster." He then turned and left the way he came.

Veronica dropped back into her chair and sat silently with her hands pressed to her face, staring down at the papers lying in front of her.

Superior Court of California, County of Neptune.
Petition for Dissolution of Marriage.
Petitioner: Logan Echolls/Husband.
Respondent: Veronica Mars Echolls/Wife
Four months earlier...

Veronica pulled her knees to her chest and wrapped her arms around her legs, dropping her forehead to rest against them. Her butt was asleep and she was pretty sure that if she stood up, her legs would fold under her but she was not leaving until she talked to Logan. She tipped her head back against the wall behind her and closed her eyes. The last several days had been long and her flight to Virginia was barely thirty hours away. Might as well get a little rest during the wait.

A bumping against her Chucks startled her awake. Resting was one thing; falling asleep alone in a public corridor was another entirely. Her eyes snapped open and she found an amused-looking Logan staring down at her, knocking the toes of her shoes with his own.

"So, might I presume you're waiting for me?"

"Well I wouldn't be waiting for your roomie."

He held out a hand to help her up. She looked at him skeptically and then grasped it to let him pull her up. Once upright, her knees buckled and she would have collapsed but he caught her by the waist and held her steady.

"How long have you been down there that your legs don't actually work anymore?" he asked with a smirk.

She pulled her phone out of her front pocket and glanced at it. "Three hours and forty-seven minutes."

His mouth dropped open in surprise for a moment before he snapped it closed and smiled. "I guess you really wanted to talk to me."

"Well, yeah. I'm leaving tomorrow night for Virginia and I couldn't leave without seeing you." The tingling in her legs began to ease as she shook one leg out and then the other. When the feeling in her legs had returned enough to stand on her own, she took a step back out of his reach. As she did so, the smile that had appeared on his face fell away and he narrowed his eyes at her.

"Are you here to yell at me? It seems like we've covered everything already."

"I'm not here to yell. I'm here to apologize."

Rather than diminishing, Logan's suspicious look intensified. "That doesn't really sound like you."

"Well, I think that's something that I probably need to correct."

Suspicion transformed into confusion. "Did you get hit on the head?"

She snorted. "Not that I remember. Can we go in the suite? I've spent more time in this hallway than any normal person should."

He smirked at her. "I'm not terribly sure that you really know what a normal person would do."

"Oh, ya think? So, hey there, pot, meet kettle."

"That's fair. Okay then, come on in." He swiped his keycard and pushed the door open,
dramatically gesturing for her to enter ahead of him. "So, what are you apologizing for?"

"Pretty much every bad thing I did or said to you this year." She went straight to the sofa and curled into the center of the L-shaped sectional, tucking her feet beneath her and looking up at Logan, hoping he would follow her. However, he had stopped and was staring at her incredulously.

"I'm gonna need you to tell me something that only Veronica would know because otherwise, I'm pretty sure you're a shape shifter or something."

She laughed. "You thought my twelve year old self was hot in her knee socks."

"That's not exactly a secret," he said skeptically and took a seat on the far end of the long leg of the sofa, folding a leg under him, and resting an arm along the back of the cushions.

"Well, it's all I've got for you for now. I'm exhausted. It's been a long few days."

His eyebrows rose and he leaned forward. "What have you been up to?"

"Trying to fix a lot of stupid things. Some were too far gone, like Dad's election. I screwed that one up too much to fix in time. But he's not going to get prosecuted and that's the most important thing. And you're not getting murdered by a Russian gangster. That was the other important one."

He scooted a little closer to her corner, reminding her of how he had gradually moved in on her at Alterna-Prom. She smiled at him encouragingly but that seemed to stop his progress in her direction and he glared at her.

"What do you mean by that? What did you do? I don't want you having anything to do with that guy."

"That's a sentiment we share then."

"I can take care of myself." He buried his hands in his hair, tugging at the ends in obvious frustration. It was a gesture she was used to causing in him.

"I know and I didn't go anywhere near Gory, don't worry. I convinced a mutual acquaintance of my sincerity and then managed to call in some old debts."

"Stop talking in riddles and tell me what you mean." She could hear his irritation increasing to approach senior year levels. This conversation was not going the direction she'd planned.

"I didn't really come here to talk about this stuff."

"Too bad for you. Are you going to spill on your own or do I have to tip you over?"

"That might be interesting but I hadn't really planned for being tipped today either." She tried a coy smile but Logan's scowl made it apparent that it wasn't working.

"Veronica," he growled and his hands began fretting with his sleeves. It was clear he was getting close to exploding at her and she felt an urge to reach over and take his hands in hers, to maybe offer him some of the calm she was keeping a tenuous hold on. But she wasn't sure he would allow it and she wasn't feeling secure enough yet for the potential rejection.

"Okay, fine. I went to see Jake Kane. Knocked on the door this time and everything. Tried to make nice, which was hard because he's really come unhinged, and I apologized profusely. I reminded him that he used to kinda like me, and then I—very nicely—asked him to back off Dad and work on
keeping Gory away from both of us.”

The irritation vanished from Logan's face and was replaced by confusion. "What does Jake have to do with any of this?" She had forgotten that he didn't know about her little field trip into Jake's new estate and its ramifications. She gave him a condensed version of her investigation into the origin of the sex tape, culminating in her burglary at Jake's.

"Once I had the hard drive, I...got some, um, help with the decryption..."

"Mac," he said, nodding like that was obvious.

"Mmm, I'm trying not to talk about specifics there so she doesn't get into trouble too but you're pretty aware of my various resources. The drive had confessions from a secret society at Hearst that Jake's a bigwig in. Some of those confessions are big. That's how I knew Gory was connected. His confession was...scary. That's why I didn't want you going after him." She shifted uncomfortably and he frowned and opened his mouth like he was going to interrupt but she rushed on before he could.

"Look, Logan, what's done is done. After that, it's just about cleaning up the mess. Luckily, I'm pretty sure that Jake remembered that he used to like you so when I made it about your safety, he got a little more rational. Plus, Clarence...I think he sees the upside to having me around." She straightened up, turning more directly to face Logan, relieved to be able to talk about something other than her humiliation at Gory's hands. "He and I have worked on a couple of situations together and I think he's been impressed. I think he may have been giving me some subtle plugs with Jake. Not enough to get Jake mad at him but...I think he told him about Abel and poor Amelia. I come out looking pretty good in that story and Clarence knows it."

"Once again; no idea what you're talking about. Abel? Do you mean Abel Koontz?" Logan's hands resumed their torture of his hair. Veronica found that her urge to reach for him was getting more difficult to suppress as his distress increased.

"Yeah, he died last year. It's a long story and not all that relevant right now. Suffice to say, I think Clarence thinks they're better off with me on their side. By the end of my conversation with Jake, I think he thought that too. Hopefully I'm not completely delusional. It felt like he was hearing me but he may have been trying to convince me of that so I'd get out of his house. I just don't know. I did paint some parallels between sex tapes to play on his sympathies, if you know what I mean. That might have been a little excessive..."

"I don't think so. I'm pretty sure that's why I lost it entirely.‖ At his obvious dejection and guilt, Veronica lost her battle to resist touching him. She gave him a sympathetic smile and pushed up out of her corner, crawling a little towards him and then reaching out for his fidgeting hands. She took them in hers and soothed her thumbs over the back of his knuckles, looking him right in the eyes as she did it.

"I finally figured that out," she said softly. She shifted her hands so she was holding both of his in her left while she reached with her right to gently fold his tortured sleeves back. His hands were so much larger than hers that she was mostly just clinging to his thumbs but his fingers wrapped around her wrist and entwined together. She had broken their gaze when she went to work on his sleeves and, as she smoothed the second one back and then dragged her fingers across their joined hands, she looked up at him again.

He was staring down at their hands with dark and questioning eyes that, for just a moment, peeked up at her through thick eyelashes. She parted his gaze when she went to work on his sleeves and, as she smoothed the second one back and then dragged her fingers across their joined hands, she looked up at him again.
remained. She traced a finger across those spots gently, waiting for any negative reactions. None came; he seemed mesmerized by her actions. She raised first one hand and then the other to her lips and kissed the remaining bruises. His intake of breath was audible and after a final kiss, she gently rested his hands on his knee and reached up to stroke his cheek.

"Thanks for always taking care of me, even when I don't appreciate it." She smiled at him as her hand cupped his cheek and for the first time, he smiled a genuine, loving smile back. She then dropped her hand and pushed herself back into her corner of the couch. His smile turned a little predatory then as he moved to follow her but she held a hand up between them.

"No, hang on, sorry for the unscheduled interlude but I got carried away and we're not done talking yet."

He smirked at her and halted his progress about halfway down the sofa. "No touching when we're talking?" He fluttered his fingers in her direction and she laughed.

"No, because once we start touching, the talking mostly stops, and we need to talk most of all."

"I agree, but you got your moment and I need one too." He closed the distance between them and caught her face in his hands. He studied her like he hadn't seen her in years, stroking her face gently with his thumbs, his fingers tangling up into her hair. She kept waiting for him to kiss her but when he finally did, it was only a lingering kiss on her forehead. When he then dropped his hands and moved all the way back into his corner of the sofa, she couldn't contain her disappointed sigh. He responded with a soft laugh.

"Gotta keep 'em wanting more," he joked but when she pouted at him, he clarified. "I'm kidding; I'm not just playing with you. It really is true. I'm pretty sure if I started anything more, I wouldn't want to stop and I do agree, we need to talk."

She smiled again as a thrill went through her. They gazed at each other for another moment and then she shook her head to try to break the familiar searing connection between them and clear her lustful thoughts. "Okay, well, by the end of the groveling, Jake said that he understood why I broke in. I think he believed that I hadn't been aiming for him or the Castle deliberately. He stopped pushing them to prosecute Dad, at least. The District Attorney passed that news on yesterday but it was too late for the election." She squirmed uncomfortably and looked down at her hands, embarrassed as she admitted to the mess she'd caused. "Clarence called me this morning to let me know that Jake had spoken to Gory's uncle and the Family would be discouraging any further action by Gory, against either of us. It also sounded like Gory's family would be keeping him closer to home next year and under better supervision—that's a boy who needs a leash—so I don't think he will be coming back to Hearst next year. I thought that sounded like really good news."

"There's still gaps in this whole story that I'm going to want at some point but, for now, I'm good with that. Now I want to know what you're sorry for with me."

She cringed and ducked her head, even more reluctant to look at him for this next embarrassing part. "Um, well, pretty much every stupid thing I did or said this whole year. Getting mad at you for trying to protect me. Throwing a fit over Madison when we were broken up when that happened. Blackmailing you into spilling your guts and then holding what you told me against you. I'm not saying that you were a model of exemplary behavior in all of this..." She looked up then, unable to take all of the blame for the bad year. He laughed and nodded, seeming to acknowledge that he was not an innocent victim in the events of the last eight months. He stood up then and moved to where she sat, lifting her off the couch, twisting, and then falling back into her spot, with her now in his lap. He smoothed her hair back behind her ear.
"I think the mutual apologizing goes better with some physical contact. No making out—yet—but some of this year has been really hard, and I just want to be able to feel you here with me while we talk about it."

She smiled and nodded, unable to speak for a moment from the lump in her throat at his words. She snuggled down into him and tucked her head into the crook of his neck and shoulder. She felt him take a very deep breath as he stroked her hair.

"So, I'm sorry about a lot of things too. That bodyguard, I'm not sorry about trying to keep you safe but I'm sorry I scared you more by getting a big guy to follow you around. I'm sorry about getting you involved with helping Mercer, ugh, that guy, I still just want to kill him." She stopped him with a hand on his chest, raising her head to look him in the eye.

"That thing you did, getting yourself arrested to get in the cell with them, was so freaking stupid. Promise me you won't do that again." The look on his face was hard to read. She wasn't sure if he was embarrassed that she knew or maybe that he'd hoped for a different reaction. She reached up and grasped his chin, giving it a shake. "What if Lamb had decided to charge you? You could have ended up in prison."

"Yeah, I guess. I just couldn't let Mercer get away with hurting you. Honestly, I didn't know you knew. Who told you? I'm pretty sure it wasn't your dad."

"Dad knew?"

He grinned gleefully at her. "Oh, is the esteemed Keith Mars not totally forthcoming? How shocking." His smile fell away and he shook his head. "Yeah, well, that situation resulted in probably our only bonding moment ever. When they let me out, he was there, at the station. Maybe Cliff let him know I was being released with no charges. Maybe he helped make that happen; I don't know. But he was there and as I was leaving, he stopped me, shook my hand, and said thanks. Nothing else, just thanks, and then he walked away. It kinda gave me some hope for a minute but then I decided that was stupid and I should just try to get on with life without you in it."

Sadness and guilt filled her as she thought of how much worse that situation could have turned out. "Bottom line is that I don't want you endangering yourself over vengeance. Please tell me you won't do that again."

He gave her a frank look. "I can't promise that. I promise I'll try but sometimes, I might not be able to stop." He tightened his arms around her and pressed a kiss to her forehead. "I'm sorry but I'm just trying to be honest."

She returned the open look. "I'm not thrilled with that answer but it's pretty much what I expected." A look of panic filled his eyes and she smiled and reached for his chin again, this time guiding his face towards hers and raising up enough to give him a long, deep kiss. When she broke it, he continued to look at her like he had that day at the Camelot, like he was trying to figure out what she was thinking. "I'll be honest too, what you did, defending me like that, was so absolutely thrilling, I can't even explain to you how that made me feel. Same thing at the Food Court with Gory. But no matter how amazing you made me feel those times, nothing would have been worth it if you ended up getting convicted of assault or worse."

Veronica drew in a deep breath; it was time to lay it all out. "That's what I worry about most, you know. My rash behavior causing your rash behavior and you end up in jail or hurt or dead. Do you have any idea what that would do to me? No thrill would ever be worth that." Veronica paused, unable to trust her voice as the emotions she always worked so hard to keep in check threatened to overwhelm her. Despite the burning in her eyes, she was still surprised when Logan brushed stray
tears from her cheeks. "I wouldn't be able to survive getting you killed. I'd rather leave and never come back to you again if that's what would keep you safe."

"No, that's not a better option. I might survive but it wouldn't be a life worth living." The weight of Logan's words combined with his matter-of-fact tone pushed away the last barrier Veronica had built to keep her emotions under control. She leaned forward, meeting his lips in an intense kiss.

She lost track of how long they kissed but eventually oxygen became an issue and she put her hand on his chest and physically pushed herself away from him. They both sat, smiling and breathing hard, eyes locked together, before she managed to say, "And this is why we talk from opposite ends of the couch." He laughed and ducked his head down to nibble gently at that magical juncture of her neck and shoulder that only he could ever really find. Her head fell back, giving him better access, even as she moaned, "No, this isn't working."

"I'm pretty sure it is," he mumbled against her skin.

"You're focusing on the wrong objective," she tried again, but since she knew that she was arching into the hand that was now creeping up her shirt, she was sure that she didn't seem very convincing. With a supreme effort, she wrung herself out of his arms and down the short leg of the sofa. She chuckled as Logan's blissed out face turned disgruntled. With a put-upon sigh, he squirmed until he seemed to find a more comfortable position, acknowledgement that he understood her rationale for forcibly separating them again.

"Okay, fine, more talking," he grumbled, then grabbed her feet so her legs stretched out towards him. He pulled her shoes off and began to massage the balls of her feet. She raised her eyebrows skeptically at him and he responded, "You can talk like this," as he continued to fondle her toes.

She watched him silently for a moment, kneading at the balls of her feet and putting firm, steady pressure into her arches. "You know, you're pretty good at that."

"Yeah? Think I could go pro?"

She colored a little thinking of the last time she suggested he had professional level skills. That may have been his intent as he snickered and then ducked his head to give his full attention to her feet rather than watching her face.

"So, tell me what you've done with Piz. Is he off crying somewhere listening to emo songs? I've got a twelve year old who could probably cheer him up."

She gave him a quizzical look. "Don't get that, not sure I want to. Pretty sure he's fine anyway, probably relieved to be rid of me. Definitely sorry he wasted his time but Wallace tried to warn him so I don't feel too bad. I'm glad he finally saw the light though. What does it say about me when my best breakups are the ones where I get dumped?"

There was an almost imperceptible tightening in Logan's hands, before he continued the massage. It was enough though. She wasn't certain what had triggered his sudden anxiety but she could feel the change. Her mind rapidly ticked over what she had said and what he might have heard and tried for a recovery.

"Well, except this year. I didn't like you breaking up with me first semester." She was pretty sure she had guessed wrong because his lips remained pressed together in a thin line.

He gave her feet one more squeeze and then set them to the inside curve of the sofa before sitting up and retreating back into his own corner, putting as much distance between them as possible without
"Yeah, that was only a quickie breakup anyway. You show back up at my door a few weeks later and I didn't have the self-respect to even make you grovel. You just give me the sad eyes and I'm done for."

"Logan? I'm sorry." She started forward but he jerked back and she stopped short. "Whatever I just said or reminded you of, or whatever. I'm sorry."

"So he broke up with you."

Oh. Now she thought she understood. "Well, yeah. When your girlfriend comes as close to following another guy away from you to jump his bones as I did at the food court the other day, the smart guy breaks up with her. Although, truthfully, Piz isn't the most observant so I'm a little surprised still. He mostly sees what he wants to see."

"I understand the appeal of that," Logan answered in a morose tone.

"Hold up, buddy. What is that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing too hard to grasp. Most things look best when we're seeing what we want to see. So, tell me. If he hadn't broken up with you, would you be here now?"

His eyes bored into hers and for the first time in the conversation, she felt trapped. "Umm, how mad are you going to be if I say I don't know?"

"I'm not going to be mad at you, Veronica."

"Oh, of course," she said bitterly. "You'll only be mad at yourself for believing we could have something again, right?"

"Maybe that's true. I don't know yet." He reached for her feet again and resumed his massage. She had a feeling he was just trying to calm her down, but she liked his methods too much to stop him. "You say you don't know if you would be here if Piz hadn't kicked you to the curb. Tell me what you do know." She was still a little freaked out but his touch was comforting and his voice gentle. "Just tell us both what you know."

She closed her eyes and thought back to that moment in the food court. When she watched him beat Gory for hurting her. When she watched him sincerely apologize to Piz for attacking him. When he looked at her. "Well, that day with Gory, I knew that I wanted to be with you. Nobody else ever makes me feel as much as you do."

"Okay, but what were you going to do with that?"

She dropped her face into her hands. "I don't know. I was feeling so guilty for wanting you and for screwing up everyone's lives. Even though I didn't want to be with him, I can't tell you for sure that I would have broken up with him. I think it's more likely I would have kept on annoying him until he did it so I didn't have to."

"So you would have kept on making him miserable until he broke up with you so you wouldn't have to hurt him by breaking up with him?"

"Stupid, huh?"

"Yeah, that's a pretty good description." She could practically hear his eyes rolling.
"I know it wouldn't have been the best course of action but I am afraid it might have gone that way. And, since I was leaving in a couple of days anyway, I might just have figured that he'd get tired of me while we were long distance and then I'd be free."

"So then you could come back from Virginia, free and ready to admit you want me, but, in my lonely wallowing, I've hooked up with someone else. And someone else. And someone else. Til the one I finally knock up because I'm drunk and careless without you. Sound possible?" His voice no longer sounded amused. Now he sounded resigned and hopeless. She looked up and he was staring at the ceiling.

"This conversation is so going downhill."

He looked at her again but his voice remained resigned. "I just want us to be honest. I told you before. I love you. I only want you. You say you know that you want to be with me. But for how long? How long before I do something dumb and you decide to write me off again? Seriously. I can't do the back and forth thing anymore." The hands stroking her feet stilled. "It's killing me. It's going to kill me. So you have to decide if you're in or out. It's your call."

"It's not just my call. If we're in a relationship, we're both in there. I'm not the only one who has to be happy."

"But that's the thing. As long as you're happy with me, I'm happy. But I'm not usually enough."

His broken voice and sad face were more than she could bear. "That isn't true but I understand why you think that. This is my fault. I can't trust and you think it's about you. But it isn't. I rarely trust anyone, not just you. You know more of my secrets than anyone, even my dad. I know it probably doesn't seem like it but..." She stopped, not really ready to say more. "Just stop thinking you're not enough. It isn't true."

"Okay, so let's say I decide to believe you, are we going to try this thing again? Us?" He gestured between the two of them although his eyes seemed to be focused on her feet where they still rested in his lap.

“I want to but I’m leaving tomorrow. For twelve weeks.”

He looked up at that. “The FBI thing?”

“Yeah. Between the dead Dean and the incarcerated Professor, they talked me up enough with the Feds to get me past what had to have been a really interesting background check.”

He snickered. “They’d be crazy to pass up the chance to get you on their team.”

“I’m not sure about that. I’m probably not cut out for something so regimented but I really want to check it out. Learn some new tricks, ya know?”

“Not too many, I hope. You get in enough trouble with what you know already.”

“Maybe I’ll learn to stay out of trouble.”

“One can only hope." He gave her feet one more squeeze and then rested one hand gently on them. “So we’re getting along again. We both seem to still be into each other. Is that enough to risk more heartbreak and despair by trying this again?”

His words triggered another memory of Alterna-Prom.
“A crazy person once told me that no one writes songs about the ones that come easy.”

A huff of amusement left him. “Yeah, that guy’s crazy all right.”

“Maybe, but he can also be the most loyal and loving person I’ve ever met and I think he might have been onto something. But, I think maybe we owe it to ourselves to not be the biggest causes of all our own bloodshed and ruined lives. Do you think we’re up for it?”

His lips quirked up at the innuendo. “Pretty sure I am.”

She shook her head in amusement. “Okay then. And you think having the entire country between us for three months won’t cause any difficulties?”

“It will be plenty difficult.” He scooted down the couch, closing the distance between them again. “Can I come visit you?”

“I don’t really know yet. I need to get there and find out how the security works first. I don’t even know if civilian guests can get in the dorms inside the Quantico campus or how much time I’ll have free. If it turns out to be no, what then?”

“Then I pine for you and surf all summer.”

“And if you can visit?”

“I’ll be on the first plane to Virginia whenever you tell me I can come. In the meantime, I pine and surf.”

“And drink?”

“Probably some but not too much.” Despite everything, her eyebrows quirked up in disbelief at the idea of a lonely but sober Logan. “Seriously. As long as I know you’re coming back to me.”

She smiled and moved to meet him in the corner bend of the couch. She tucked herself into his lap, resting one hand at the back of his head and lacing their fingers together with the other. “That’s what I want to do.” She leaned into him and kissed a line up his neck to his ear where she delicately bit his earlobe. He gave a helpless groan and gathered her in his arms, standing to head for his bedroom. She raised her head and looked at him seriously. “I’ve only got about two more hours I can spend here, then I’ve got to get back, finish packing and set things straight with my dad. It’s important. Can we agree on that?”

He nodded. “Whatever you need.” He paused to open his bedroom door and once inside, tossed her unceremoniously onto the mattress. She giggled as he threw himself down beside her, toeing his shoes off and jerking his legs to fling the shoes violently off his feet. They lay side by side for a few minutes, kissing lazily and letting their hands wander.

“I love you, Veronica.”

Those words, that she had feared were lost forever, warmed her all the way through. That realization, what words could mean to even someone as jaded as she had become, landed hard in her psyche and for the first time that she could remember, she wasn’t afraid of what she was feeling.

“I love you, Logan.”
Chapter 3

The blaring alarm clock jerked Veronica upright at 6:30 the next morning. The two hour window she and Logan had agreed on the previous night had become four so she hadn’t finished her packing as she had hoped. Her dad was already asleep when she crept in so there had been no conversation with him either. That part she was actually relieved about; she wasn’t really feeling up to looking him in the eyes right after her joint reunion and possible farewell-for-the-summer evening with Logan.

She counted backwards from her flight at 7:50 PM…she would need to check in luggage by 6:30 PM so they should leave the house by 5:45 PM. That gave her about eleven hours to finish getting ready and see all the important people in her life. Mac was supposed to be by about 9:30 AM, Wallace at 11:00 AM, and Logan had volunteered to bring pizza by around 12:30 PM. That gave her the next three hours for packing and smoothing things over with her dad.

The packing was going well when the smell of bacon distracted her. She wandered out of her room into the kitchen to watch the master chef at work. Keith slid a tray piled with bacon into the oven and then poured batter for pancakes as she took a seat at the counter.

“Sending me away with a sweet and savory breakfast, hmm? Or is this a celebration of your impending bachelor freedom?”

Keith turned to her with a wry smile. They hadn’t spoken much since all the drama and she could see his relief at her overture this morning. “Are you kidding? This is my sad-my-beloved-daughter-is-leaving-home breakfast. I’m going to be the loneliest guy in Neptune after tonight.”

She thought he might not be correct about that but wasn’t ready to talk about Logan yet. “Hmm. Dubious face here. Do you expect me to believe that Cliff isn’t planning a poker night here within the week?”

His head jerked in surprise. “Have you been listening in on my calls?”

Veronica smirked at him. “I don’t have to. I have many years exposure to your BFF. And, ew, did that ever come out wrong. Anyway, an opportunity for poker night with free booze? Cliffie is there.”

“Well, I’m still considered persona non grata in a lot of the better Neptune circles so Cliff has to round up a group. If he can find enough guys who will come play poker with me, I told him I’d even spring for hot wings.”

“Buying friends with hot wings. I wish I had thought of that a couple of years ago. Brilliant strategy. By the way, I might know a guy or two interested in playing poker with you.”

“Wallace and Stosh? Yeah, no. I can’t be responsible for that level of innocence lost after an entire night with Cliff.”

She laughed and shook her head. “Not who I meant. Wallace is leaving for Africa tomorrow and for all I know, Piz has already left for New York. Or home to the chicken-in-every-pot land of Beaverton. We’re not a thing anymore so I’m not really up to speed on his activities.”

Keith looked at her with surprise and a little sympathy. “I’m sorry to hear that, honey. I thought Stosh was a very nice boy.”

“Hmm, yeah, nice, I guess. I’ve been thinking back on some stuff during this year and it seems like maybe his nice guy persona wasn’t completely deserved but I’m turning over a new leaf and won’t
judge him. Once I achieve perfection, then maybe I will, but right now, nope. I’m just moving on.”

“Okay then, I’ll bite. Who should I invite to poker?” he asked as he poured more batter on the griddle.

“Well, maybe not the first week but maybe if you’re short a guy as the summer wears on, you might try inviting Jake Kane.”

This time it wasn’t surprise on Keith’s face, it was outright shock. “Veronica. That is not funny.”

“Not actually joking. He’s not pushing the DA to file charges against you anymore, right?”

“Well, yeah, but that isn’t a sign that we’re going to kiss and make up after nearly four years of animosity, not to mention that little thing where he had an affair with my wife for two decades.”

Veronica dropped her head to the counter top and banged it several times. “Oh my God, Dad, I am so sorry. I haven’t seen her for so long, I sorta forgot about that part.”

Keith looked a little sick at that statement. “She’s your mom, Veronica. I know she’s disappointed you but she’s the only mom you’re ever going to have. I don’t want you to write her off forever.”

She looked at him with something of a sneer. “You have to be kidding. I don’t ever need to see her again. I’m perfectly fine being mom-less. If you can ever find someone worthy of you, I’ll be happy to have a stepmom but Lianne Reynolds is in the rearview mirror.”

“I don’t like this, Veronica,” Keith said, shaking his head as he moved the current batch of pancakes to a plate.

“I’m not crazy about the situation but why would I spend any more time worrying about it? I’m just sorry that putting her out of my mind so completely made me forget why Jake isn’t on the Mars Family Christmas Card list.”

“I’d have thought trying to get both of us arrested would be enough.”

“Ah, but he isn’t doing that anymore, is he?”

Keith leaned against the counter to stare at her with his full-on sheriff interrogation face. “And what, may I ask, did you have to do with that?”

Veronica had spent many hours over the past few days considering what she should tell her dad and how she should do it. Showtime.

“Look, I screwed up. We both know it. I cost you the election because of that screw up. I just went to Jake and apologized for everything that happened and pretty much begged him not to hold my stupidity against you. I got lucky and made my appeal to ‘Lilly’s dad’ instead of ‘The Jake Kane’ and it looks like some part of him responded. He’s obviously not pushing the DA to charge you and he agreed to call the Russian gangster kid off Logan.”

“What??” The spatula clattered to the counter. ”He had a gangster after Logan?"

Veronica raised her hand quickly and shook it like she was trying to stop oncoming traffic, her head shaking rapidly also. “Oh no, no, sorry. Gory was after Logan all on his own. But, Jake has some influence with him and with his family so he agreed to talk to them.”

“You know someone named Gory?”
Veronica released a nervous burst of laughter, now nodding. “Gorya actually. But his nickname is pretty accurate. Especially after Logan smacked him around.” She snorted at the memory of Gory bleeding and covered with cafeteria food before realizing too late that she hadn’t planned to deliver that particular piece of news.

“So a gangster kid—code name Gory—somehow incurred the wrath of Logan, suffered a righteous beatdown, and then wanted revenge.” Keith recovered his spatula and turned to wet a paper towel to clean off the countertop.

“Um, yeah. That’s exactly right. But please don’t say righteous anymore.”

“You cannot contain my effortless cool, daughter.” Veronica raised her eyebrows at him, cleaning the counter in his ‘Kiss the Cook’ apron.

“I’m pretty sure I can’t locate your effortless cool. Because it is non-existent.”

“The young have such skewed standards.” Keith finished the quick cleanup, then carried two plates of breakfast to the counter, taking a seat next to her. She could see the amusement on his face as she moved the bacon on top of the pancakes and then drowned the entire mess in syrup. “So, honey… any chance you’ll tell me what triggered Logan’s wrath?”

“I’d rather not, if you don’t mind.” She turned her face away from him, afraid that the heat she could feel in her cheeks was going to give too much away.

“So you’re going to make me fill in the blanks myself. Is it safe to say I’m going to owe Logan my thanks again?”

Veronica turned back to him with narrowed eyes, embarrassment gone as she stared him down. “Yeah…let’s talk about that. I heard you made a short visit to the sheriff’s office a few months ago, before you took the job back.”

“Temporarily took it back, you mean.”

“Of course. So, who told you about Logan’s adventure in cop car and rapist bashing?”

“Jerry. He was pretty damn impressed. Had to let me know what a great boyfriend you had. I didn’t tell him he wasn’t your boyfriend anymore. I was feeling pretty ecstatic about that fact but I couldn’t break Jerry’s heart.”

“So Sacks is in the Logan fan club now, hmm? I’ll have to let Logan know.”

“Are you back in the club, honey?”

She looked up in surprise, fork loaded with dripping pancake hovering midway to her mouth. “Umm…well…” She shoved the bite into her mouth to buy some time but it was too late.

“Yeah. That’s what I thought.”

She swallowed hard and looked him in the eye. “What would make you think that? I haven’t said anything about him for months; he hasn’t been by here in longer than that.”

“True. Not only has he not been here, you have not even said his name for probably five months but today you’re telling me about getting Jake to protect him from a bully and you’re talking about something that I don’t think you would know about unless you talked to him. I’m a private eye, Veronica. I can put the pieces together.”
That fact was always what she feared the most. Her father was way too intuitive for her taste which was one of the reasons why she had always tried to keep him and Logan apart. She never wanted him to know how vulnerable she was to Logan. Now though, having made a few breakthroughs in accepting her own feelings, she was starting to reconsider how she could balance her relationships with both of them and still stay in some semblance of control.

“Well, Mr. Private Eye, your keen senses are relatively on target, this time. Logan and I have decided to try again. It’s still very recent but...Logan gets me. No one else really does. And he likes me anyway. Most people, they’re either scared of me or they’re condescending because they don’t understand what’s important to me. Logan...he knows who I really am. He understands what I need to do. The only time he doesn’t is when I’m pushing too hard and taking risks. All those times you’ve been mad at him for being mad at me, your P.I. skills were sorely lacking, because he was only trying to get me to be safe. Like you would have, if you knew all the facts. You guys are almost always on the same side. I’ve just never let you see that.”

Keith had a better poker face than anyone she had ever known but she had a feeling that her confession has surprised him. His next words made her wonder for the first time if he might eventually see some merit to her relationship with Logan. “I appreciate you sharing that with me. It’s true that I’ve always jumped to the conclusion that if you’re mad at him, I should be mad at him too. You telling me that maybe it was you I should have been mad at is a rather surprising, and disconcerting, development.”

“Yeah, I’m trying harder to act outside my norm. It’s still a challenge, I can assure you.”

“So, I think my take-away from this conversation is that I need to invite Logan to poker night.”

She laughed even as she cringed. “Not sure I’m ready for the two of you to have that much togetherness yet but I guess I probably just need to get over myself. Logan is a good poker player though. You might live to regret including him.”

“Mmm, perhaps, but I can’t stack the table with all bumblers. If only I win, people will stop showing up, even with the promise of wings. And, he’s already spent a fair amount of time with Cliff so that trauma and loss of innocence that would accompany such an evening for Wallace won’t even faze Logan.”

“Plus, from what you’ve said, including Logan is a sure-fire way to get Sacks to play too,” Veronica said, causing them both to laugh. “I’ve been able to bluff Sacks since I was eight years old so I think he’d be a great addition to the table. I’m actually going to be sorry that I can’t play.”

“Oh honey, this internship will fly by and you’ll be back before you know it, all ready to take Jerry to the cleaners.”

She rubbed her hands together gleefully. “Exxx-cellent. After a summer of an unpaid internship, I’m going to need to find a way to make some spending money.”

“So, speaking of indentured servitude, are you all ready for your exciting FBI adventure?”

“Not yet. I still need to finish packing and I need to do it soon. Mac will be here in about two hours, Wallace an hour or so later, and Logan with lunch shortly after that. Maybe you can float your poker idea while he’s here.”

“Ooh, and he’s bringing food. Hey, you think I can talk him into picking up those wings for poker night?”
“There ya go, that’s an even better idea than paying people to be your friend in exchange for wings. Let Logan pay for your friends in wings instead. You really are an evil genius.” She sopped up the last of the syrup with her final bite of pancake and hopped down from her stool to take her plate to the sink.

“Well, Daddy-O, that was a most excellent breakfast but I have to get back to packing.” She peeked in the oven to see if there was more bacon and scored the last two slices. “Want one?” He smiled and shook his head. She grinned and walked over to him, giving him a slightly sticky kiss on the cheek and then headed back to her room, munching on her bacon.

“When Mac gets here, just send her in my room please.”

“As you wish, darling daughter.”

She turned and began to walk backward towards her room while giving him a brilliant smile. “Love you too, Dad.”

She reached her room and was greeted by the sight of her dog sprawled across her largest suitcase, his ears down, muzzle resting on his front paws, looking as glum as a dog can look. She laughed gently and shook her head. “Backup, ya big dope, get offa that suitcase. I’m going whether you like it or not.” She leaned down to scratch behind his ears and he whined pitifully. "Oh geez, way to lay on the guilt." She turned back to her door, patting her hand along the side of her leg and he jumped up to follow her.

"Dad? Can you maybe take this one for a walk or something? He doesn't seem very happy about my packing.” She lifted the leash off its hook and handed it to Keith. He’d started working on the breakfast clean-up but immediately took the leash and snapped it onto Backup's collar. She started back toward her room, swallowing away the lump in her throat when she heard Keith speaking to the dog.

“I know how you feel, boy.”

In spite of Backup’s continual interference following the walk, she was pretty much ready to go by the time Mac appeared in her doorway. She would be staying in a dorm room so it wasn’t like she was moving out on her own. It was more like adopting Logan’s lifestyle, only providing what you needed to put on. She thought it was a safe bet that the Quantico dorms wouldn't be as luxurious as the Neptune Grand though. That was fine; the art deco motif in that suite was weird.

She tucked a few photos and keepsakes into her luggage to give her a little touch of home but for the most part, she thought this would probably be a pretty barren couple of months. She thought back to the night before, when Logan had asked if he could come to visit. She wasn’t sure if she would ever be stepping off the Quantico grounds and she wasn’t sure if visitors could step on. She liked the idea of him being there with her but it was just impossible to know yet if they could make that work. She suspected that Logan would set himself up in whatever the town of Quantico considered to be the equivalent of the Neptune Grand and wait for her to be available but that made her feel guilty about him spending his whole life waiting for her. On the other hand, the idea of him spending his whole life waiting for her warmed her to the core. The conflict of guilt versus warm fuzzies was confusing and she was relieved when Mac showed up.

“So, Bond. Are you ready to blow this joint?” Mac picked her way through the suitcases, stepped over Backup, and dropped into Veronica’s desk chair.

“I believe that I am. I’ve got suits that would make Dana Scully proud and casual clothes designed to
not kill you in 85% humidity. Plus…” She reached into her carry-on and pulled a small clutch of photos out to wave at Mac. She shuffled through them to bring one to the top. “Reminders of my favorite peeps.” She handed the stack to Mac, the photo on top a picture of the two of them side-by-side, with their arms wrapped around each other, holding each other up as they laughed hysterically. Mac grinned at Veronica and looked back at the photo.

"I remember Wallace taking this because I remember him laughing too but I don't recall what was so funny?"

Veronica scrunched up her face and stared at the photo for a minute before she nodded. “Weevil.”

“Yeah, yeah, that's right. Graduation practice, dressed in his cap and gown, threatening Kelly Kuzio.”

“Yep. And somehow his threatening look was undermined by the goofy green dress.”

“It certainly was. But then he blamed us laughing for his lack of tough.” They laughed again at the memory. “What else have you got in here?” Mac began to flip through the stack of pictures. Veronica startled and grabbed for them but Mac pushed her feet on the ground and the wheeled chair rolled out of reach. “Hmm. Interesting response.” She continued to flip and Veronica watched the pictures flip past with a sinking feeling. Keith, Wallace, another of Mac, Backup, and…aha…score.

“Looky who I found here.” She waved Logan’s Senior Picture at Veronica, followed by a couple of Logan and Veronica together, and one of a shirtless Logan sleeping on his stomach on a rumpled bed, his hair poking in all directions and his mouth open. “He must love this one. Funny coincidence. I got a fairly early call from my website partner today. He actually sounded alive for the first time in a month. Lately, all he does is grunt. Today he wanted to talk about going live with two new alternate websites...bikini bods, for the tasteful college crowd, and—get this—ponies of all things. I wonder what, or who, inspired that? We’re supposed to meet for lunch tomorrow. He said he was busy today.” Mac’s lips pressed together into a thin line as she obviously tried to control her amusement. “Any chance you have insight into his apparent return to the land of the living?”

Veronica stood with one hand on her hip, looking up at the ceiling in exasperation. She squeezed her eyes shut and wrinkled her nose while taking deep calming breaths. After a minute, she opened her eyes and looked straight at Mac. “I might.”

“Ho ho ho. This is an unexpected turn of events. Well…not exactly unexpected but rather occurring ahead of the anticipated schedule.”

“There was a schedule?” Veronica squawked indignantly.

“Well, not exactly, but sorta. We, Wallace and I, talked about this briefly and the general consensus was that you’d get back together next school year. Wallace said…well, let’s just say that he’s a little bitter about your break-up with Piz.”

“Piz broke up with me!”

“Yeah but be real, Veronica. You can’t be surprised that happened. Or sorry either. He was a Duncan Redux, a way to feel okay about yourself while you licked your Logan-related wounds. Wallace is just mad because he wants to be loyal to the best guy friend he’s had since he moved to California. Being best friends with you kept him from having any really strong friendships with other guys so when he ended up with a decent roommate, it was a natural inclination to get buddy-buddy with him. I know he thought it was a bad idea for you and Piz to get together in the first place but once it happened, I think he saw that as the perfect opportunity—two BFFs in one package. Deep
down, he knew it wasn’t going to work out and once that happened, he got upset that he’d ever hoped for it in the first place.”

Veronica’s face scrunched up again with her lips in a disgusted sneer. “I’m not sure what the most uncomfortable thing is: you and your new psycho-analysis skills or Wallace thinking he could get two best friends in one by me and Piz staying together.”

“Veronica,” Mac chided, “that’s not what he was doing. He just feels bad for Piz. And it’s easy for him to be mad at Logan. Think about the first time they met. He’s probably still got post-traumatic stress from watching Logan breaking your headlights.”

“Wallace has what? I think your analysis is going over the top here.” Veronica turned away to resume folding her clothes and fitting them into her suitcase.

“I don’t mean PTSD in the clinical sense. He just can’t forget that first encounter so whenever he’s supposed to not like Logan—specifically when you don’t like Logan—he trots out that memory to rationalize his feelings.” Mac turned in the chair and gave another push with her feet to roll back closer to the desk. "Without that, and when left to their own devices, he and Logan actually get along pretty well.”

“Yeah, Wallace told me once senior year to cut Logan some slack. I was, quite frankly, being a bitch. If he gives and takes his friendship from Logan in response to my whims, I’m surprised that he stood up for him.”

“Well, despite his susceptibility to your whims, Wallace's fundamental nature is 'nice guy' so I'm not surprised.” Mac leaned her crooked elbow on the desk, propping her head on her hand. "Was that back when they were partnered in physics?”

“I’m sure I don’t know.”

“It probably was. They passed the egg drop test but they both decided to keep working to try to keep Angie Dahl from getting out of the final exam to try to help you win the Kane Scholarship.” Veronica stopped in mid-fold to stare at Mac.

“Really? Why haven’t I ever heard about that before?”

Mac laughed. “Something the all-seeing eye never saw? Color me surprised. And it's probably because their egg ended up cracked and Angie’s didn’t. Neither of them would have wanted you to know they'd let you down.”

“Oh. Well, that's a bummer. Not that it would have mattered anyway since I blew off a final to get Aaron’s verdict.” She turned back to her packing.

“Mmm, yeah. It’s water under the bridge, you can’t unscramble an egg—oh haha, see what I did there—and any other trite saying you can come up with to say, that was a freaking year ago, stop worrying about it.”

Veronica laughed at Mac’s sarcastic advice. “Thanks. You’re right. And, you’re a good friend. I’m glad I’ve got you in my life.”

Mac looked surprised by the earnest remark. “Well, I’m glad I’ve got you too. Now spill Bond. What did you do to Logan?”

“I’m not telling you that!” Veronica could feel her cheeks warming at the thought of what she'd done to Logan. A gagging noise from Mac interrupted her thoughts.
“No, eww, that’s not what I’m asking. But now I’m reminded that you’re my worldly friend and I may already know the answers even if I don’t want them. So tell me why he’s suddenly happy. Did you promise to come see him and talk when you come back from Virginia or did you actually get back together just in time to leave town? Now please remember, we do not do girl talk so I want just the most basic facts and then we can move on.”

“Actually back together.”

Mac’s eyebrows rose in surprise. “Just last night?”

“I thought you didn’t want details,” Veronica smirked.

“I don’t, just the timing.”

“Yes, it was last night. I needed to clear the air before I left and it went better than expected. I knew I was going to want to try to get back together and, as I learned the extremely hard way over the Christmas break, unattended and depressed Logan doesn’t always make the best decisions. I wanted him to at least know I still hoped to be in the picture if he was willing. I thought that would keep him from doing anything that I wouldn’t be able to recover from.”

Mac nodded, looking impressed. “That was good, proactive thinking. Now, tell me what you know about your internship. I cannot take another minute of relationship talk. Any more and I might have to get my own Colin Farrell poster for my room.”

“He’s pretty yummy, Mac.”

For the next hour, they talked about Veronica’s internship, Mac’s summer job in Hearst’s IT department, Wallace’s upcoming stint as a humanitarian. They were discussing Keith’s decision to give Weevil one more chance at the agency when Wallace walked into the room and threw himself onto Veronica’s bed.

“Ladies. How are you this fine morning?”

The conversation continued easily as Veronica pulled items out of the suitcases and attempted to fold them into even tinier bundles so she could squeeze more in. Wallace seemed to delight in making fun of how much stuff she was trying to pack. His packing for Africa involved a full-size backpack and a knapsack only. Her pair of rolling suitcases plus carry-on and her messenger bag ‘purse’ amused him greatly. The subjects of Piz and Logan never arose. The three friends bantered casually about Veronica solving the various high-profile cold cases of the last century. As they laughed and talked, Mac rolled back and forth in the desk chair, spinning with her head thrown back and Wallace produced a baseball from his knapsack, throwing it into the air above him while he lay fully stretched out on the bed. Veronica, meanwhile, kept a close eye on the clock. She needed to alert Wallace before Logan arrived but was a little wary of what his response would be. About quarter after twelve, Veronica took a deep breath and looked at Wallace. She saw Mac stiffen in her chair out of the corner of her eye.

“So, Wallace, umm, I wanted to let…”

“Oh, I’ll be back.” Mac jumped out of the chair and darted out of the room.

“What the hell was that?” Wallace asked, clearly confused.

“That was my friend, THE CHICKEN,” Veronica shouted toward the door.

“Bwawk,” came a cackle from the living room. Veronica laughed and turned back to Wallace.
“So, the chicken tells me that you’re kinda mad at me. About Piz.”

“Veronica.” Wallace released a tense breath. “Yeah. I’m kinda mad. I’ll get past it. I’ll come back from the summer and there will be so many more important things I’ve learned in Africa that this will seem like no big deal. So can we just let this go for now?”

“I’m good with that. Except for one thing. Logan will be here in…about fifteen minutes. Are you going to be okay with that?”

Wallace groaned loudly and pulled the pillow over his face, then crossed his arms over it, muffling a shout of irritation that made Veronica cringe. She stood uncomfortably next to the bed, jumping back with a start when he suddenly shot upright.

“I gotta go.” He dropped the pillow on the bed and headed for the door.

“Wallace, please, I don’t want you to be mad at me. Not when we’re going to be apart all summer.”

“I’m not mad but I’ve still got to get out of here. Look, I should have kept a better leash on Piz all along. I knew that, I just thought…but I was wrong. I’m sorry that Piz ended up being collateral damage. I warned him but then once you wised up and dumped Logan, I just hoped…but that was a mistake. And just like I was delusional and made that mistake, you get to do the same. I just hope it doesn’t hurt too much when he screws up again.”

“Hold up. I didn’t wise up and dump Logan. I behaved badly and dumped Logan. Again. The first time was a mistake too but I was still too traumatized by Lilly and Aaron and…everything…to be able to support him like he needed back then. You know Logan’s a good guy. When you guys are on your own, you seem to like him just fine.”

“That’s an exaggeration,” Wallace huffed.

“I don’t think so but, like you said, we each get to be as delusional as we choose. Personally, I’m trying to stop that.” She paused and took a step toward him. “Look, you’re my BFF and that isn’t going to change—not for me, at least. I’m really hoping that you’ll be able to accept what, and who, I want in my life. I get that Piz is important to you too but if that friendship means that you can’t support my choices, then I’m going to miss you so much more than I can say.”

Wallace reeled back from her words, banging into the edge of the desk. “You’re going to pick Logan over me?”

“That’s what you got out of that? NO. I’m not picking anyone over anyone. What I’m telling you that if you decide to pick Piz over me, I’m going to be really sad.”

Wallace slumped against the desk, cradling his head in his hands. He shook his head and glanced up at her. “Look. Let’s do what I said at the beginning of this conversation. We don’t talk about it, I get a dose of the hard reality of a third world life, and I come back understanding that the ins and outs of your poor love life choices are inconsequential. But that means I need to go before he gets here.” He stood up and gave her a quick hug.

“Love ya, Vee. Have a great summer.”

“You too, Papa Bear. Stay safe.”

She followed him out to the front room. “Hey, Mac, I gotta take off. Have a great summer bailing out the computer illiterate.”
Mac grinned and gave him a hug. “Have fun saving the world. Come back in one piece.”

“I’ll do my best.” He opened the front door to find Logan, balancing two pizza boxes and a bag in one hand while the other was poised to knock.

“Wallace, man, lunch is served.” The smile on his face fell away as he took in Wallace’s look of disapproval.

“No, I’m out. See ya in a few months.” He pushed past, forcing Logan to take a step back to avoid losing the precariously balanced lunch. Logan turned away and Veronica saw his shoulders slump as he watched Wallace jog out to the parking lot. He turned back to the apartment, looking a little wistfully at Veronica.

“I’m sorry he’s mad because of me.”

“It’s absolutely not your fault. Lots of fault to go around here but this part? Not on you. Truly, at this point, I’m not all that happy with him. But he’s right about one thing. In a few months, this isn’t going to be a big deal and we’ll work it out. But right now? Hand over that pizza, buddy. And I hope there are cheesecake eggrolls in that bag.”

She stretched up to give him a quick kiss, took the bag from him, and headed into the kitchen. Logan followed her, giving Mac a quick wave. “Hey Mac. You get my new websites up and running yet?”

“Are you insane, Echolls? Plug and play doesn’t mean wave a magic wand. I can get the templates set up in a couple of days, do a little testing to make sure there’s no glitches, and then we can open for content. Is next Wednesday soon enough to satisfy you, Mr. Slave Driver?”

“That’s Admiral Slave Driver. And yeah, I guess it’ll have to be since I’m totally at your mercy in this project.” He hip-checked her as she walked up to look at the pizza. “Yes, miss, there’s half a pizza designed for a vegan. Soy cheese and veggies only. Ugh. What a waste.”

Veronica ducked in next to him to look too. He put his arm around her and pressed his lips to the top of her head. She locked her arms around his waist and hugged him back. “I agree, Mac. I can vaguely grasp the veggie thing but no cheese? That seems criminal.”

A booming voice made Logan jump out of Veronica’s grasp. “Do I smell pizza?” Keith came into the kitchen, obviously trying to control his smirk at Logan’s reaction and sniffing the air in an exaggerated manner. “Mac. Logan. How are you guys doing?”

“Good, Mr. Mars,” they chorused together, grinning at each other.

“Jinx,” Mac muttered under her breath. Logan smirked at her and then reached into the bag, pulling out a soda and handing it to her. She nodded approvingly and popped the can open.

Keith turned to pull plates out of the cupboard. “Is Wallace still here?”

“No, he had to get going,” Veronica answered.

“Good, more for me.” Keith set four plates on the counter and loaded the top one with three pieces of pizza. “What else is in the bag? And do you know a good place for wings?”

Logan’s mouth dropped open in confusion and Veronica began to laugh hysterically. “Dad. Don’t make me put you out on the porch.”
Logan, Veronica, Keith, and Mac lingered over their lunch, laughing and joking. Keith extended his offer of poker night to Logan who embodied the term ‘deer-in-the-headlights’ as his head swiveled between Keith’s earnest face and Veronica’s exasperated one.

“Hey, don’t look at me,” Veronica said dryly. “You’re free to hang out with whomever you like while I’m in Virginia. And if he suckers you in to bringing the hot wings, *ppffft*, that’s your problem.” She swiped the last cheesecake eggroll and hopped down from her stool to move into the living room. As she passed Logan, she smirked at him and kissed him on the cheek.

The guiltily flustered look Logan turned to Keith reminded him of when Lilly kissed Logan to irk her mother at the conclusion of the Homecoming limo debacle. Keith was managing to control his smirk until Veronica called from the couch, “If you keep running scared like this, you’ll be his bitch forever.”

Mac snorted violently and got up to follow Veronica. She clapped Logan on the shoulder and leaned in to him, saying in a stage whisper, “Man up, Echolls.”

Keith couldn’t hold in his laughter any longer. Logan’s indignant face was too much. “The girls are right, Logan. Never show your fear.”

He immediately regretted pushing the young man too far when Logan stood to follow the girls to the couch. He picked Veronica up and dropped onto the cushions with her on his lap. He swept Veronica’s hair off her neck and leaned in, his face disappearing from view, making it appear to Keith that he was kissing her neck. Now it was Veronica who looked stricken and Keith could feel his own face frozen in disbelief. Mac, on the other hand, laughed hysterically at this turn of the tables.

“Oh, okay, okay, truce. Get off my daughter.”

Logan looked up innocently. “She’s on me, sir.”

At that, Mac gave another squawk of laughter and came very close to falling off the couch as she struggled to calm herself. Veronica harrumphed indignantly and gave Logan a solid shove in the chest, which pushed her off his lap and onto the couch beside him. Keith, despite the momentary discomfort, had to give the boy’s sense of humor and willingness to go all in its due, but he had his own role to play in this circus.

“We do all recall that I am licensed to carry a weapon.”

Veronica made a rude noise and pushed up from the couch. “I’m going to finish packing and then Logan is taking Mac and me for ice cream. You, old man, are not invited.”

“But I brought lunch,” Logan faux-protested.

“Oh, some boyfriend you are.” She stalked away to her room. Keith had mixed feelings as he watched Logan watching Veronica before he stood up and followed her. The look of adoration on Logan’s face when Veronica called him her boyfriend was inescapable. With what he already knew and what Veronica had confessed earlier, Keith was pretty sure that there wasn’t anything that Logan wouldn’t do to make sure his little girl was as safe and happy as she would let herself be. He wasn’t sure he was ready for this to happen but he was no longer convinced it was a terrible idea either. His moment of introspection ended when he saw Mac stand up and realized that she was smiling at him.

“I think it’s going to be okay this time,” she said matter-of-factly and then headed for the bedroom.
“Don’t pack every item of clothing you own,” Mac scolded as she walked into the bedroom, taking in the scene of Veronica pushing things around in the suitcase like a strange game of Tetris, while Logan lounged on her bed, his legs hanging off the end of the mattress. “You won’t have room for all the FBI tee shirts you need to bring back so we can use them for undercover ops.”

“Oh,” Veronica said in a thoughtful tone. “You’re right. Hmm.” She returned to the digging but this time she was pulling things out.

“Oh for God’s sake,” Logan huffed, standing up and grabbing the tiny bundles and pushing them back into the suitcase. “I’ll buy you another suitcase before it’s time for you to come home.” He flipped the suitcase tops closed and zipped them both up. As he lifted them onto the wheels, he grunted with exertion. “Good lord, these weigh a ton.”

Veronica had stepped away from the suitcases and was trying to discretely tuck her photographs back into the side pocket of her carry-on. Mac thought about calling attention to the hidden treasures but decided to take pity on her friend. She had the feeling the last couple of days had been emotional ones and she thought she’d let Veronica off the hook. She’d tease Logan about his bed head tomorrow at lunch when Veronica was safely away from Neptune.

“So, are you done?” Logan asked. He moved behind Veronica and, as Mac watched, stroked his fingers up and down her arms. Veronica sighed and leaned back against him, rocking her head back to look up at him.

“I guess so. Someone closed my suitcases.”

Logan smiled down at her fondly and leaned down to kiss the bridge of her nose. “All righty then. I believe I have been directed to provide ice cream.”

Mac lead the trio back to the living room where Veronica called out to Keith. “Dad, we’re going.”

He appeared in the hallway. “We’ve got to be out of here by 5:30 PM.”

“By 5:45 PM at the latest. Even I can’t eat ice cream until then.”

“Hmm. Not so sure about that.” Keith glanced first to Logan and then Mac, giving her a wink. “In case I don’t see you when you bring her back, have a great summer, Mac. Logan, if you’re in for poker, either Cliff or I will call you with the time to show up with the wings.”

Logan laughed. “That sounds good. I’m not going to go easy on you just to curry favor, you know that right?”

“You’re buying hot wings to curry favor. I don’t expect you to throw a poker game too.”

Mac and Veronica burst into laughter before telling Keith goodbye. The girls headed out the door and down to the parking lot with Logan following behind them. When they reached Mac’s Bug, she stopped and reached out to hug Veronica.

“I’m going to let you guys have a little time. He’s buying me lunch tomorrow anyway. Have a great summer, Bond. Kick the FBI’s ass.” They broke the hug but stayed close, grinning at each other.

Logan smiled shyly and reached out to squeeze her arm. “Thanks Mac. 12:30 PM at that weird hippy veggie place you like?”

“Yeah, that works.” Logan walked to the Range Rover and leaned against the passenger door.
“Are you sure, Mac? Turning down Amy’s? I’m not sure I’d be able to do that for you.”

“I’m actually pretty full after half a pizza and you guys aren’t going to have much more time alone before you go.”

“Thanks. Be sure you call, write, email, text, whatever. Just remember me sad and alone on the other side of the country away from everyone I love.” Mac snorted and rolled her eyes as Veronica displayed her best pouty face.

“Absolutely.”

“And keep an eye out for my boy please.”

“I think he’ll be okay. Seems like your dad will be keeping an eye out for him too.” Mac couldn’t help the warm smile she felt pulling at her lips.

“Yeah. Isn’t that weird? That’s going to take a little getting used to.”

“It’s a good thing. Okay, I’m going.” They hugged briefly again and Mac turned to get into her car. She glanced back to see Veronica leaning against Logan again with his arms wrapped around her as they watched Mac back up to drive away. Mac raised her hand and grinned as they waved back. "Good luck guys," she said to herself, and the universe, as she drove away. "Fifth times the charm, right?"

Veronica leaned her head against Logan's chest, closing her eyes with a sigh. I don't want to go. She gave her head a shake to clear the thought and turned in Logan’s arms, stretching her arms up around his neck.

“Thanks for being such a good sport with my dad.”

“Hey, when I’m not afraid he’s going to kill me, he’s a pretty funny guy.”

“I agree.” She raised up on her tip-toes to kiss him gently. “Okay, so I was promised ice cream.”

He gave a skeptical frown and released her. “That isn’t how I remember it. I seem to recall you demanding ice cream.” He beeped the locks and opened her door for her with a flourish.

“Hmm, nope, I don’t think so.” She climbed up into the Rover and he stepped in to grab her seatbelt and buckle her in. She smirked at his overly solicitous actions, not at all surprised when he took the opportunity to lean on her center arm rest so he was pressed up against her and able to give her the first serious kiss of the day. When she broke away, breathless, he kissed down her neck, sucking lightly where her pulse pounded erratically. “Logan,” she moaned.

“Yes, love?” She could feel him smiling against her neck.

“Funny or not, he will shoot you.” They both laughed and he gave her one final smacking kiss before backing out of the car and closing the door.

“I’m so afraid there won’t be any ice cream like Amy’s in Virginia.” She turned and stretched her arms around the sign. “I think I’m going to miss you most of all.”

“Oh, nice, Dorothy. Make me feel like the Tin Man.”

She turned from the sign and stretched her arms around him. “He was all heart too. But, I was talking
about Amy’s being the food place I’ll miss most of all.”

“Mmmhmm. I’m sure. So, do you have time to come back to the suite for a while?”

She smirked up at him. “We really shouldn’t. Maybe the beach for a little while? I’m going to miss that while I’m gone but I really do need to be home in about an hour.”

“Whatsoever you want.”

Dog Beach was mostly deserted and they strolled along the water’s edge for a while before settling down into the sand with Veronica straddling Logan’s lap. They alternated between making out and talking about the summer, both in Neptune and Virginia. As she had guessed, Logan was fully ready to hang out in a hotel all week long if she could get away from the base over the weekend. He pointed out that he could range around throughout the week and have an opportunity to sightsee all over the East Coast while she “slaved away for the Feds”.

“Everything’s so close together back there, Veronica. The length of California is the equivalent of like New York to about Atlanta. Think of everything I can see. It’ll be awesome.”

“Yeah, but all by yourself?”

“Sure,” he said, sneaking in another kiss. ”There’s so much historical stuff to see and sometimes that’s better by yourself so you can go at your own pace.” He smoothed her hair back behind her ear. "Any tourist stuff we ever did when I was a kid was always for a camera. I'd just get interested in something and we'd get hustled off by Aaron's handler. Going where I want, and staying for as long as I want? I think it'll be great.”

“You’re just going to drive around all week? In what?”

“Eh, who cares? I can rent a car or honestly, I can buy something. If I get something small, it probably wouldn't be much more expensive that renting a car for weeks on end.”

Veronica pulled back and looked at him skeptically. “You’re going to drive a small car?”

“Mmm, maybe not. I don’t know. I could always drive the Range Rover across the country and then you can come back home with me at the end of the summer. That would be totally fun. Drive from Virginia to St. Louis and then take Route 66 home? Whatever way you want.”

“You know that since my dad is now expecting you for poker that if you vanish, he is going to figure out that you’re with me.”

“Maybe he will and maybe he won’t. We can worry about that later. Kiss me some more. I’ve got to return you soon.”

Fifteen minutes later, she was completely brushed free of sand, even from places that she really didn’t think she had gotten sand, and they were back in the parking lot of her apartment. She was sitting in her seat, facing out, with Logan standing between her legs, arms around her, with both their heads tucked into the crook of the other’s neck, just breathing. She gave a deep sigh and straightened up, putting her hands on his face and pulling him in for one more deep kiss. When they broke the kiss, he leaned his forehead against hers as she smiled up at him.

“Just remember I love you,” she whispered.

“And it’ll be all right?” he teased, his eyes shining.
“It will definitely be all right. Now step back, I’ve got to go in.” He tugged her out of the truck and spun them around a couple of times before releasing her. She backed a couple of steps away from him and stopped. “So who’s going to leave first? I stand here while you drive away or you watch me walk to the apartment? And remember, if I walk away, you have to drive away once you can’t see me anymore so when Dad and I come back out in a few minutes, you’re not here to tempt me anymore.”

His nose wrinkled as he thought for a moment, appearing to be contemplating two undesirable choices. “All right, I’m going to drive away. I want to see you watching me.”

“You got it.” She ran back to him for a moment and gave him a brief hug, then stepped back. “Go.” He obediently walked around the Rover and climbed in where he sat for a few seconds looking at her before raising his hand and blowing her a kiss. She gave him a goofy smile and reached up as if to snatch the kiss from the air, laying that hand across her heart for a moment and then blowing him a kiss back. He matched her gesture then started the car and tore out of the parking lot. She stood for another minute with her eyes welling up before she turned and trudged back to the apartment.
Chapter 4

Happy Holidays to All! Unfortunately, Logan and Veronica are on opposite ends of the country for our Christmas Eve chapter so all we get is phone calls but don't worry, they'll be back together soon. Best wishes to everyone and special thanks to my very helpful betas, KMD0107 and Irislim. You've both been so much help over the last year. I'm so grateful.

Veronica arrived in Virginia in the early morning hours and, both excited and groggy, caught the shuttle to the FBI compound with several other interns in a similar condition. Most were starting their junior years in their respective universities in a variety of majors, including criminology, biology, and business. There was one other young man who had just completed his first year of college like she had but he was a computer science major. The shuttle dropped them off at in front of a multi-storied dorm and they all filed in to the lobby to check in. She was grateful to find fresh coffee and two cups later, she'd gotten checked into her double occupancy dorm room and headed upstairs to get settled in. She knew from the information packet she'd received shortly after getting her acceptance letter that her roommate was fairly local so Veronica anticipated that she might not show up until the last minute before the mandatory welcome mixer set for the following day. Once she had unpacked her suitcases and distributed her various reminders of home, she curled up on her twin bed to read the informational packet that outlined the internship program and life on a Marine base.

First things first; a girl needs her priorities straight: three meals were served in the dining room every day, with breakfast available from 7:00 to 8:00 AM each weekday, until 9:00 AM on the weekends, lunch from 11:30 AM to 1:30 PM, and dinner from 5:00 to 7:00 PM. The twelve hour gap between the end of dinner and the beginning of breakfast was slightly concerning. I wonder if we can get one of those little fridges for snacks. Beyond food, the packet explained that the program would start at 8:00 AM each weekday and end between 4:00 and 5:00 PM, depending on the intern’s assignments. Near the end, she found the piece of information that Logan would be most unhappy to learn: guests were not generally allowed on the grounds. Weekends were usually open however and the interns were free to go off base whenever there wasn’t a previously scheduled activity but, without a car, transportation options were relatively limited. A shuttle ran into the Town of Quantico but the town itself was tiny. Once there though, there was a fairly extensive bus system that could be taken to other nearby municipalities with more amenities. Another detail she found interesting was that cell phones worked in the area surrounding the dorms and the dining hall but once you crossed into the Academy classrooms and the office buildings, cell signals were blocked. There goes my mid-class sexting, she laughed to herself.

She texted both her dad and Logan to let them know she had arrived and then took a nap to try to recover from the all-night flight. Towards the end of the lunch hour, she wandered over to the dining hall to check out the lunch options. The food was decent, for a cafeteria, but Veronica could feel her craving for Mama Leone's and Amy's already starting. She finished a cheeseburger and headed back to her room, looking forward to a post-meal nap.

Veronica unlocked her door and stepped inside, only to find she was no longer alone.

"Hey, I'm guessing you're Veronica. I'm Jeannie Morton."
"I am Veronica. Your investigative skills serve you well. Pretty obvious you're cut out for this place." The other girl chuckled. "It's great to meet you."

"You too. Did you get in this morning?"

"Yeah, I had an all-night trip. It wasn't fun but we saved like four hundred bucks on the ticket so it's cool. I'm a little surprised to see you so soon. From the 'get to know your roomie' information, it looked like you live pretty close. I thought you might take advantage of one last night in your own bed." Veronica flopped down onto her hard mattress. "These things aren't exactly the height of luxury."

"Last year, you probably would have been right," Jeannie said with a friendly smile. "After my first year in the dorms at GW, my mom was dying for me to get home and hang out." She turned back toward her suitcase and went back to unpacking. "But this year, once I got this internship and knew I wouldn't be home for any length of time, she decided it was time to turn my room into a home gym."

Veronica snorted out a laugh. "What?! That's cold. So where do you stay when you go home?"

"Her concession to my occasional home visits was getting a futon for this new gym. She also shoved my dresser into the closet." Jeannie made a comical, pouty face. "Believe me, I was not feeling the love when I came home for the first time and discovered I'd been replaced by a rowing machine and a Cloud Walker."

"Oh no! I don't know what I'd do if I came home to that. Although, I lived at home this last year so it would be a lot more hurtful if my dad did it." Veronica twisted around, trying to settle into a more comfortable position, then gave up and pushed herself to a seated position against the wall. "So what did she do with all your stuff?"

"Boxes. Lots of boxes. So I have to hunt for anything I didn't have with me at school already. Made finding my summer clothes a bitch, let me tell you."

They both laughed, then continued to chat, getting to know a little about each other while Jeannie unpacked. Veronica learned that Jeannie was going into her third year at George Washington University, pursuing a combined BA/MA in Criminal Justice. This was her first FBI internship also. Like Veronica, she planned to use the summer to decide if she was interested in a career with the agency.

Once Jeannie was unpacked, with her side of the room set up like she wanted it, she came over and plunked herself down at Veronica's desk, peering at the pictures she'd tacked up on her bulletin board.

"Oh my God, look at this adorable baby!" She tapped the picture of Backup with a fingernail. "He looks like he's smiling."

"That's Backup," Veronica said. "He's a sweetheart. Although he is very handy as...well, backup. Let's just say he's been my enforcer more than once."

"And this is your dad, I'm guessing?"

"Yes." Veronica pointed at a few of the other photos. "And my friends Wallace, and Mac, and my boyfriend, Logan."

Jeannie gestured at the sleeping picture and laughed. "This is a good look. Was he drooling?"

"Not that I remember. So, it's getting close to dinner time; what do you think about heading over to
the cafeteria?” She looked at Jeannie seriously. "You should know right from the start...I never miss a meal."

They walked over for dinner, still sharing mildly personal information and speculating about what they were getting themselves into. After dinner, they talked about what they could expect from the welcome event the next day and then Veronica turned in for the night, still tired from her cross-country trip.

The next day was Sunday, the day before their internships officially began. All of the interns were expected for a short introduction to the program, followed by a welcome mixer and luncheon. Several of the Academy instructors and department directors were in attendance also. The Director of the internship program explained that everyone would attend a variety of different morning classes at the Academy and would then have a job assignment in the afternoon. The first few days would be spent in orientation meetings and interviews to determine job assignments and training preferences. Both Jeannie and Veronica were interested in the Behavioral Sciences area, both for job placement and coursework so they mingled through the room looking for agents with BAU on their nametags.

Veronica had just ended a conversation with an agent who specialized in locating computer hackers. She'd been torn through the whole discussion, knowing that she was supposed to be there learning how to be an FBI agent and instead she was wondering what she could learn from the agent to help keep Mac out of trouble. The whole conversation felt like a conflict of interest. She had walked over to one of the service tables to fill her water glass when she saw Jeannie waving her over to where she stood with a tall man.

"Veronica," Jeannie said, her eyebrows raised, "Agent Lewis was very interested when I mentioned your name. It seems he was hoping to meet you today." Veronica looked at them both in surprise. "Agent Jason Lewis, this is Veronica Mars."

A genuine smile spread across the man's face as he held his hand out to her. "It's nice to finally meet you. Hank Landry had a lot of amazing things to say about you."

"Oh!" Veronica smiled, relieved at first by how he knew her name. "Are you his friend from college? It's really nice to meet you." As they shook hands, an unpleasant thought occurred to her and she paused. "Have you been in touch lately?"

"Do you mean do I know that your father arrested him? Yeah.” Agent Lewis smiled at her and out of the corner of her eye, Veronica saw Jeannie's mouth fall open briefly before she snapped it shut. "I was actually out in California a couple of weeks ago and I was able to get in to see him. He's only being tried for manslaughter instead of murder, and he says you're to thank for that. He doesn't bear any grudges against you or your father. He'd be taking the fall for cold-blooded murder if you hadn't figured out who really killed his boss." Jeannie's mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water, making it very hard for Veronica not to laugh. She kept that urge in check, given their topic of conversation. "Hank always had really poor impulse control where attractive women were concerned. It got him in trouble more than once. But I really don't think he did anything to his girlfriend. I think she did just fall off the boat like he said."

"Well, if that's the case, I hope his attorney can prove it. He was—sorry, is—an amazing teacher. I'm just sorry that he won't be at Hearst any longer. Even if he does beat the charges for Mindy's death, I'm pretty sure the administration will have an issue with bringing him back to the university. He may not have killed the Dean or the Dean's wife, but I'm guessing he'd be a little too controversial for Hearst."

"That's probably true. Hey, Huston, come here. Come meet Hank's protégé.” Agent Lewis waved to another agent and Veronica took advantage of the break to put a hand on Jeannie's arm.
"I'll fill you in later," she said in a low voice.

"You better believe you will," Jeannie answered firmly.

Both Agent Lewis and the newcomer, Agent Huston, were BAU instructors, and Veronica and Jeannie both questioned them at length about that Unit and its training and job programs. The agents assured them that they should have a pretty good chance of getting their first-choice assignments. The case against Aaron came up too and Veronica reluctantly nodded at Jeannie who was making it extremely clear from her facial expressions that she expected more information about that also. Once the luncheon concluded, they wandered around the grounds talking, with Veronica giving Jeannie the most condensed version of her private investigator background and the cases against Aaron and Landry as she thought she could get away with. Jeannie accepted the Cliffs Notes version that Veronica was willing to give and by then, it was dinnertime. After dinner, they headed back to their room and Jeannie changed to go for a run. Once she was gone, Veronica settled down on her bed to call Logan.

He picked up her call on the second ring. "Bobcat! Have you solved anything unsolved yet?"

She laughed and shook her head at his exuberance. "Not yet. We haven’t even started anything so that would really be beyond even my superpowers."

“I’m confident you’ll wow them before the summer is done.”

“Well, I have successfully made friendly overtures with my roommate and two of the instructors. Aren’t you proud?” She flopped back to lie down, resting the phone on her pillow under her head.

“Even when the rest of the world hates you, I’m always proud. As long as I'm not afraid that you're going to get hurt, it kinda turns me on when you just keep poking your nose in everything, no matter what anyone else thinks.”

She smiled at his sentiment and sighed, wishing that she could snuggle with him while they talked. She filled him in on the conversation with Landry's friends and their assurances that she should get the assignment with one of the BAU teams like she wanted.

"So how was your lunch with Mac? Will you guys be able to go live with the new sites by Wednesday like she said?"

"It sounds like it. She really knows her stuff. I know you know that since she's helped you so much in the last few years but she really is amazing."

"I know. Why do you think I made her my Q?" Veronica said with a laugh. "I just hope that you guys don't get so successful that she doesn't have time for me anymore."

"Pretty sure that isn't going to happen. Once she gets it set up, she doesn't have much to do with the day-to-day as long as no doofus screws it up. Those are her words, not mine. I'm a tiny bit concerned that I may be the doofus that she was referring to so I'm keeping my hands off her computer." They both laughed. "Oh, by the way, she mentioned something about a picture of me sleeping. She made it sound like it was a naked picture. What do you know about that?"

"Wellllll," Veronica said reluctantly, "you were actually naked at the time but you can't see that in the picture. Just your bare back. In bed. With the covers pretty messed up. I guess it is a little suggestive."

"Oh really?" he said with a low chuckle. "When did you take it? Some night you stayed here with me? Wore me out and then took naughty pictures?"
"Logan, no, of course not. Although, urgh, I guess maybe it sorta is. It's actually a picture from our New York trip. It was our first night...umm...you know."

"Ahh. Yes, I do know. I think of that night often. I may have actually thought of it in the shower this morning," he teased. "I never knew you had photographic evidence of when you finally coerced me into your bed."

"I did what?" Veronica shot upright. "Coerced? Seriously?"

"Oh stop, you've gotta know I'm just messing with ya. I'm happy to admit, to anyone but your dad, that I was more than happy to be there." She heard rustling sounds that made her suspect he was stretching out on his bed and tucking his phone under his head like she had been. "So, do you think of that night? Maybe late at night, when you're alone in your bed?"

She laughed, settling back against her pillow. "I might. But I'm not telling you anything specific, if that's where you're trying to take this conversation. I've got a roommate who could come back any time. I am not talking dirty to you in my double occupancy room."

"I suppose that means that if I ask you what you're wearing, the answer isn't going to be anything too exciting."

"Yoga pants and a tank top," she said, rolling her eyes.

"Ooh," he said in an excited voice, "I can absolutely work with that. I'm thinking of that thin white tank top that you wear to bed sometimes. When the light's just right, I can see straight through it."

Veronica glanced down with a frown. She was wearing the tank top he mentioned but she'd never realized that it could be see-through. So much for wearing that down the hallway to the community bathroom.

"So you won't talk to me but I can talk to you," he said in a husky voice. "Like maybe about how you jumped me when I turned up at the door to your hotel room. Or maybe I can tell you how much I enjoyed watching you model the silk nightie I bought for you before I got to the hotel. Or, about how, after we spent the day sightseeing, we got back to the room and I pinned you up against the wall—and—"

Veronica had closed her eyes, picturing the moments he was describing, and was wishing she was back at the Grand with him, when Jeannie burst through the door. Veronica shot upright again at the sudden appearance of her roommate, feeling her cheeks burn bright red, and Jeannie laughed as she apologized, seeming to recognize that she'd interrupted something.

"Lo-Logan, hang on; Jeannie just came back," Veronica stammered, beyond embarrassed. She struggled to regain her composure but Jeannie immediately went to her side of the room and grabbed her bathroom supplies.

"I'm gonna run down the hall and take a shower," Jeannie said in a quiet voice, smiling at Veronica. "I'll probably be twenty minutes or so. Will that work?"

"You don't have to leave because of us," Veronica answered apologetically.

"No, it's no big deal. I need a shower after that run. Tell him I said good night." She grinned and waved before disappearing into the hallway. Veronica squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head, hoping she'd be able to live down this little humiliation, then turned her attention back to her phone.

"Logan, Jeannie’s gonna be back again pretty soon and it's starting to get late for me, especially
considering how early my day is going to start. I really should get going.”

“Okay, but we need to talk about me coming out there. You say you’ve got weekends free and I’ve been doing a little research. There’s almost nowhere to stay in Quantico but there’s a lot of towns right outside the base you’re on and there are some extended stay places that come with little kitchens. That way we can stock up on food and never have to leave our room all weekend long.”

“Logan! You’re suggesting that you stay somewhere with no turn-down service?”

“Oh, aren’t you a laugh riot. You know I don’t let anyone in the suite for that kind of thing anymore. And I am perfectly capable of living in a normal hotel. I just never have. This will be a new adventure for me.”

He was giving her the full court press, trying to get her to agree that he should come to Virginia. She was so tempted to tell him yes but she held strong. “You need to at least make it to one of my dad’s poker games since you did promise him that you’d bring wings.”

He made a scoffing noise. “That’s no big deal. I can think of all kinds of places that I can arrange to have deliver to every poker game they have all summer long.”

“Logan, no, not now. Let me get through at least a week here before you invade the state. Okay? If you’re bored, get Mac to come over again to work on the new websites with you. Extract Dick from his dad and surf. Re-read Harry Potter. I don’t know. Just do it in California for at least another week.”

He reluctantly agreed to table the matter until the week was over and then spent another ten minutes whispering risqué come-ons in her ear before Jeannie returned and they finally hung up. Veronica got up to gather her bathroom stuff, then remembered Logan’s excitement about her tank top and threw a tee shirt on over it.

“So, is he trying to talk you into him coming out here for a visit?” Jeannie asked with a grin.

“What he wants to do is come out and stay as long as I’m here. I’m just worried that he’ll end up just hanging around his hotel room waiting for me most of the time.” Veronica grabbed a washcloth from her dresser and dropped it in with the rest of her supplies.

“He isn’t going to like living in a hotel for a whole summer.”

Veronica threw her head back, laughing, before looking back at Jeannie. “He’s lived in a hotel for the last year and a half but none of the places around here are up to his normal level of ritzy. You know, when I think about it, it might actually be fun to see him roughing it someplace like Extended Stay America.”

The week started with the promised orientations followed by interviews with a multitude of instructing agents and directors. On Wednesday, assignments were handed out and both Veronica and Jeannie were ecstatic to find that they had gotten into the Behavioral Sciences program as they had hoped. With the first official poker night happening that same day and the three hour time difference, Veronica was able to call Logan to share her news and then get to tell her dad in the same call. She shared her excitement with Logan and then he dutifully handed his phone over to Keith so she could deliver her news to him as well. They were both happy for her but once the news was delivered and congratulations extended, the rest of the call was focused on her dad making sure she knew how poorly her boyfriend was doing at the poker table so far and Logan protesting that he wasn't doing that bad. She could also hear Cliff's rumbling voice in the background, probably
zinging insults on them both from the roars of laughter she could hear. Before they were done, they had her laughing so hard that her eyes were watering. When they did finally hang up, she lay in bed trying to sleep for quite a while, aching for home and the people she loved.

The next morning, the regular daily schedule went into effect: classes in the morning and work in the afternoon. As expected, the work part was at least starting out to be mostly copying and filing. Veronica and Jeannie did their best to reassure each other that there would be more exciting things coming their way but at least the coursework was stimulating. Veronica had no trouble keeping busy, especially through the days, but every night she talked to Logan before she went to sleep and she missed him more and more as each day passed. When Friday night rolled around, and a whole weekend loomed in front of her, she was ripe for the picking as Logan again started to talk about coming out to Virginia.

“Veronica, I wish you’d just agree. We’ll have so much fun. I really miss you,” he said so earnestly —and she missed him so much—that it was all she could do to not just tell him hop a plane so he could be with her by the morning.

“So, for argument’s sake—purely hypothetical you understand—let’s say I tell you that you can come. What are you going to tell my dad when he invites you to poker?”

“Mmmm. Well...” Earnest Logan was replaced by another familiar creature: evasive Logan.

“Logan,” she said in a warning tone. Jeannie’s head popped up from the textbook she was reading, an amused smirk on her face. As Veronica watched her, she grabbed a sheet of paper and scrawled a note, holding it up so Veronica could read it. ‘Take pity on him, V.’ Veronica choked back a laugh before turning to ignore her roommate. In a stern tone, she asked, “You already told him?”

“He ambushed me!” he said, a frantic edge to his voice. "I was just trying to do what he asked me—help him clean up after the poker night. So I’m folding up chairs and he just says, straight out, ‘when are you heading for Virginia?’ He totally caught me off guard. I just answered, before my brain caught up with my mouth.”

“And how did you answer?” She closed her eyes and rubbed the bridge of her nose, the picture of her dad interrogating a hapless Logan all too clear in her mind.

“I was so surprised; I mean, if he knew, you must have talked to him, right? So all I could think was, ‘she said I could come?’ And then he says, ‘not that I know of—is that why you’re still here?’ At that point, I realized that he’d suckered me in.”

“And you’re just telling me this now why?” she asked, both amused and exasperated. She heard Jeannie get up off her bed and opened her eyes to see her roommate heading for the door.

"I'll be right back," Jeannie whispered to her and Veronica nodded.

“I didn’t know how to bring it up. Plus, you know, you said didn’t want to talk about me coming out until the week was over."

She shook her head, smirking at his justification. “So, how did that conversation end? You’re talking to me so he didn’t kill you. Did you just turn and run away or what?”

“Of course I didn’t run away. I sat down, told him I was trying to get you to agree that I could come out there. That I wasn’t going to distract you at all, wouldn’t mess up your internship, probably wouldn’t even be around during the week so I could check out the Atlantic seaboard. And that on the weekends, I’d be able to take you around to do some sight-seeing that you wouldn’t probably have
the opportunity to do otherwise. Washington DC, all the Smithsonians and memorials, that could keep you occupied all summer long. Maybe trips up to Philadelphia or Boston. Cape Cod. Newport. All kinds of things to see. Personally, I thought that was inspired, thinking to make it into an educational opportunity, especially after he tricked me like he did.”

“So did that work?”

“Well, I'm still alive. He seemed reluctantly in favor of you getting the chance to see all those places.”

“You know that defeats your plan of staying in each weekend in your little efficiency hotel room.”

“You know we weren’t going to do that anyway. I'll be able to spend time sight-seeing during the week when you’re busy but I'll want to see a lot of these places with you too. We can go wherever we want. On this trip, I can be like the advance guard, making sure the sites are important enough to take m'lady's time.”

She rolled her eyes at his silliness. “So fly or drive out?”

“Are we still hypothetical?” The hopeful tone in his voice made her feel warm inside.

“Right now, yes, consider the whole conversation hypothetical.”

“Okay, well, I think it might be cool to drive. I might get Dick to drive with me but I’ll drop him off at an airport before I come anywhere near you. He’s having a pretty hard time with his dad after only a couple of weeks. If I’m going to be away for the rest of the summer, I’d like to give him at least a little something else to do before I’m gone. Do you have any problem with that? Plus, in case you agreed, I’ve been getting Mac over here as much as possible to hang out and play video games. In case I went away, I was hoping she might still spend some time with him and keep him company. What do you think about that?”

“Make sure Mac knows that’s your plan. I don’t want her getting stuck all summer with your cretin friend without her consent. As for the trip, I guess that’s fine, as long as he doesn’t talk you into cross-country debauchery.”

“Veronica. You don’t really think I’d purposely do something to hurt you, do you? I know that you’re not always happy with some of my choices, but really? Do you think I’d cheat on you? Do you think I’ve ever cheated on you?”

Veronica was silent. This was getting too near to what they’d gone through repeatedly in the last year. She had committed herself to not jumping to conclusions and thinking the worst. Unfortunately, her pause to contemplate how to fix the conversation made it worse.

“Dammit Veronica, how can you think…” Where his hopeful tone had made her feel warm, the hurt in his voice made her shiver.

“No, stop. I’m sorry. I was looking for the right words, not trying to decide. I know you haven’t and I know you wouldn’t. However, I would not put it past Dick Casablancas to try to get you drunk enough to hook up with some floozy in a bar. I can't imagine that he's happy about us being together again. He hates me and I don’t see that changing, probably ever. That has to be hard on you, always having to walk the tightrope between us.”

“Veronica, I know you don’t get it, but Dick’s like family,” Logan said, his voice returned to the calm contentment she'd heard earlier. She sighed in relief. He understood her trust issues but he was confident that he could believe her with only a few reassuring words. She hoped that someday she
could learn that kind of faith. "Other than you, he's pretty much the only family I have. I know you feel like his familial relationship is that of my idiot brother but beggars can’t be choosers. He doesn’t have anyone else either so I kinda feel responsible for him. I wouldn’t ever choose him over you but unless you absolutely need me to put him out of my life, I don’t feel right about just discarding him. Can you understand that?"

She sighed at the idea of spending time with Dick but she understood what Dick meant to him. “I can, even if I don’t want to. So if you want to lose valuable brain cells spending the next week crossing the country with Dick, I’m not going to give you a hard time. I will say that I like the part where you send him home without me having to see him.”

“Absolutely, Mars. You’ll still be locked on that base when we hit town and he heads home. Scout’s honor.”

She scoffed. “Don’t push it. Scout’s honor, Logan? The closest you ever got to a scout was making fun of Duncan.”

“He looked stupid. That’s not my fault. So, have you answered my question and I just didn’t recognize it? If I want to drive cross-country, you won’t give me a hard time. Does that mean yes?”

She made a little grumbly noise, then grudgingly forced out, “Yes. It means yes.” She jerked the phone away from her ear just as Jeannie walked back into the room and they both heard his 'whoop' of triumph. The girls' eyes met and they both laughed as Jeannie came the rest of the way into the room and headed for her bed.

“Thank you, Veronica, you won’t be sorry, we are going to have the best time. I love you.”

Veronica put the phone back to her ear, still laughing as the words tumbled excitedly from him. “So will you be leaving tomorrow?”

“Oh no, probably not until Wednesday morning, after next week’s poker night.”

She was shocked. “You’re going to wait four more days and then voluntarily go back to my dad’s before you come out here? Won’t it take four or five days to drive out?”

“Not if we drive straight through. Less chance of road trip shenanigans that way too, right? Plus, there might be stuff your dad wants to send to you and I told him I’d be there for poker next week. He said something about getting Sacks there. I don’t know what that was about but I didn’t really care. I just don’t want to let him down.”

She laughed again, but nervously this time. “Are you absolutely sure about waiting? What if he tells you not to come out?”

“ He won’t. He already said that we’re adults and it isn’t up to him but that he hopes we won’t do anything to disrupt your FBI opportunity. I promised that we wouldn’t.”

“And he bought that? Are you sure you were actually speaking to Keith Mars? About half a foot shorter than you? Balding? Sneaky as hell?”

“I think we’re in another pot and kettle situation on that last one. Yes, I’m sure it was your dad. And I’m sure I’m going back there on Tuesday. This week I’m getting pizza delivered. Apparently Cliff really likes those cheesecake eggrolls too. I might keep having food delivered even while I’m with you. If he’s his daughter’s father, his stomach will be a good route to his better side. ”

“Oh, that's real funny.”
They spent a while longer on the phone, debating the best route for a straight-through trip to Virginia and places they could visit together. When they signed off, he was still throwing out ideas for places to see and things to do, his excitement palpable. As she plugged her phone into the charger, she noticed Jeannie smiling at her.

“So, I guess you’re getting company soon, hmm?” Jeannie asked, closing her book and placing it on the desk beside her.

“Yep, I couldn’t say no anymore,” Veronica answered, a smile on her face as she realized that she’d wanted to say yes right from the beginning.

“You didn’t say no for very long,” Jeannie teased. “A whole week. Ooh. You’re a tough customer.”

“Yeah, yeah, a marshmallow, I know. Sue me.”

“Oh no, I’m glad you said yes. Personally, I can’t wait to meet this guy.”

Veronica looked at her with suspicion. “Why?”

Jeannie gave her a confused look. “Why are you looking at me like that? Your phone conversations are hilarious and I’m only getting one side. I can’t wait to hear how they sound when I can hear both of you. And a guy who can interest someone like you yet still seems to turn himself inside out doing whatever you say? This I have to see.”

Veronica shook her head and let out an embarrassed laugh. “Sorry. We’ve had some trouble before. People sometimes want to know more about Logan than he’d like them to know.”

“Is this the movie star parent thing that you mentioned? I don’t care about his parents. Now, if HE were a movie star, maybe that would be interesting but just his parents? Nah. Honestly, since they’re both deceased, he can’t even get their autographs if they were actors I really cared about.”

“That’s refreshing. Maybe we should have come to the East Coast a long time ago,” Veronica said, drawing in a relieved breath.

“Maybe. Around here, kids of politicians are probably considered more interesting than entertainment spawn.”

“If that’s true, he’s going to be ecstatic here. He’ll also be thrilled with a new moniker for his sister. Entertainment spawn.”

The next week went by fairly quickly. Jeannie had her car with her since her school was only about an hour away and her family about ninety minutes. They did a little sightseeing around the tiny town of Quantico over the weekend and then made their way beyond the Base perimeter to some of the nearby towns, checking out the shopping, dining, and lodging options. They were constantly interrupted by excited phone calls and texts from Logan with ideas and questions. Sunday night, Veronica got a call from Mac, crowing about her gaming victories over both Logan and Dick, who could be heard in the background claiming that she had somehow cheated.

As the week began and they returned to the program, Veronica, like her fellow interns, was finding the coursework to be interesting but the afternoon work shifts weren’t nearly as exciting. The most amusing part of each day came at the end of the work shift when they would move out of the blocked cell zone in the offices as they walked back to the dorms and Veronica’s phone would begin to buzz nonstop as a day’s worth of texts from Logan would roll in.
Early Wednesday morning, Jeannie and Veronica were walking to the dining hall for breakfast when Veronica’s phone vibrated with an incoming call from her dad.

“Dad, hey, is everything okay? It’s barely four in the morning there.” She tried to keep her voice even but she knew that her panic over the unexpected call at a weird hour was probably showing.

“Yes, honey, I didn’t mean to worry you. Everything’s okay. I just wanted to talk to you first thing, about Logan’s trip.”

Ah, now she understood. He wanted to talk her out of it before Logan left town.

“What did you want to talk about Dad? Logan said you told him you were okay with it but I thought that seemed unlikely. Did you tell him last night or do I need to call him now and tell him he can’t come?”

“No, Veronica, I’m not shooting the idea down. I just realized that you and I didn’t talk about it and I wanted to make sure that you actually wanted him there…that this isn’t just his idea.”

She paused for a moment, not certain what she wanted to admit. Finally, she just decided to lay it out for him. She waved Jeannie on into the dining hall and sat down on a bench outside the entrance.

“Dad, it’s not just his idea. I do want him to come out. He is SO excited about getting to visit all the museums in DC and about us getting to explore some of them together. I am too but I’ve got the internship that will be taking up my weekdays and I swear, I’m not going to let that slide just because he’s here. I’m sure that he isn’t going to try to distract me either; he’s been really great about making sure I know he’s completely supportive of whatever I need to make this summer successful. I just think that him being here will be icing on the cake of this really great opportunity. Can you understand that?”

“Honey, I completely understand. And I think you’re right, he’s been bending over backwards to try to convince me that he isn’t going to undermine your participation in the FBI program, even if that means that he might not see you at all some weeks if you’ve got weekend activities too. Actually, at one point he said that he needed you to be successful because once he burns through his inheritance, he’ll need someone to support him.”

She gasped in surprise at that statement but then heard her dad laughing. “I gave him a really dirty look when he said that and he about turned himself inside out trying to explain that he was only joking. It was pretty funny watching him squirm.”

“Don’t be mean to him on purpose please.”

“I’m not. Sometimes he just walks right into these opportunities for a little harmless fun because he’s trying so hard to say all the right things. But I do know he’s trying and I know that he has the best intentions but, so help me, Veronica, you had better not come home pregnant. I will make him pay for that.”

She gasped at this blunt statement. “Dad, no, it’s not going to be like that.”

“Veronica, don’t try playing me for a fool. I know exactly what it’s going to be like. However, you’re an adult and so is he, mostly. I also know he pretty much worships the ground you walk on. I’m not an idiot and I don’t want to have this conversation again but I need to say this once. Make sure you’re safe.”

“Yes, Dad,” she said in a subdued voice.
“Okay, then. I won’t call him and wake him up to tell him his trip is off. Although that does sound fun. I’m gonna let you go so you can get your breakfast and have a very productive day. I love you, honey.”

“Love you too, Dad.”

The rest of the week continued in the same fashion with the only exception being the content of Logan’s texts. After a message at 8:23 AM PDT on Wednesday morning, complaining about Dick’s slow and lazy ass, all further texts simply contained location names. At 8:54 AM PDT, the message was “Buh-bye Neptune”. At 11:40 AM MST, “Yuma, AZ”. As she and Jeannie headed to dinner, 2:30 PM MST, “Eloy, AZ”. When she woke up the next morning, she saw that at 4:15 AM CDT, they had been in “Abilene, TX”. And so it went…classroom, filing, and then a stream of texts from the road on his way to her.

On Friday morning, on the walk to breakfast, came one last text: 6:26 AM EDT “Stafford, VA, closest thing to Quantico without passing through a Marine Corps checkpoint.” She squealed and jumped up and down as she read it. Jeannie laughed at her.

“They’re here already? They really did drive straight through.”

Veronica was already dialing. A rough voice answered. “Shh, we’re sleeping.”

“Are you already checked in somewhere?”

“No, we’re still driving.”

“And sleeping?” she asked incredulously.

“Well, maybe not everyone’s sleeping. We’re about a mile from our destination. I made a reservation starting last night so we could check in this morning and wouldn’t have to wait until after 4:00 PM. I need to get my strength back before you show up tonight.”

She squealed and jumped around again. Now both Logan and Jeannie were laughing. “So, when and where do I find you at the end of the day?” he asked.

“Actually, Jeannie’s going home for the weekend so she said she would drop me off. I just need to know where.”

He gave her the name and address of his latest hotel home and she told him when to expect her. She snickered as she heard Dick in the background saying, “I cannot believe you’re going to stay in a place with the word affordable in the name all summer”.

“Come down from the Grand, hmm?”

“Yeah, probably. I’ll live. Now go learn something cool and I’ll see you in about eleven hours.”

“I can’t wait.”
"It'll be fine, Jeannie, come to dinner with us," Veronica urged, as she and Jeannie ran up the stairs to their dorm room. They'd been released from their afternoon duties and headed straight for their room.

"You've been apart for a couple weeks—pretty sure he's gonna want to be alone with you," Jeannie protested. They both grabbed their already-packed weekend bags, then hurried to the parking lot and Jeannie's car.

"Hey, I told you on our first day that I don't miss a meal," Veronica laughed. "He knows he’s going to have to feed me first. It will be quick though so you can get on the road to your home gym futon before it gets very late."

"If you’re sure," Jeannie said, but it was clear from the grimace on her face that she was still not thrilled about being a third wheel.

Just to be certain, on the drive over, Veronica sent Logan a text. "Jeannie’s with me. Do NOT open the door naked."

The response was nearly instantaneous. "Damn. Where are my shorts?" She laughed and turned to Jeannie. "Like I said; no problem."

Twenty minutes later, she was bounding up the stairs to Room 237 of the Affordable Suites Quantico with Jeannie ambling, still a little reluctantly, behind. The door opened immediately after she knocked and she stumbled backwards at the sight of Dick Casablancas. Jeannie's hands caught Veronica before she fell any further back while Dick was wrenched out of the doorway and Logan appeared.

"You stupid ass, I told you to let me get it." His angry face dissolved into remorse as he saw Veronica’s horrified look. "I am so sorry, Veronica." He caught her in his arms and swung them around while planting little kisses on her face. Her Dick-induced stupor quickly dissolved and she passionately kissed him back. When she became cognizant of anything besides Logan’s mouth and arms, she was pressed between the outside wall of the hotel and Logan with her arms and legs wrapped around him. She pulled her head back and they smiled at each other.

"You are, apparently, no Scout. What is that thing doing here?"

He momentarily looked chagrined then walked them back into the room. "I had to let the thing stay so you could see... this." He turned so she could view the room's interior and see Mac.

"Oh my God! Mac! What are you doing here?" Veronica struggled to extricate herself from Logan and threw herself into a hug with Mac. As she turned back toward Logan, Dick opened his arms like he was expecting a hug also and instead she gave a mocking laugh before asking Logan, "Any other surprises for me? You’re not hiding my dad in the bathroom, are you?" She walked back into Logan’s open arms and turned to see Dick making a pouty face at his exclusion from the welcome hugs. She rolled her eyes as Mac patted him on the shoulder in mock sympathy.

"No, I offered but he said he’d pass on a non-stop cross-country trip with me and Dick. He was okay with Mac. Just not us."
“So does that mean your dad is perv’ing on Mac?” Dick spoke for the first time but he shut up immediately when Mac's fake sympathy turned to violence and she punched him in the chest.

“Shut up, Dick,” she said, following the chest punch with a smack upside the head. The look of dismay on his face made Veronica laugh.

“Geez, can’t anyone take a joke around here?” Dick said, rubbing at his chest.

Using her grip on Logan's waist to move him with her, Veronica turned toward Jeannie who was leaning against the wall watching the scene with an amused expression.

“Jeannie, sorry about all the crazy. Someone caught me off guard.” She gave Logan a poke in the side. “This is my boyfriend, Logan—” he reached for Jeannie’s hand and they shook “—and my friend Mac—” Mac gave a little wave from where she stood “—and that, is Logan’s ill-chosen hetero life mate, Dick. He tends to live up to the advertising his name provides.” Logan and Mac both snorted in unison and Dick walked over to Jeannie, took her hand in his and lifted it to his lips, ignoring the groans from everyone else in the room.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Jeannie. I hope my friends’ poor attempts at humor don’t offend you.” He lowered his voice and tilted his head toward her as if in confidence. "They all think they're funny but..." he shook his head, nose wrinkled, "not so much."

Veronica shook Logan’s arm off her shoulders and walked over to push Dick away from a smirking Jeannie.

“Hey, don’t get handsy, Ronnie; isn’t Logan enough for you?” Dick said with a sneer. That brought Logan over to give Dick another push.

“You’re really making me regret bringing you, Dick.”

“Ah, come on, I’m just kidding around with Ronnie. You guys have, like, no sense of humor.”

“We need to get moving along if we’re going to eat anything before you dump us at the airport,” Mac interjected. “It’s hard to find anything besides peanuts that I can eat in an airport and I’m hungry. Do you guys have a suggestion for a speedy dining experience with no animal products?”

Veronica and Jeannie had noticed a little café with a vegan-friendly menu the prior weekend that was in the direction of both Jeannie’s parents and the airport so they all headed out for a quick dinner. While they waited for their meals, they discovered that Jeannie’s route to her parents’ house in Montpelier would pass the regional airport where Mac and Dick’s trip home was to begin so she volunteered to drop them off and save Logan and Veronica the rest of that trip. Once everyone was finished eating, Mac and Dick grabbed their bags and moved over to Jeannie’s car after they all said their goodbyes.

“Ready to go home, Bobcat?” Logan curled his arm around Veronica’s waist and tugged her closer to him. “I’ve lost a couple of hours with you already with my not-so-brilliant plan to bring your friend to see you for like, a minute.”

“So you lost two hours but Mac and I only saw each other for a minute. Hmm. I think your math skills suck. And I’m so glad you brought her, even if it was only for a minute. I loved seeing her. Plus, it probably made the drive straight through even easier with three drivers instead of just two.”

“Yeah, it actually did. One of us could sleep, one could drive, and the other could help keep the driver perked up when necessary. Forty-four straight hours in the car, stopping only for gas, food, and bathrooms was a long trip. I’ll tell ya, there was definitely a fight for the shower when we got
into the room this morning.”

“On the way home at the end of the summer, let’s take a little more time, if you don’t mind.” She stretched up to kiss his cheek. "I'm rather fond of regular showers."

He lifted an eyebrow suggestively. “Absolutely, we can take as much time as you want. Whatever way we want to go, stopping to see whatever we want to see. It'll be great.” He stooped down to kiss her and she turned to wrap her arms around him.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” she whispered in his ear as he grabbed her hips and lifted her up to him.

“Me too,” he answered and with her securely wrapped around his frame, they walked to the Range Rover, kissing as they went until he finally deposited her in the passenger seat and they made their way back to the motel.

During the drive, they talked idly of the events of the last couple of days since they had not actually spoken between Tuesday and Friday. She had thought that odd at first, then had written it off to unreliable cell service on the drive, but now understood that he hadn’t wanted to spoil the surprise of Mac tagging along. He had been very successful in luring Mac to the suite for video games and she had been hanging around with them for most of the week before they left for Virginia.

“It was actually Dick’s idea to bring her along. I kinda think he’s getting a crush on her but she’s oblivious as far as I can tell. She usually treats him like a poorly behaved pet. You saw her smacking him around earlier. That’s a pretty regular occurrence. If she could physically rub his nose in something, I think she probably would. She’s got a keycard for the suite now and I told her she could use my room whenever she wanted. You know, if she wants some time away from her family, or whatever. It sounds like her little brother bugs her when she’s trying to do computer work.”

“Yeah, that's true. Sometimes when I’ve needed her to get into something for me, she’ll just come to me rather than try to work on it at home.

“She filled me in with a little more detail about what she got into for you a few weeks ago.”

Until that point, she had been drawing shapes on his arm with her fingertip but now she froze. “So how mad at me are you?”

“I’m not.” As she watched, he glanced up into his rear view mirror before changing lanes, then peeked over at her with a shame-faced grin. "Hey, I totally understand why you felt the need to figure out who taped you and Piz and why you wanted revenge. I did the same thing when I kicked Piz’s ass, only I did it without actually getting the evidence that he was guilty first. And I went off half-cocked again when I fought that asshole in the Food Court. How can I be mad at you when I’m doing the same kind of thing or worse?”

His complete lack of irritation was more disturbing to her than the anger or disappointment she had expected. As he spoke in his even tone, she scrunched further away from him until she was pressed against the door. Softly, she said, “I always get mad at you. It never seems to matter to me that I’m being a hypocrite.”

He glanced towards her and then back at the unfamiliar road. Although his eyes were on the traffic around him, he reached over and grabbed her arm, pulling her back towards the center console, then grasping her hand firmly and threading their fingers together before lifting it to his lips for a kiss. “I’m hoping you’re starting to get some control over that.” Another quick glance and a smile. "Acknowledging we have a problem is the first step, right? Seems to me like you’re on your way.”
She nodded and traced their linked fingers with her free hand. She couldn't help but wonder if she'd done the right thing, bringing him all the way across the country just to keep her company. “I am trying but I don’t know why you even like me, let alone think you love me. Most of the time I’m such a bitch.”

Logan was filled with relief when he spotted the Affordable Suites sign immediately ahead. With regret, he extracted his hand from Veronica's so he could make the hard turn into the parking lot. He slid the truck into a space and slammed it into Park before turning to her. To his dismay, she had pulled away again, and had pressed both hands over her eyes. She was taking long, deep, shaky breaths.

"Oh hell no," he murmured and reached over to unsnap her seatbelt, then dragged her over the console, settling her facing him in his lap. This was not how his first night back with her was supposed to be going. "Veronica, baby, please don’t cry. I don't just think I love you, I know I love you and I've told you before, sometimes I like you best when you're a bitch."

He was horrified when she sucked in a loud, sobbing gasp of air. "No, no, no please, baby, you gotta stop, I was just kidding around."

"No, you weren't," she said in a broken voice. "We both know we get turned on when the other one goes all medieval on people we don't like." He snickered and gave a little nod. "But you don't like me being a bitch to you. And I have been. Such a bitch. To you."

"Sometimes," he admitted as he stroked her hair. "And no, those haven't been among my happiest moments. But you're not doing that right now, are you?" She hid her face against his neck and shook her head. "And you're not planning on being a bitch to me in the immediate future, are you?" She actually gave a weak chuckle against his throat and shook her head again. "Okay, then, I need you to listen to me for a minute." He leaned back as much as he could in the cramped space and cupped his hands around the sides of her head. "Veronica. Please look at me." He could feel her resisting at first, then she let out a heavy sigh and leaned back against the steering wheel. He groaned when he saw the tears running down her face. He smoothed his thumbs across her cheeks and then dropped his hands to her arms, stroking slowly up and down.

"Are you listening?" She nodded. "Okay, this is what I think. Once upon a time, you told me that some really shitty things I did, you were choosing to think of as not real. Do you remember?" She nodded again. "Now, just so we're clear, I don't think that the stuff that happened over this last year equates to what I did in the year after Lilly died. Not even close. But for argument's sake, I'm going to tell you exactly what you told me. Those things that happened in this last year, when you were having such a hard time trusting anyone, me included, I'm choosing to think of those things as not real. Just like you did for me."

"It isn't the same," she said in low voice.

"No, it's not. What I did was so much worse. And here's something else. Pretending the bad stuff wasn't real. In retrospect, I don't think it was your best idea. I actually think that part of the reason that you had so many trust issues this year, is because those "not real" things were real and they didn't just vanish because you said so." He stroked his thumb across her cheek, wiping away more tears.

"So why are you saying this year's stuff isn't real if that's such a bad idea?"

"Because for me, as long as you’re willing to be with me again, and as long as you really are going to work on not practicing your evisceration skills on me directly, the bad stuff in the past really
doesn’t matter. I think the best thing we both can do is realize that the other person made mistakes, is sorry for them, and would give anything to take away the hurt we’ve caused the other." She looked down, nodding slightly but her lower lip trembled. Logan gently bumped his knuckle under her chin and she looked up again. "But we need to remember, Veronica, we both are absolutely going to make new mistakes. We’ve just gotta learn to work through it and start acknowledging that no one’s trying to hurt anyone else intentionally and then we move on. Everyone screws up sometimes, Veronica. We just need to agree that we aren’t going to torch our lives all over again if something doesn’t go just like we think it should."

“I can agree with that," she said, her voice stronger and a tentative smile on her face.

"Yeah?" She nodded. He smiled back at her and kissed the tip of her nose. “Okay then. One more thing then, while I have you all captive and agreeable." He snaked his arms around her torso and tugged her toward him slightly. He recognized his error immediately as she took the opportunity to roll her hips to press down into his lap. He sighed in relief at the teasing smile that had replaced the sad one.

"I'm not sure why you think I'm the captive here. I'm the one on top."

He was torn for about a second before he decided that they had the whole summer to talk about their feelings and right now all he wanted was to get her upstairs and naked.

"How right you are, my dear. So what do you plan to do with me?"

Her uncertain expression returned as she said, "Was there something else you wanted us to talk about first?"

"Nope. Not tonight. Right now I want to get back to our home for the next three months and do some of the things that I've been dreaming about for the last two weeks."

She smiled a little wider and nuzzled into his neck. “Ooh, I like the sound of that.” She opened the car door and then rose up on her knees that were planted against his seat on either side of his hips. He could see the wicked smirk on her face just before she deliberately pressed her breasts into his face as she stretched behind him into the backseat for her messenger bag. Never one to let an opportunity pass, he nudged his nose and mouth against her hardened nipples. The low murmuring sound she made low in her throat took the partial erection he’d been sporting since he’d first set eyes on her at the door to his room to a new, nearly painful, level and he wrapped an arm around her waist to stop her passage out of the car before gently catching a nipple between his teeth. She moaned more loudly and arched toward him momentarily, then gave a husky laugh and pressed her hands to his cheeks. She kissed his forehead and pulled back to look at him.

"Come on, buddy, more of that up in the room." She slid off his lap and out of the car, then turned to walk toward the staircase to their suite. He immediately followed her out of the truck, catching up to her as she started to ascend the stairs. She giggled as he grabbed at her ass and turned so she was climbing the stairs sideways. "You can't even keep your hands to yourself for a minute?"" }

"Nope," he repeated, popping the P more deliberately as he reached for her waist and lifted her to settle on his hip. She wrapped her legs around his torso and her arms around his neck, clinging to him as he climbed the stairs. When they reached the top of the stairs, he walked them to their door and she tightened her legs around him, grinding against him again while kissing and nipping beneath his jaw and up behind his ear. She released his neck with a gasp when he reached the door and pressed her against it with the hip she was straddling. He somehow found his keycard while continuing to keep the pressure against her and when the door fell open behind her, he stumbled in and nearly lost his grip on her, before he recovered and kicked the door shut behind them.
Logan woke in an unfamiliar room feeling both chilly and strangely overheated. As his eyes and brain came into focus, he realized he was in Virginia with Veronica sprawled across him like a blanket. Her bare skin was warming his wherever they touched. However, they were very different sizes and the air conditioner seemed to be blasting super-chilled air into the room so anywhere Veronica wasn’t covering him, he had goosebumps. He wrapped his arms around her trying to spread her warmth further but discovered that her entire exposed back was also freezing. He raised his head, trying not to shift too much and wake her, while looking for any of the covers that had been pushed out of the way by their earlier activities. He found a corner of the sheet still within his grasp and tugged it back up over them.

After a minute, he realized that while the feel of Veronica covering him was quite rewarding, his neck was getting stiff since they’d sent the pillows flying like the sheets. He slowly shifted to his side, sliding Veronica to the mattress beside him. He managed to get her where he wanted her without waking her and then moved to spoon up behind her. The careful maneuvering all unraveled when he yelped as he felt the extreme temperature differential between the side of Veronica that had been cuddled up against his chest and abdomen and the side that he had just tried to spoon up against. He knew her back had been freezing but it wasn’t until he felt it against his warm skin, especially some of that particular warm skin, that he realized just how cold she was. His distressed cry woke Veronica, who jerked away into a seated position near the head of the bed. Her eyes rolled wildly around the room and he reached out to pat her reassuringly but he couldn’t stop his reaction to the whole mess, giggling hysterically and repeating, “Sorry, I’m so so sorry,” as he lay stretched out next to her.

"What just happened?" she asked, sliding back down on the bed, still looking suspiciously around the room.

"The air conditioner tried to kill us." He started to tuck the sheet around her again but was distracted by the cold's effect on her nipples and got sidetracked. As he then started to slide his attentions down her body, the sheet came with him and the moment was broken by her sudden attack of the shivers. He nuzzled at her core briefly before slipping back up to face her. He smiled and kissed her, this time successfully tucking the sheet behind her.

"As much as I enjoy you shuddering beneath me," he whispered in her ear, "I don’t think sub-arctic temperatures are really how I want to make that happen." He kissed her again and then hopped up to vanquish the A/C. When they first got back to the room after dinner, it had been so stuffy that he'd given the controls a quick twist to crank up the noisy contraption and had then gotten lost in Veronica. A couple of times. Okay, maybe three. Now that his head was not swirling with pent-up lust, he took a few minutes to try to figure out how to find a happy medium. Unfortunately, he found additional proof that he wasn’t at the Grand anymore; there was no digital control to set the temperature at a pleasant 72 and leave it there. There was only a dial with a range through the extremely descriptive 'High - Medium - Low'. The dial had been in the lower range when they got into the room and he had twisted it as far toward 'high' as it would go, wanting to air the room out in a hurry, not realizing it would keep on pumping out the cold til glaciers formed. He chose a more middle-of-the-road setting this time, realizing this process was going to require more attention than he was used to.

He headed back to bed but discovered Veronica was in the bathroom, now wearing his discarded shirt and brushing her teeth. Their eyes met in the mirror and she gave him a foamy smile. He pulled his own toothbrush out of the cup he’d put on the counter earlier and joined her in the dental hygiene. As she washed her face, he explained what had happened before he accidentally scared her awake earlier.
"Oh, my poor baby having to deal with a non-programmable heating and air unit. This is going to be a crash course in living like the little people do."

"Oh sure, make fun of me. I was trying to warm you up when that whole incident occurred but you're gonna ridicule me. Nice girlfriend."

She hung up her washcloth and pressed herself up against him where he leaned against the counter. "I can be a very nice girlfriend," she said, smiling up at him. He leaned hard on the counter to make sure it seemed solid and lifted her onto it. Reaching for his bag of toiletries, he extracted a condom and handed it to her. As she smoothed it down over him, she teased, "Do you have these things everywhere?"

"Baby, you don't know the half of it, I haven't even brought out the big guns yet." He pulled her to the edge of the counter and slid into her with a groan of satisfaction. She moaned in response and then giggled.

"I don't know. Feels like a pretty big gun to me."

Much later, Logan spooned behind Veronica in the remade bed. The room temperature had returned to something inhabitable by humans and, for a while at least, they both wanted to sleep.

Veronica woke first in the morning, having already adjusted to the time zone and an alarm clock going off at 5:30 each morning. Logan was still curled securely around her with one arm wrapped around her and, amusingly, his hand firmly cupping her breast. Apparently even in a deep sleep, he wasn't letting her go. She listened to his long, slow breaths and reflected on her meltdown the night before. She knew she was making a sincere effort to be aware of her tendency to leap to judgment and stop it before it happened. She had also committed to taking all of the people she loved more into consideration before choosing a course of action.

The problem last night seemed to be more about the guilt she was feeling about the past. She thought about Logan's assertion that burying her thoughts of his betrayals after Lilly's death, instead of dealing with them, had caused her to subconsciously expect him to hurt her again and, in true Veronica Mars' fashion, make sure to fire a preemptive strike. It had seemed like the right thing to do back then. Let things go. Isn't that what normal people did? Maybe so, but it seemed now that maybe she hadn't let her hurt go quite as well as she thought she had. She thought of what Logan had said was true for him: as long as they were together and trying, he wasn't driven by past mistakes. That seemed like a good plan. She twisted in his arms, smirking at his hand's initial resistance to letting her go. She laid on her back with his arm still wrapped around her protectively and watched his eyes flutter beneath the lids, wondering if she was what he was dreaming about. He looked peaceful and content so she hoped so. She watched him for another minute, then stretched up to leave a gentle kiss on his lips before snuggling in against him and closing her eyes.

She woke again to find Logan lying on his side, staring down at her with a tender smile on his face. "Morning, sunshine." He kissed her forehead and smoothed her hair behind her ear. "Sleep well?"

"I think I did, when you let me." She scooted in tightly against him and ran her fingers along his chest to his shoulder and then down his arm. She frowned at a long scratch on his bicep and he glanced down to see what had caught her attention, grinning when he discovered the source of her reaction.

"Yeah, we did have an activity-filled evening. And morning. And stop worrying, that doesn't hurt." She peered at him, trying to see if he was telling her the truth. There was nothing in his face to
suggest anything different from what he was saying. She lifted her hand to her mouth and kissed her fingertips, then smoothed them along the scratch. His eyes fluttered shut with an expression of pure contentment. She rolled from her back to her side, propping herself up on her elbow so she could reach to drop a kiss directly on his bicep, then on his chest.

"So what's on the agenda for today?" she asked, continuing to kiss his chest as she ran her hand up and down his back.

"No agenda today," he said in a low voice. His eyes stayed closed but he groaned softly when she moved closer so she could run her hand further down his back, then flatten her palm against his ass. "We've got a couple weeks to catch up on, then maybe we'll bum around a little and start figuring out this tourist thing. Decide what I'll go see next week and what we'll both go do next weekend?"

"Okay, that works for me." She gave him one more kiss on the chest and patted his butt like a football coach. "Now, open your eyes and let's go take a shower."

Thanks to the endless hot water, they both were exceedingly clean and satisfied when they finally made it out of the shower. Veronica had dressed in shorts and a tank top and was settled down on the bed, flipping through Logan's tourist guidebooks while he unpacked his suitcases. She had a stack of multi-colored mini post-its to mark places she was interested in and was putting them to good use when a cardboard box thumped into her leg, followed by another that hit her in the hip and bounced behind her.

"Hey!" she squawked indignantly. "What are you doing?"

"Getting out the big guns."

She looked at him in confusion and then down at the box. Condoms. Thirty-six count. The box that had fallen behind her was the same thing.

"That's a lot of condoms, Logan."

"Yup." He snagged the box out of her hand and tore it open, then pulled open the drawer on the nightstand he was standing next to and dumped them in. "The other one is for your side of the bed." She raised her eyebrows at him and shook her head.

"Seventy-two condoms. That's kind of a lot."

"How many have we used since I got here?"

She stopped for a minute to think. One, two, three, then the one in the bathroom in the middle of the night, and then one in the shower... "Five."

"And I've been here for, what, twenty hours? Project to a full day, that's an average of six a day. We've only got twelve days worth. We're gonna need more."

She laughed. "So yesterday, your math related to time was completely ridiculous but today, your condom math is impeccable. You're some kind of idiot savant."

He grinned at her. "You know it, baby."

"You do realize that I'm only with you two days a week, right? So it isn't really twelve days worth, it's six weeks worth." He gave a noncommittal shrug. "And, my impression is that you've got more stashed in several other places." He shrugged again and nodded. "Okay. Be prepared. That's your motto. I see you're taking this scout thing to a whole other level."
"I think this might be my Eagle Scout project."

She snorted and sat up to pry open her own box as she scooted off the bed and opened the drawer to dump her box.

"Oh no, no, no." She pulled the standard hotel bible out of her drawer and tossed it over to him. "I'm not covering a bible in rubbers. You put this on your side." He laughed but obediently opened his drawer and pushed the contents around enough to stash the bible. She dumped her own box and then threw it at him. "You're taking those out of this room and throwing them in a public garbage can so they can't be linked to us. Put them in a bag first so no one sees what you've got."

"Yes, ma'am." He set the empty boxes on the corner of the dresser and returned to unpacking. She stretched out across the head of the bed again and was just returning to her guidebooks when her stomach suddenly remembered she was used to having breakfast at 7:00 AM and rumbled loudly. "Oh no, I can't believe I haven't fed you yet. Come on, I can finish this later, let's get some breakfast."

It was actually late enough that they got lunch instead and then explored the town of Stafford, where their motel was located. They found the local mall and a farmers' market where they picked up fruits and veggies and some other interesting local specialties, including something that one vendor referred to as 'chow chow' and another called 'mustard pickle' but both insisted that they could not leave Virginia without trying. On the way back to the motel, they found a grocery store and stocked up on food and drinks so they would be able to stay in if they wanted. They spent the rest of the weekend picking things they both wanted to see and identifying things that she wasn't as keen about but he was so he could plan to see those places during the week. They spent time in the pool and a lot of time in bed. By the time he had to take her back to the base, they had tentative plans laid out for the next couple of weeks.

"So you're going to commute into DC all week?" Veronica asked after they'd passed the preliminary checkpoint around the village. She leaned across the center console drawing 'V's on his leg with her fingertip. "Just drive to the closest train station and take public transportation?"

"Why not?" He captured her hand in his and leaned sideways to kiss her knuckles. "Everyone does it around here."

"I just wish I could be there for your first experience," she said, smirking as he rolled his eyes. "By the time I get to tag along, you'll be an old hand at mingling with the masses. I'm going to miss the fun stuff."

He sighed and shook his head. "You know, you constantly doubt my ability to interact with the general public. I've managed to not beat the crap out of Weevil for...what? Eighteen months?" She laughed. "Come on. I think that speaks volumes about my tolerance and character. One day, you'll be sorry for your skepticism."

"Oh yeah, you're quite a man of the people. Practically Gandhi."

"Yes, I am. I'm glad you're finally seeing it."

They were both laughing as he pulled up to the parking lot outside the base. Jeannie was supposed to meet them in the next fifteen to twenty minutes so Veronica could ride the rest of the way to the dorm with her. They climbed out and Logan popped the rear hatch open, settling into the rear compartment and pulling Veronica up to sit in the 'V' of his legs, her back against his chest, resting his arms loosely around her. They were both sweating like crazy in the Virginia heat and humidity but were unwilling to separate for another week until they absolutely had to.
"You left that tiny bikini back in the room didn't you?" Logan asked between kisses across her shoulder. "I really don't think it's FBI appropriate."

She tipped her head back onto his shoulder so she could look him directly in the eyes. "Yes, I told you I brought that strictly for time with you. Any swimming I've done in Physical Training for the internship has been in a sensible one-piece. Only you get the bikini treatment."

"Okay, good." He kissed the tip of her nose. "So when you come for next weekend, you should just bring some clothes to leave in our room. I saw how much you packed. You've got casual clothes you don't need during the week. That way you don't have to drag so much stuff back and forth."

"Excellent planning," she said with a grin, reaching behind her to twist her hair off her neck. He nuzzled her exposed skin briefly until she dropped her hair against his face and he straightened up to finish telling her his plan.

"So next Saturday, we'll take the train in and do the Museum of Natural History and maybe the Duck Tour, plus some just general wandering around the National Mall. If there's more we're anxious to see, we can go back the next day. Or we can spend Sunday on just us. Maybe some time with that bikini." He waggled his eyebrows at her and she rolled her eyes.

"Look at you, you master planner. Those all sound like great ideas. Just make sure you call me when you get back in in the evenings so you can give me the lowdown on what you're doing. That way if you see anything awesome, we can add it to our joint list."

"Okay, I think we've got it. Now, stop talking and kiss me. I've got to give you back soon."

"But not for as long as the last time you said that." She snuggled in closer to enjoy what time they had left before the new week began.

Chapter End Notes

Best wishes to all for a very safe and happy new year. Feel free to make one of your resolutions be commenting on every chapter you read! :)
Happy Birthday to beta extraordinaire, KMD0107! Your help and friendship have been great gifts to me in the last year.

Week Three of the FBI program got more interesting for most of the interns in the Behavioral Unit. Each was assigned to a trainee agent to start learning to do background checks. Veronica wasn’t as thrilled with this development since she’d been doing this same work for a few years. She was interested in the different databases that the FBI could access but she was surprised to find out that they used quite a few of the same programs that she and her dad used already. It was a step up from filing but from speaking to her “mentor” agent, who was in his first year at the FBI, she learned that this was what he expected to be doing for at least a year before having an opportunity to get involved in anything more advanced. This made her a little more apprehensive about the idea of the FBI as a career but she was glad to learn this reality now rather than actually choosing this as her life’s work and then realizing later that it wasn’t for her.

The advance to background checks did make the afternoons move along more quickly and the training was always interesting. For the first couple days, two agents came in to present case studies and talk about the investigative techniques used to solve them. For the remaining days, scenarios based on actual cases were to be presented as they would be to an investigative team and the interns, under the supervision of the instructors, would have to work to “solve” the crime.

Veronica was a little apprehensive when she learned how this portion of the training program worked. She knew that a year ago, she would have jumped at the chance to show off her skills. Now that she'd spent time reflecting on how her choices had impacted her and others around her, she knew she needed to make some changes in her behavior. She thought of Jeff Ratner, who had basically hated her on sight in Dr. Landry's criminology class, largely because she had shamed everyone on the first day of class by looking up the answer to the murder mystery game online rather than playing along and going through the steps to actually solve the game’s crime. Her initiative wowed Landry but not anyone else. As she thought about it, she considered that she was probably lucky that Tim Foyle had only tried to frame her for plagiarism. If Landry's insulting treatment of Tim hadn't been so much more egregious than Veronica’s, Tim might have decided to try to frame her for murder instead.

Logan, of course, put her on track. He had made it a habit to call her in the evenings once he made it back from his day as a tourist. He would share what sights he had seen that day and was always interested in hearing about whatever she'd done. She reflected back on their conversation when she explained her concerns about reverting back to 'bitchy type' when they actually started their 'investigation' the following day. He'd offered her an alternate perspective.

"You don't have to pretend to be less competent than you are to keep from being bitchy," he'd assured her. "Just try not to make fun of the people who don't get it as easily as you do. Share some of what you do know so you're being helpful, not to make sure they know that Veronica Mars is smarter than them. Just remember that no one at the FBI—and certainly none of these interns—have done anything to deserve that. Let them see you work and they'll all see just how brilliant you really are. But you better remember, when every guy, and several girls, fall in love with your amazing self
immediately, I've got dibs."

At his statement that no one in the FBI deserved the scornful treatment that had become pretty much second nature for her during the last year, she thought briefly of the one FBI agent to whom that might not apply: the one who had harassed her quite unmercifully, a year and a half ago, during her investigation of Duncan's disappearance with his daughter. However, she had not encountered Agent Morris since entering FBI grounds and Veronica assumed she was still assigned to one of the Southern California field offices. Everything else Logan said made sense and she agreed to give his advice a try.

"And don't worry, I promise not to throw you over for another intern," she said with a laugh, "no matter how much they all beg."

"I will fight for my Bobcat," Logan said and she felt the same thrill she'd always felt when he'd done just that.

"As you have proven on several occasions. Don't worry, slugger, it's YOU I'll be waiting for outside the gate on Friday night."

The next day, she was thrilled to find his advice was solid. She kept her showboating tendencies under control during the exercise. The instructors presented the facts and the interns were supposed to look for the clues in those facts and decide what they would investigate next. If the plan led to another set of facts, the instructors would present the newly uncovered information for consideration. Sometimes a path would lead to new facts but they would not necessarily end up being relevant to that particular crime. As she watched that take place early in the exercise, she thought uncomfortably that she could probably refer to that error in judgment as "jumping to the conclusion your overwrought imagination dreams up" otherwise known as the "blame Logan or Weevil for everything" syndrome.

After she had let a couple of interns lead them down the wrong trail, she raised her hand and suggested what she would look into based on the original facts of the crime scene. As it was the first day of these exercises, the scenario was actually pretty simple and Veronica's recommendations led to another set of facts that she thought were even more apparent so she suggested further investigation and the crime was solved within the hour. They then had to take a break so the instructors could go gather information for the next scenario. The delay made Veronica suspect this exercise was supposed to have taken longer, which thrilled her, but she was most pleased that she had been able to accomplish her investigative objectives without leaving any of the other interns reeling in her wake.

Veronica took the same approach with the next scenario presented, allowing the other interns to make suggestions and when they seemed to be going off on a wrong trail, she jumped in with her own recommendations, leading them to another closed case within the hour. When the instructors returned again with a third scenario to present, one of the supervising agents came with them, intrigued by a class that had gotten through two days worth of activity in about two hours.

The third scenario was more involved but by now the other interns were as interested as the agents in what Veronica could do. She took the lead but kept the rest of the intern team involved in the process, couching some of her thoughts as suggestions for others to consider and offer their conclusions. This was not a group of first-year college students at the beginning of their first criminology class because their favorite TV show was Law and Order. There was a reason these people had been selected for this program and when she laid out a set of facts looking for an answer, generally several of them would find it. This time, when the crime was solved, there was only about fifteen minutes left before the class session ended and the group was released to head for the
cafeteria. At lunch, she was the focus of a lot of questions and she had to confess, for the first time to everyone but Jeannie, that she had a private investigator's license and had worked with her dad for a few years. She only talked about the low-profile cases but she was nervous that as soon as they had internet access, some of these people would be doing online searches for her name and finding out the other cases in which she had been involved.

Walking back to the dorms at the end of the workday, Veronica thought quietly about what the next day would be like if anyone started to research her.

"All right, what's bugging you?" Jeannie asked, getting her attention with a gentle hip check. "The silent treatment is not normal."

"Sorry, I was just thinking," Veronica replied with a sigh. "I'm a little worried about people getting back to their rooms and using their laptops to look me up. I'm sure that you already know that there are some less than flattering articles out there about me associated with the case against Aaron. I'm really not excited about everyone here getting Aaron's twisted story of me playing three guys against each other and coming onto him. It wasn't fun the first time and I've kinda enjoyed not having everyone around me thinking that a bunch of lies are true. And even if they accept the less deviant version...for some reason, people don't like teenaged girls solving crimes. It seems to threaten people. I just don't want to go back to people looking at me like I'm a freak. It hasn't been bad being just like everyone else."

Jeannie smiled sympathetically. "This is just who you are, Veronica. Not a freak but someone who's done things that most people haven't. You can't change that and, in my opinion, you shouldn't want to anyway. You're nineteen and you've done some impressive things. So more people here find out about that. Big deal. Around here, I think most people will be most interested in the cases you've solved, not the ugly story a defense attorney spun to get their client off the hook. I suspect that mostly, this will turn out to be a good thing. And here's the bottom line. Anyone who resents you for what they learn on-line—to hell with 'em."

Later that night, Logan's response was the same, with some slightly more colorful language, "Anyone who believes what Aaron's lawyers said is a shithead whose opinion doesn't matter anyway. The people who matter know the truth."

Veronica took a deep breath. "I know that. I do. I guess I've just gotten used to being a normal person." His laughter rolled through the phone.

"Baby, I'm sorry, but you're never going to be normal. And as far as I'm concerned, that's a good thing. What you've gotten used to is being anonymous, and believe me, I get why that's appealing."

"Yeah, you would have a better perspective on that than most people." She reached for the bottle of water on her desk. "All right. I'll stop whining now."

"You know you can always tell me anything, right? Even if you are whining. But stop worrying. Whatever happens, this is a short-term gig and before long, we'll be back to a town where we're equally notorious and most people are afraid of us."

She burst into laughter. "That's supposed to make me feel better? You might need to work on your approach, Dr. Echolls."

"Whatever. I'm more interested in how my career counseling went. How'd things go with the training exercises?"

"That actually turned out well. I was a team player but I contributed enough that we got through
what I think was supposed to be two or three days worth of work. That's kinda what generated all
the interest in my background. But other than making everyone curious about me, your advice was
right on target. Thank you."

"Toldja. Anyone ask you out?"

Veronica snorted. "Nope. You're stuck with me."

"You better believe I am."

"So, tell me about your day. What did you see today?"

"I spent the day in The National Mall. Hung out at the Lincoln Memorial, spent some time at the
Korean War Memorial, and just wandered around the other Memorials. There was one unexpected
thing. You remember the part in Forrest Gump when he and Jenny meet again in the middle of the
Reflecting Pool? I watched a couple recreate that scene today...wading across the pool to each other
shouting 'Forrest' and 'Jenny'."

"You're kidding, right?"

"Oh no, I'm totally serious. It was actually kinda romantic. It made me miss you more than usual,
Veronica, and that's really saying something. But then the District cops showed up, hauled them out
of the Pool, and cited them. That kinda put a damper on the whole thing."

Late Friday afternoon, Veronica trekked down to the main gate with an overnight bag to meet Logan
who was just making his way back from another day in DC. She walked through the gate at the
Marine checkpoint and saw Logan leaning up against the Range Rover, ankles crossed in front of
him, waiting for her. She felt her heart swoop in her chest and they grinned at each other as she
crossed the parking lot.

"Do you practice that lean in the mirror?"

"What are you talking about?" Logan answered before scooping her up for a kiss. She wrapped her
arms around him and kissed him back but she quickly realized that no matter how much she missed
him when they were apart, she was not comfortable engaging in major public displays of affection in
the FBI parking lot. She broke off the kiss before she could forget where they were, pulling back to
smile at him.

"Did you really just ask me if I practiced a lean in the mirror?" he asked with a self-conscious grin,
letting her slide back to the ground before opening her door and taking her bag. She climbed in while
he stashed her bag in the back then walked around to climb in behind the wheel. "So, let's hear it.
You think I practice leaning?"

She laughed, embarrassed. "Maybe."

He looked at her quizzically. "Why would I do that?"

"I don't know why but it works. There's just something hot about how you lean." She knew her face
had to be bright red at confessing this but he was a little pink too.

"Hot? Like 85 degrees and 85% humidity kinda hot?" She could tell from his smirk that he was now
tormenting her on purpose.

"Yes, that's what I meant. You look sweaty when you lean. Now shut up."
He laughed and shook his head as he started the truck. “So I thought we’d eat first. Sit-down place or pizza?”

“I eat in a cafeteria all week. I want to sit down and have someone bring me my food.”

"I was hoping you'd say that," Logan said, reaching across the console to hold her hand. "I saw a cool looking steakhouse in Stafford owned by a retired Marine called The Globe & Laurel. Sound good?"

"Sure, that's fine as long as it's not out of the way. I'm hungry."

"Shock ing," he said with a laugh. "So let's hear about your field trip this morning."

"It was pretty cool. We toured a warehouse full of evidence from all kinds of cases during the century since the FBI was founded. Next year is the agency’s centennial and they're organizing a display for the Smithsonian from this collection of artifacts. The docent of the collection took us all around, talking about various crimes and showing us what was used to solve them."

"So basically a museum of crime and punishment. Sounds right up your alley." They passed the exterior perimeter of the base and headed into Stafford with Veronica filling Logan in on some of what she'd seen that morning. It was still early when they pulled into the restaurant so they were seated right away in a round booth in a corner. Veronica scooted into the center and Logan followed to sit immediately next to her.

“So do you have a step-by-step itinerary planned for tomorrow?” Veronica asked once they had ordered.

“I do. The good news is that there shouldn’t be as much of the commuter traffic I’ve been dealing with everyday to get to the train station so we can sleep in a little in the morning.” Logan settled his arm around her shoulders, twisting his fingers into her hair.

“I'm all for sleeping in, or at least staying in bed beyond my usual wake-up time.” She smiled at him lasciviously and, under cover of the table, began to run her hand back and forth from his knee to his hip. She stopped her motion high up on his leg, pressing her hand against him firmly while her fingers massaged his inner thigh. She licked her lips as she felt him responding against her. He tightened the arm around her shoulders, ducking his head to drop kisses onto her neck. He stilled suddenly as she moved her hand higher and started to stroke him through his khaki shorts. She felt his soft moan against her neck and then he sat up, capturing her hand with his own and raising it to his mouth for a kiss, then a nip that made her giggle, then another kiss.

"Unless you want to end up flat on your back on this table with your skirt flipped up, you're gonna have to keep those hot little hands to yourself."

She made a pouty face at him, her eyes hooded as she watched him kiss each finger on her captured hand. “Your loss,” she teased in a low voice.

“Undoubtedly,” he responded with a grimace. “Just hold that thought for like, thirty minutes. Okay? Then your hot little hands will be welcome anywhere you want to put them.”

“Okay, you’ve got a deal.”

Dinner arrived a few minutes later and it was a very speedy meal. When the waiter returned to see if they wanted dessert, Veronica queried whether they still had ice cream in the freezer and when Logan affirmed with a grin that they did, she gave one final look at the dessert tray before them and declined. He asked for the check and smirked down at her, smoothing her hair back. "So I guess I
should be honored that you're passing up that Bailey's mousse pie in favor of having me for dessert." She scoffed. "I don't know what you're talking about. I'm having ice cream for dessert."

"Oh, I see." He kissed her shoulder and then pulled away from her, lifting his hand toward the waiter.

"What are you doing?"

"That pie actually sounds pretty good."

The waiter returned and started to hand him back his credit card and receipt for signing but Logan held up. "I think I might get that mousse pie after all."

"What?" Her tone was only a tiny bit desperate.

He looked at her with a completely straight face, other than an eyebrow raised in challenge. "Pie for you too, muffin?"

She ignored him entirely and spoke directly to the waiter. "We're fine for tonight, we'll be back another night for dessert." She took the little tray from the waiter, put it on the table in front of Logan and placed the pen in his hand. The waiter looked at them oddly then walked away. "Okay, fine," Veronica said grudgingly, "You're for dessert. Now let's go."

He signed his name with a flourish, threw the pen on the table, and wrapped his arm around her waist, tugging her out of the booth after him. When she was on her feet next to him he leaned in to give her a deep kiss followed by a quick tap on the nose. "I'm glad I can be your dessert too, cuz you always taste like cookies to me."

Veronica was amused to find that Logan had become an old hand at the DC Metro system in the last week. They started their day on the Blue Line, which was the main route for the touristy things that Logan was sharing with her that first day. They spent several hours at the Museum of Natural History before joining the Trolley Tour and riding all around town, hopping on and off as they pleased. After a long day of sight-seeing, they rode back to the beginning of the Blue Line and drove home. They spent the next day relaxing in bed and by the little pool, just enjoying time together.

The next week was much of the same for Veronica but Logan waited for rush hour to ease on Monday morning and then drove north to Philadelphia. He spent the rest of the week in the City of Brotherly Love, visiting the Historic District over the course of a couple days as well as some additional famed locations, including both the Rocky and Love Statues. On Friday, he again waited out the rush hour crush before heading back to Virginia but ended up caught in traffic trying to get past Washington DC. Jeannie had given Veronica a ride to the motel and by the time Logan made it home, she was curled up in bed and sound asleep. After a long day of driving, he simply pulled off his clothes and snuggled in next to her. He had no objections when she woke him up in a most pleasant fashion a couple of hours later but once they were both sated, he tucked her in his arms and went back to a sound sleep. They spent Saturday lazing around together and used Sunday to drive to Splash Down Waterpark and play on the water slides.

The next Wednesday was the Fourth of July. The interns were free for the day and Logan, Veronica, and Jeannie drove up to DC to watch the fireworks at the National Mall. On Friday, Jeannie and Veronica picked Logan up at the motel and Jeannie drove them to the same little airport at which she had dropped Dick and Mac at the beginning of the summer and they flew to Boston for the weekend. Since they only had a day and a half in the city, they stayed at the Four Seasons right off the Boston
Common and spent the weekend walking the Freedom Trail and exploring the attractions along the way. They spent Sunday morning in the Boston Common, riding the Swan Boats and wandering around the duckling statues in the park, then had lunch at Cheers Beacon Hill right off the Common before catching their flight back to Virginia. With so many more things to do in Boston, they agreed they'd return again when they had more time to see the sights.

Logan spent the next week closer to home, hitting Atlantic seaport surf spots. The best surfing he found was at Croatan Beach. The East Coast Surfing Championships were scheduled for Veronica’s last week of the internship and he planned to come back to watch while she was occupied on the base.

The week after the Fourth, the BAU interns moved from background checks to practicing more involved research techniques. Veronica was more excited about this development than anything in the internship to date. The interns were each given an issue attached to a real, pending case, and were asked to develop anything they could to determine if the issue was truly relevant to the case or just one of the multitude of things that always surround a case and may not have any actual significance. There were agents working with the interns at all times but for the first time all summer, Veronica really felt that she was working rather than just playing a really boring game of cops and robbers. However, what she mostly felt was familiarity, like she was back home in the Mars Investigations offices, working a case.

On Friday afternoon, Jeannie dropped her off at the motel again and Veronica found dinner of grilled chicken over fettuccine Alfredo waiting for her. Everything had been prepared by Logan with the exception of dessert—the Bailey's Mousse Pie from The Globe and Laurel had become one of their favorites. After dinner, she curled up in his lap in the love seat so they could talk about their weeks. She explained a little more about what the interns were doing now, outlining how similar to her regular life this week had been.

"Basically, what I'm mostly learning is that if I want to keep investigating, I already have the job I want. I'm pretty sure that I won't want to spend the first year out of college trapped in a bullpen with a bunch of rookies running names through databases. I don't mind doing that when I get to take what I've learned and act on it. I like solving things. I'm just not sure I'd like being just a tiny piece of the crime-solving machine when I already know what it feels like to be the one who figures it out."

Logan silently nodded as he held her in his lap, his face neutral, not even a quirk of his lips to indicate what he was thinking.

"What?" she asked, frustrated that she couldn't read his thoughts.

"What what? I'm just listening to you. Isn't that what I'm supposed to be doing?" he responded, pressing his lips to her temple.

"No opinions? No snarky comments?" she shot back.

"Why would I have a snarky comment? I understand what you're saying. No opportunity for snark has presented itself." He snickered quietly against her hair. "You know I'd take it if it had."

"Hmm. Okay then, let's hear your snark-free opinion. Tell me what you're thinking about my conclusions."

He sighed and tightened his arm around her. "It's your career, Veronica. I don't have the right to tell you how you're going to spend your whole working life."
“But it impacts you too. In the FBI, I could end up getting sent anywhere, anytime. What do you think you're going to want to do? Is it something you can just pick up and move wherever I get sent? You can't just wait for me to come home like you're doing now.”

He lifted his hand, tracing a finger along her jaw. "You're making your plans to include me?"

She felt her own face turn expressionless. "Should I not? I'm sorry, maybe I'm being presumptuous." She started to squirm out of his grasp but he caught her before she made any headway and pulled her more tightly against him.

"Oh no, you're not getting away now. I don't think you're being presumptuous. You're telling me the thing I've wanted to hear more than pretty much anything else. You just caught me by surprise. I think of our future but I'm never really sure if you do."

She rested her head on his chest. "We've never talked about this. Maybe it isn't the time. Everything's been so perfect but we only see each other two days a week, with none of the stressors that have hurt us before. Maybe we shouldn't be thinking about long term things when we're in such a short term environment."

"That's one way to think about it. Are we still gonna be in sync when you're not being compelled into safe activities by the dictates of the Federal Bureau of Investigation?” He smiled down at her, kissing the top of her head. “And what about when Dick is bitching about you and Wallace is bitching about me? How are we going to react? Can we ignore them and keep it just about us?”

Veronica nodded thoughtfully, remembering how angry Wallace had been on that last day in Neptune. She hated him being mad at her but it wasn't fair to her or Logan to pretend she didn't feel like she did. Maybe if I hadn't pretended Logan wasn't as important as he is, that whole thing with Piz wouldn't have gotten so out of control.

"Or how about when you see me talking to a girl in one of my classes and you decide I'm being too flirty?" Logan continued. "Or my personal favorite, when some other new guy decides he's better for you than I am and tries his best to come between us? None of those things are happening here but I can guarantee that most, if not all, will happen when we get back to Neptune. So if this is just the eye of the storm, is it a good idea to make long term decisions like that? Or maybe this is the best time, when it is just us and what we really feel, without people and things that shouldn't matter pulling at us when we're having a weak moment. I don't know the right answer. I know what I want but I don't know if it's sustainable."

“Maybe this is the eye of a storm, but it seems easy from here to think about the future and see you there. Is that what…do you…? Uuggghh. This is so hard.”

“Veronica.”

“Yeah?”

“Hold on.” He pushed himself to a standing position, keeping her balanced in his arms, as he carried her to the bedroom and set her carefully on the bed. She had wrapped her arms around his neck when he stood up and she tried to pull him down to the bed with her but he kissed her gently on the lips and untangled her arms from around him. “Give me just a minute, okay?”

She looked at him quizzically but released him and then watched with curiosity as he went to the closet.

“Logan, what are you doing?”
“I have something to show you.”

She sat forward a little to see what he was doing in the closet. She could see now that he was opening the safe. He reached in and extracted something then came back to the bed. He sat on the end of the bed next to her, then dropped back to lie beside her, resting a small, square, blue box on his chest. She sucked in a startled breath at the unexpected sight, reaching toward him but pulling back before she touched him or the box.

“What is that?” she asked in a subdued voice.

“If you want to know, open it.”

She looked between him and the box for a while. He lay still and silent, taking long, deep breaths.

“How long have you had that?”

“January.”

“Before…”

“Yeah. Before we broke up the last time.”

Veronica reached out suddenly, taking the box from his chest before she chickened out again. She didn’t make any move to open it, just cradled the box in her hands. “Did you have a plan for this?”

He grimaced and choked out a noise that might have been a laugh. “The one question that I’m not sure we should talk about.”

“It was that night, wasn’t it? We were supposed to go out on a fancy date and instead I came in and told you to get out of my life because I couldn’t stop thinking about Madison.”

He made a pained noise but nodded his head.

“Why do you have it here?” she asked, running a tentative finger across the top of the box.

“I wasn’t going to just leave it in the safe at the Grand while I was away all summer. It seemed safer to keep it with me.”

“Yeah, I can just imagine what Dick would do if he found it accidentally.” She smiled, thinking of how horrified Dick would be.

“That was one scenario I was trying to avoid.” He rolled onto his side, watching her with a thoughtful expression. She hadn’t opened the box but stroked its soft top with her thumbs.

"Did you think of any scenario where you might want to have it with you?"

He laughed and sat up, reaching for the box in her hands. She looked at him with alarm and closed both hands around it protectively. In response, he closed his hands around hers.

"I think about it all the time. I'm just trying to be smarter about it this time."

"What do you mean?" She scooted closer to him.

"I got this because I was terrified that you were going to leave me. I thought if I asked you to marry me, you would finally believe how much I love you and I would be able to stop being afraid all the time. In retrospect, I was apparently right to be afraid you would leave but a knee jerk marriage
He looked at her, his expression surprised. "Are you telling me I should do it now? Or are you asking if I still think about doing it? Let me tell you, with all the sightseeing I've been doing, in between these blissful weekends with you, everywhere I go I find someplace that makes me think, ooh, how great would it be to propose there? It's actually making me a little nuts; I can't seem to stop picturing it whenever I'm somewhere cool or beautiful." He shook his head, like he was trying to clear his thoughts, then looked back at her. His eyes widened and she knew she probably looked like a crazy person; she could feel the wide smile on her face and her vision was blurry from the tears in her eyes. She blinked furiously and looked down, then pulled her hands out of his and set the ring box on the bed next to her. She gave him a shove in the chest, pushing him onto his back again. He grinned up at her and hoisted himself up toward the head of the bed until he was fully reclined on the mattress. Veronica picked up the ring box, clutching it in her fist as she crawled up the bed after him, placing the box carefully on her pillow before straddling his hips. She unbuttoned his shirt and ran her hands up from right above the top of his jeans, caressing his abs and up his chest.

"Ooh," she murmured, "impressive." She leaned over him and kissed up the same path her fingers had taken but when she reached his chest, she sucked one of his nipples hard, while twisting her fingers around the other. His hips bucked up at her involuntarily and a low moan escaped him before he reached up and cupped the back of her head, tangling his fingers in her hair. After a few moments, she kissed over to the opposite side, repeating her previous actions. His hips continued rocking up into her and he moaned her name as she began kissing back down, scooting further down his legs. When she hit his jeans again, she tugged the button open and eased his zipper down. "Hips up," she ordered and he complied immediately, lifting up enough for her to tug his pants down. He panted her name as she took him in her mouth, his hands clutching at her head. After several minutes, she slid back up to face him, and reached toward the bedside drawer for a condom. Logan was already kissing her neck and breasts but he stopped short when she barked out a laugh.

"When I left here five days ago, this drawer was nearly empty. Either you've consolidated the drawers or you went shopping."

"I like shopping," Logan retorted and pulled her shirt over her head. They made short work of their remaining clothes and spent the rest of the evening getting lost in each other. At one point, Veronica hopped up and ran naked to the kitchen to get a couple slices of the Bailey's pie, claiming that Logan had worked her too hard and she was weak from hunger. He loudly scoffed at her assertion but seemed more than happy to eat his portion using her as a plate.

Shortly after midnight, Logan woke with a start. He last remembered seeing the ring box resting on the pillow that Veronica now had bunched up beneath her head. He sat up to try to find out where the box had fallen. His frantic search ended when he realized that Veronica was clutching it in her fist as she slept. He settled down again with his arms wrapped around her, falling into dreams of ivory lace.

Early in the morning he woke again, still wrapped firmly around Veronica. Logan knew she was awake because her hands were no longer tucked together at her chin but instead she had one arm bent in front of her with the ring box sitting in her outstretched hand and her other hand was stroking
the top of the box as she had been doing the night before. He watched her for a minute, then ducked his head into the crook of her neck, kissing her several times.

"Morning, Sugarpuss." He didn't use that nickname often but it reminded him of the first time they'd been 'engaged', trying to con the clerk at the Beverly Wilshire into letting them into the room they thought his mom might be using to hide out. It seemed an apt pet name in light of what she was holding in her hand. "Have you looked at it yet?"

She rolled toward him and kissed the base of his throat. "Actually, I have not." She snuggled in a little closer and then unexpectedly licked his shoulder. When he pulled back to look at her quizzically, she looked slightly abashed. "You had a little pie there."

He laughed out loud and tucked her hair behind her ear. The ring box was again clutched tightly in her hand. "Why haven't you looked?"

She ducked her head into his chest and then lifted her eyes to meet his, her cheeks just a little pink. "I want to be surprised when you put it on me."

He was pretty sure his heart had stopped. Or maybe exploded. There had to be some explanation for the roaring sound in his ears. He clutched her tightly to him, willing himself into slow, deep breaths. After a few minutes of rocking her in his arms, he thought he would be able to trust his voice.

"Question."

"Shoot."

He took another deep breath, still trying to calm himself. "In this rather unexpected turn of events, do you see a timeframe? Do I have to wait til we get back to Neptune so I can try in vain to get your father's permission or can I figure out something while we're here?"

Veronica wrinkled her nose, an embarrassed smile on her face. "Well, the only thing he told me I couldn't do was come home pregnant..."

"Oh my God, please tell me you're kidding." This seemed like a perfect time for his life to flash before his eyes. He was sure he must have looked horrified because Veronica chuckled softly and stroked his cheek.

"Nope, those were his exact words." Her hand stilled to cup his cheek and she stretched up to brush her lips across his. "Sorry to freak you out like that but my actual point is that he never prohibited anything else so I'm gonna say, knock yourself out buddy. Surprise the hell out of me."

He was surprised how matter-of-fact she was when he felt like he was struggling for each word. "Veronica?"

"Logan," she said in a deep, serious tone, belied by the amused smile on her face.

"Is this really what you want? You know, the eye of the storm and all that stuff we talked about last night. Are you sure?"

She wriggled a little, pulling back enough to look him in the eye. She actually looked serious this time. "If you remember, the other thing we said was that this is us—here, now—without those things and people that have worked against us before. I think we should take the opportunity we have right now to build up what we want our lives to be. That way when the obstacles come at us, we're already sure what we want and it should be easier to find our way through any minefields that we encounter. Does that makes any sense? Or am I just making excuses to justify self-indulgent
decisions?"

"If you are, I'm okay with it since your self-indulgent decisions seem to match up quite nicely with mine."

She smiled and kissed his jawline. "I love you, Logan. I don't see how I could ever stop."

He clutched her back against him again and she giggled and kissed his chest and shoulders before starting to squirm in his arms. "Dude, you're squishing me." He laughed and shifted her a bit away from him. "Let's lock this box back up and take a shower. No proposals today. Think about it and figure out the place you like the most. We've got time."
"Bobcat, isn't Jeannie on vacation this week?"

Veronica looked up from the textbook she'd been reading prior to Logan's call and leaned on her desk, resting her head against her hand as she held the phone to her ear. "Yeah, she is. Her best friend from junior high and high school was on a semester abroad and just got home. She's only going to be in town for a couple of weeks so Jeannie went home last Friday and won't be back here til Sunday. They're going camping and hanging out and stuff like that."

"That sounds fun for them. So, can you get time off too?"

"What? Why?" She grinned to herself, wondering what he was up to. "They're not crazy about that but from what I've seen, plenty of people take days off. The diehards who want to come back next year don't usually. They're all trying to stay on the good side of the selection committee."

"Well, I don't want to mess that up for you."

"Oh no, that's not a problem. It's interesting here—to a certain extent—and I might re-apply for next summer but more likely? I'll just get you to take me on an all-summer road trip."

"Seriously? That would be so awesome. Just planning where to go would be amazing."

The excitement in his voice was contagious but she didn't want him distracted while she was trying to get information out of him.

"Okay, okay, but that's next summer. What's in your dangerous mind for this summer?"

"Nope, that's for me to know and for you to find out. But trust me. You're going to be super surprised. I promise."

"Hmm," she mused. "Intrigued, but a little frightened here. When are you talking about and for how many days?"

"We'd need to leave town by next Tuesday at the latest and we'd be gone for the rest of the week. I'll take Monday too if you're willing but really, that would just be fluff."

His voice lowered seductively. "You know, extra time to spend with you naked."

The seductive tone vanished, replaced by a teasing voice. "Or time to feed you ice cream. Whichever interested you more..."

Even with the teasing tone, she shivered a little at the picture his words brought into her mind. "Why can't you feed me ice cream WHILE we're naked?"

"You say that like we didn't do it just two days ago."

"Well I liked it," she said with a smile.

"Believe me, that was apparent," he laughed. "Now, back on topic. Time off or not?"

"If it's really as exciting as you claim then absolutely. But if it does work with your plans, I'll come back after this coming up weekend and be here Monday so I'm not gone the entire week. We've got lots of time for more naked ice cream stuff. Deal?"
"Yep. Just let me know as soon as it's definite so I can make some reservations."

"Come on, just a little hint," she wheedled.

"You're going to lose your mind."

A week later, Logan was thrilled to watch as Veronica did, in fact, lose her mind.

He picked her up on Monday after she was released for the day and they drove to Virginia Beach where they checked into the Newcastle Motel. He'd booked the fanciest room they had, with a whirlpool tub across from the king-sized bed, a fireplace over the tub, a double-head shower and a balcony overlooking the Atlantic. She'd made fun of his need for a fix of over-the-top fancy digs when they pulled up to the motel but once they were in the room, he was pretty sure she was actually impressed with his choice of accommodations. His suspicions were confirmed when she started to drop hints about how much she would love having double occupancy tubs and showers available to her on a regular basis.

On Tuesday morning, they got back on the road, setting out across the twenty-three mile Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel. Once they arrived at the southern end of the Delmarva Peninsula, he noticed the first event sign and looked anxiously at Veronica, relieved to see that she had drifted off to sleep. There was still at least an hour of driving to go, more if they started to hit traffic. He didn't want to spoil her surprise by just seeing a sign so when he saw the next road sign for their destination, alongside a wide shoulder, he pulled the truck over to orchestrate his reveal. He parked beyond the tell-tale signs and reached over to stroke her arm gently.

"Veronica, baby, wake up."

Her eyes popped open and she grinned at him broadly. "Are we there yet?"

"No, but it's time to let you know where we're going."

She looked out the windows and then at him in confusion. "Why are we stopped on the side of the road?"

"You'll see. Stay put for a minute." He hopped out of the Rover and went around to open her door. She swung her legs around to slide out but he blocked her exit to kiss her first. "Okay, I'm pretty sure you're gonna like this." He grabbed her around the waist and swung her out of the truck. He tucked her in close to his side and put his hand over her eyes. "No peeking."

"Yes sir," she answered, giving him an irreverent salute, as she stumbled blindly next to him. He walked her over to the permanent sign and gave her a quick kiss on the side of the head before pulling his hand away from her eyes.

CHINCOTEAGUE ISLAND - 62 MILES.

Her mouth dropped open. "You're taking me to where the ponies are?" She squealed and clapped her hands, jumping in circles. "Are we going to see ponies?" She stopped her circular jumping, squealed again, and returned to her jumping, only in the opposite direction, clapping her hands together the whole time. He put his hands on her shoulders to settle her back down and she threw her arms around him. "I'm so excited."

"I would never have guessed that," he laughed. "Now, look over there." He twisted her to look at another sign.
"Oh my God!" she shrieked. "That's tomorrow." She resumed her squealing, jumping, and clapping while he laughed, thrilled with the success of his surprise.

"Okay, back in the truck with you. We've got ponies to see." She tried to head back but her progress was limited since she was still hopping with excitement so he threw her over his shoulder and carried her back himself. He dropped her back into her seat and was buckling her in when she suddenly grabbed him around the neck and pulled him in for a deep kiss. It didn't last long though; she was grinning too broadly to kiss very effectively.

"Thank you so much. Do you have any idea how many times I read "Misty of Chincoteague" when I was little? Only like a million. I cannot believe I'm actually going to get to see the ponies swim. I'm so excited!"

"No kidding," he said drily, kissing her one more time before closing her door and walking around to get back into the driver's seat.

Ninety minutes later, they were pulling into the Refuge Inn. Logan had been very concerned about getting reservations for anything on the island at such short notice but not being too concerned about cost made that process a little easier. Even with such late booking, he'd gotten them a lovely room with another whirlpool tub, much to Veronica's delight. Once they were situated in the room, they went over to the Inn's Bike Depot and rented a couple of bikes to use while checking out the area and avoiding the problem of parking which was in very short supply around town. They explored between the Inn and downtown and then biked to the fairgrounds to check out the Fireman's Carnival. They locked up the bikes and took a stroll hand-in-hand through the carnival. Veronica was beside herself with excitement and Logan was absolutely thrilled that he had been able to make her so happy. Her joy made him think about her as that innocent twelve-year-old he had met so long ago, back when she'd still been reading horse books.

"So, can I interest you in a ride on the Carousel? Or the Tilt-o-whirl? Or hey, maybe the Ferris Wheel. Maybe we'll get lucky and get stuck at the top."

She laughed and shoulder-checked him. "Nah. I think today is the perfect time for a show of ring tossing skill. Although I'm not sure if there are any bears to win. I've mostly seen stuffed horses at all of these booths."

"You know you'd rather have a pony than a bear."

She spun in toward him and stopped short, stretching up on her tiptoes to kiss him. "And you've gotten me all the ponies." Another kiss. "I love you so much. You are so good to me. Thank you for setting this up. I will never forget it."

He wrapped his arms around her waist and kissed her back. "Neither will I." He pulled back and smiled down at her. "Before we find the ring toss, I'm guessing that you might want a corn dog? Or maybe some cotton candy?"

"Or maybe both?"

"Or maybe both," he agreed. "Come on. Corn dogs first."

They strolled through the midway, enjoying their corn dogs, and checking what games were available. They both broke balloons with darts and Logan made a pretty good showing for himself.
with the ring toss. Veronica tried it also but failed miserably, insisting that her lack of skill compared to his had to be about the height differential. Once Logan had won enough times to load her down with a stuffed pony, dog, and bear, he led her back to the concession stand for cotton candy, then to a bench so they could feed each other without losing their stuffed treasures.

They started out side-by-side but unexpectedly, Veronica bopped Logan in the nose with the cotton candy.

"Hey!" he said in the most injured tone he could muster, "that was just mean. After I bring you here to see the ponies and win you all these prizes, and—"

"And buy me cotton candy," she added with a grin.

"Yes, exactly. And buy you cotton candy. Which you then use for nefarious purposes." He pouted his lower lip out at her and she smiled suggestively at him, her eyes shining.

"I guess I better make this right then," she said and rose to stand between his legs. "You've got a little blue on you." She leaned in to mouth the fluff off his skin but as she started to pull back, he tugged her into his lap, wrapping his arms securely around her so she couldn't escape.

"Logan," she protested, "it's too hot for this."

"Veronica Mars," he said in a scolding voice. "Surely you know me well enough to know it is never too hot for this." She giggled when he nosed into her neck to kiss her and then shrieked when he took advantage of this distraction to tickle her sides. She wriggled and thrashed although he noted with amusement that her cotton candy preservation instincts remained intact even in the face of unrelienting tickles. She kept the paper tube firmly in hand and as far away from their struggles as her arm could reach.

"Logan, stop, I'm not kidding, I'm going to make you pay, stop, stop, LOGAN!" She practically spilled off his lap; she would have fallen if he hadn't kept one arm wrapped completely around her, even while he continued his tickle torture.

A deep voice broke through her shrieks of laughter. "What about these two? They're so sickeningly cute that surely some crime must be occurring."

Logan stilled immediately and Veronica dropped her head back, looking to see who was interrupting them. A small group was clustered in front of them, five guys and a girl. They all looked close to their age, or maybe a little older, and were all wearing matching blue tee shirts with a white stitched left chest logo. The young woman in the center of the group stepped forward and said, "I'm sorry if we startled you. Welcome to Chincoteague."

"Thanks," Veronica answered. "We look that touristy?"

The tall blonde guy built like Dick made an amused noise in his throat and answered, "it's just that this place is too small to not know everyone who actually lives here. As in know since birth. I think Gil here is the most recent transplant and he came when we were seven."

The girl nodded in agreement. "If you don't mind, are you planning to stay in town for the week?"

Veronica looked at Logan quizzically. "I don't know; are we planning to stay in town for the week?"

He made an incredulous face and shook his head at her. "We're telling perfect strangers our plans now? Where's my highly suspicious girl gone?"
"I'm so sorry, you're right. I'm Madelyn Cooper, with the Chincoteague Volunteer Fire Department. You can call me Mady. The rest of my team here...Adam, Gil, Sam, Spencer, and Eliot. I hope you're enjoying our little festival so far."

"We're having a great time. I'm Veronica and this is my boyfriend, Logan. We're planning to be here until..." she turned and looked pointedly at Logan.

"The reservation is until Sunday," he said in a grudging tone, but he couldn't keep up his irritated facade when she squealed and clapped excitedly.

"All week long! I'm so excited!" She kissed him on the cheek and he finally smiled at her.

"So, Logan and Veronica, we have something kinda weird to ask you," Mady said, gesturing to the rest of the group with her when she said 'we'. "It's a tradition during pony penning week to choose a vacationing couple to be our guests for the events of the week. Usually, the older firefighters get to make the selection so we always end up with some middle-aged couple. We wanted to try something different so I got us assigned to be in charge of this part of the week. The unusual thing is that it's set up like you're arrested. There's a fake trial, conviction, and then you're sentenced to the events of the week. If you're not too bugged by pretending you're being arrested, there are a lot of benefits to it."

She stopped, seeming a little perplexed by the way Logan and Veronica were smirking at each other. In a low tone, Logan murmured in Veronica’s ear, "Arrested together for a change. Hmm. Sounds like fun." She laughed and in a louder voice he said, "So, what are these benefits of which you speak? It sounds like you're going to be taking up my time with my girl so this needs to be worth my while. Let's hear it."

The Dick look-alike who she had introduced as Sam spoke up. "Tickets to the banquet on Wednesday, the dinner/dance on Thursday night, prime seats for the auction, space on one of the charter boats tomorrow..."

"The boat tomorrow?" Logan interrupted. "That's the one thing I couldn't get when I was making reservations last week."

"A boat for what?" Veronica asked. Sam started to answer but Logan interrupted him.

"Nope, Bobcat, we're back on the secret train. You'll find out in the morning." He turned to Mady. "We're in. What do we need to do? Get processed, fingerprints, arraigned? No problem. Let's do it."

Mady was looking at him a little suspiciously but her companions seemed happy to end their search, filling in Logan and Veronica about the trial to be held at 6:00 PM that evening that would establish them as the arrested couple of the week. Since it was already after 4:00 PM, Mady offered to take them and their bikes back to the Inn so they could get changed for the event. The group walked back to the bike racks and then to a red truck with the Chincoteague VFD logo on the side, a blue shield with the department name displayed with a black pony with white mane and tail. Sam and Logan loaded the bikes into the back while Mady directed Adam and Eliot to find the fire chief and let him know they had their criminal couple. She sent Gil and Spencer off on some pre-trial errand as well.

"You guys are going to have a great time. And you'll be way more fun for us than the past years. We'll make sure you get at a table with the young volunteers for at least one of the dinners. Normally you'd be at the head table with my mom and dad and the rest of the old guard but we're going to drag this tradition into the future if it kills me."

Veronica raised her eyebrows. "Am I correct in assuming your dad is the fire chief?"
"Yeah, Mady's dad's been the fire chief for all our lives. He's waiting to retire until she's ready to take over."

Mady sighed with exasperation. "Sam, don't be stupid. There are other people with lots more experience and seniority who will be chief long before I'll have a chance."

"No one with a Bachelor's in Fire Science and classes from the National Fire Academy," Sam retorted.

She shook her head at him, looking frustrated, and Logan had a flash of Mac smacking Dick in the head. "No, it's a Bachelor's in Public Safety with a minor in Fire Science and lots of people have classes from the National Fire Academy."

Logan grinned at Veronica. "Someone after your own heart. Taking after daddy." He opened the passenger door to the truck and lifted her into the very high truck seat. "Up you go, Bobcat. We gotta go get pretty for getting arrested." She looked at him with a little concern and he wondered as he climbed up next to her what was bothering her. As he settled in next to her, she turned and took his hand.

"Do you really want to do this?"

He suddenly realized she was probably worried that the mention of 'taking after daddy' and getting arrested in the same conversation might trigger some Aaron unpleasantness. With the wonderful day they were having, his asshole of a father was the last thing he was going to think about. He smiled at her and lifted their joined hands to kiss the inside of her wrist. "Yeah, it should be fun. Plus, there's that thing we're getting that I want to be a surprise in the morning. And hey, we never have gotten arrested together. So what do ya say, let's try to make this time together be our last. I'm just not sure the conjugal visits are worth it."

"You never got any conjugal visits. And neither did I."

"Oh dang. I could be wrong then." He stretched his arm around her shoulders and leaned closer so he could kiss behind her ear. "Hey, maybe I will have to get arrested again. I'm willing to bet Vinnie Van Lowe would be happy to let you in the cell with me."

"Uck, after you paid him and then he'd probably take TMZ's money to come in and get pictures. How about we just say that the whole rest of the week is one big mutual conjugal visit and call it good."

"Mmm, I like the way that sounds." He kissed her again just as the driver's side doors opened and Mady climbed into the driver's seat while Sam hopped into the back and they set off for the Inn.

"So what does your dad do that you're taking after?"

"Oh, he's a private detective. I've worked for him for a while. He used to be sheriff but I don't see that being for me. I was thinking FBI but I'm not so sure about that anymore. I really think they're going to make me follow too many rules. That's not really my strength." Logan snorted in derision and Veronica slapped his thigh, then rubbed her hand along it. "Anyway, I'm starting to think the private detective thing might be the best idea. I've kicked law school or investigative journalism around a little too. I'm just not sure yet but I've still got time to figure it out."

"You're the only other girl I've ever met who was interested in their dad's line of work," Mady said with a smile. "I've always wanted to be a fire fighter, since I was a little girl. As soon as I was eighteen, I joined the volunteers. I'm only here in the summer now since I'm going to school up in
Maryland but I do hope I’ll get to come back here eventually. It won’t be right away because I'll have to get work experience elsewhere but I love living on the Island and I don't want to leave forever. The thing is, we're so small here, the department is strictly volunteer except for the chief and you don't get a chief's job straight out of college, even if it is your family thing."

"That's true, if my dad was sheriff again and that was what I wanted to do, it would be quite a while before I was qualified to run for that office. But at least police jobs are generally paid. You don't have volunteer cops the way you have volunteer fire fighters."

Mady nodded. "Yeah, that’s what makes it harder to go just anywhere and get your experience. Paid positions tend to be in larger towns."

“What about EMS jobs? Those are paid and that would let you stick around home and keep getting your local volunteer experience.”

“What’s EMS?” Logan asked.

“Emergency medical services,” Mady answered. "Yeah, I do that too. I did those classes while I was in high school and got certified about the same time I joined the fire department. The problem though is still how small of a town we are. Those jobs don’t come open very often. I’d probably have to get hired for that somewhere else also. It would be easier to stay closer to home though."

"She should be thinking bigger," Sam interjected from the back. "I keep telling her she should apply for a department in DC or someplace like that. They'd be crazy not to want her. All the education and experience and family history. Of course they would want her."

Logan looked back to see Sam's face. Listening to him talk about Mady was like listening to himself talk about Veronica. Sam's eyes were locked on the reflection of Mady in the rear view mirror but she wasn't looking back at him; she had an embarrassed look on her face but she was keeping her eyes pinned to the road. As Logan watched, she used the side mirrors but steadfastly avoided the rear view, where he suspected she already knew she would see almost nothing but Sam. Uh huh. He recognized this situation; they liked each other but didn't think the other felt the same. He grinned down at Veronica and curled his arm more tightly around her. He liked his life much better this way. Admitting what you can't escape was very freeing.

"So can you guys be ready by 5:30 PM? I'll be back to pick you up but it will be with the old Model T fire truck and my dad. Then we'll do the little trial thing and afterwards we'll all get some dinner. Does that work for you?"

"Sure," Logan answered, then looked smugly at Veronica. "So, what does one wear in Chincoteague to their own trial? I didn't bring anything that I would normally wear to court."

Sam laughed. "Nah, this court is very informal. You could go in what you're wearing now if you needed to but after an afternoon in the Midway, we figured you'd want to shower off the dust and sweat. I know I want to."

They pulled up to the Refuge Inn and Logan had Mady pull around to where the Range Rover was parked so they could lock the bikes in the back. Sam climbed into the truck bed and handed the bikes down to Logan.

"I didn't understand how you got reservations here on such short notice since they're usually totally booked for Pony Penning Week but after getting a load of this sweet ride, I think I might have some idea."
"Yeah, well, I'm just happy it worked out for Veronica. She's been a nut about ponies for her whole life I think." Logan slammed the back of the truck shut and beeped the lock. "So Mady, we'll see you and your dad here in about an hour, all ready for the trial of the century. Later Sam."

They hurried to their room to get showered. Logan tried to convince Veronica that a joint shower would speed up the process but for some reason—certainly not past experience—she wasn't buying it. He was still making his case when she turned off the water and stepped out with a towel wrapped firmly around her.

"You're up," she smiled sweetly at him and he groaned.

"I know, what do you think I've been trying to tell you?"

"Shower Logan. We will be back here and sweaty again soon enough." She walked out of the bathroom and shut the door firmly behind her.

"It's never soon enough," he shouted through the door but got into the shower alone regardless.

Ten minutes later, he entered the bedroom with a towel around his hips and found Veronica fully dressed in a flowery sundress. He flicked at the hem of the skirt, trying to see what he could catch a glimpse of. She giggled and twirled away, which triggered his pursuit instinct. He caught up to her easily in the small room, grabbing her from behind and this time running his hand deliberately up her leg as he dipped his head to drop a line of kisses from one shoulder strap along the back of her neck to the other strap.

"Logan," she scolded weakly, "Mady and her dad could be here anytime."

He raised his head to glance at the bedside clock. "Nope. It's only 5:00 PM, we've got half an hour to finish getting ready. We can take ten minutes for ourselves." He scooped her up and dropped carefully onto the couch, in consideration of his towel-only attire. She let out an exasperated huff and shook her head.

"Five."

He smirked and wound his fingers into her hair, pulling her closer and kissing her, gently at first while he ran his tongue along her bottom lip, then more deeply when she relented and parted her lips, meeting his tongue with her own. When he pulled away and rested his forehead on hers, it felt like no time had passed but when she leaned away from him, Logan saw that the clock now read 5:07 PM.

"Yikes, up, up, Logan, you need to get dressed." Having apparently seen the time as well, Veronica jumped away from him and ran back to the bathroom, calling behind her, "I still have to do my hair and make-up!"

They were waiting out in front of the Inn when a restored Model T fire truck pulled up. Mady jumped out of the passenger seat to pull her seat forward so they could climb in the back.

"Guys, this is my dad, Chief Cooper. Dad, Veronica and Logan. They're visiting from California. Veronica's a big 'Misty' fan."

The chief turned in his seat to shake their hands, then pulled the truck onto the road. "Welcome to Chincoteague. Call me Bob. You're a long way from home. Did you come all the way out here just for our little event?"

"No sir, Veronica's interning with the FBI this summer," Logan said, looking at her proudly. "I
found out about this event, and well, ponies tend to make her a little nutty, so I decided to surprise her."

"The FBI? That's unexpected." Bob gave Veronica a speculative look in the rear view mirror. "I wouldn't have pegged you for a G-Man."

"Veronica's a private detective," Mady said excitedly, "Like her dad."

"Oh, I see." He looked at his daughter with a fond smile and then glanced back at Veronica. "I bet he's pleased as punch that you're staying in the family business, hmm?"

Veronica grinned and shrugged. "Some days, yes, others, not so much. He'd like me to go to law school and do something he sees as more respectable than PI'ing."

"And you, young man, do you want her doing something more respectable than PI'ing?"

Logan was startled at the question. "I want her to do what makes her happiest and I'll always support whatever that is. Truthfully though, I've been known to worry some, when she's investigating things."

Veronica smiled at him and took his hand. "I've given you reason." She stroked her fingers along his and then met Bob's eyes in the mirror again. "Logan's always understood, more than anyone else, when I need to follow up on something. He doesn't always agree with my methods but...to be honest, in retrospect, I don't always agree with my methods."

Logan was stunned into silence by her confession but Bob's laugh as he turned the little fire truck into the fairgrounds startled him back into the moment. "Okay, so here's the drill," the Chief said. "The rest of Madelyn's little team is going to meet us and escort the two of you to our 'Judge'. It's the mayor, Irv Sanders; he's Madelyn's godfather. He'll read the charges—they're silly things—you plead not guilty, he convicts you anyway, and sentences you to the week in Chincoteague. Don't worry when the crowd gets loud; the whole thing's in good fun. Once the sentencing is done, someone will bring you back here and we'll go for dinner at the Fireman's Hall. I think they're doing a spaghetti feed in there this year; it smelled garlicky when I dropped in to pick up the truck." He pulled into a parking space and turned off the truck before turning back to Logan and Veronica. "Any questions?"

Logan met Veronica's eyes, but still not trusting his voice, simply shrugged at her. She furrowed her brow as she looked at him but then smiled and looked back at Bob. "Sounds reasonably painless."

Bob smiled and nodded, starting to turn forward again before he glanced back at Veronica as if a new thought had occurred to him. "You'll eat pasta, right? They'll probably have salad too."

Logan burst into hysterical laughter that he couldn't stop even when Veronica turned and punched him hard in the chest. "Yes, I eat pasta."

"Wait til you see her eat," Logan gasped. "It's a sight to behold." Veronica glared at him and made as if to hit him again. He cowered a little away from her while continuing to giggle.

Bob chuckled at the antics in the back of his truck as he stepped out of the truck. He flipped the seat forward, reaching for Veronica's hand to help her but then stopped suddenly with her hand in his.

"No ring?" Veronica looked up at him and Logan could see her eyes widen. "Not married?" She shook her head. "Engaged?" She shook her head again, cringing a little. "Madelyn Rae, I told you the couple needed to at least be engaged."

"Dad, we looked everywhere."
"Everywhere for people of the age you wanted. I don't have any problem with you wanting to skew the event younger but I've still got to keep some of these old farts happy and some kind of ring holds off the questions." He looked down at Veronica's also-bare right hand and then over at his daughter. "Give her what you're wearing." Mady tugged a simple band off her right hand and handed it to Veronica. "If they see something there, no one will ask questions and I don't have to deal with anyone I don't want to deal with."

Veronica put the ring on her left hand and glanced back over her shoulder at Logan. "Sorry baby, you've been replaced. It's me and Mady now."

Mady busted up laughing and gave Logan a gentle shove before getting out of the truck. "Ya snooze, ya lose."

Bob chuckled again, shaking his head as Veronica climbed out of the truck. Logan followed her but Bob stopped him and said, "Son, pick her up a pony ring or something at the carnival; anything to keep the old ladies off my back."

Logan stood next to the chief for a moment, watching Veronica walk ahead with Mady, laughing. He looked back to the older man. "I actually may be able to handle this without a carnival ring."

Bob smiled knowingly and clapped him on the shoulder. "Well then, good luck to you. Now, let's get you guys convicted."

"And to complete the list of charges, Possession of an Unregistered Bear, Excessive Noise, Excessive Levity, Inappropriate Mode of Transportation during Pony Penning—specifically, bicycles—and Failure to Possess Cowboy Boots. Suspects, how do you plead?" After each listed charge, the crowd booed vociferously.

Logan answered confidently, "Not guilty."

Veronica answered immediately following him, "Not guilty," but her voice was more tentative. She looked up at the Judge. "Except the cowboy boot thing. I really don't have those." The crowd changed from booing to laughing, then went back to booing again.

The "prosecutor", a short man dressed in a plaid shirt and jeans, wearing a vest that read "Saltwater Cowboys" on the back, turned to the crowd nodding his head as if to say, 'what did we expect'. Aloud, he stated, "Your Honor, I believe we have heard enough. I call for a directed verdict finding the defendants guilty of all charges."

The Judge, clad in a black robe with jeans and boots showing below the hem, shook his head and said in a mournful voice, "It is such a shame when you find young people like these gone wrong. I do find the defendants guilty of all charges."

"This feeling of being railroaded, it seems so familiar," Logan whispered into Veronica's ear.

"Defendants are sentenced to the activities of Pony Penning Week. And, someone get that girl some boots."

With the trial concluded, Bob and Mady drove them to the Fireman's Hall where dinner was indeed spaghetti with garlic bread, followed by ice cream. "If they keep feeding me like this, I could be persuaded to stay longer than a week," Veronica mumbled in Logan's ear as the evening was winding down. She was curled in his lap, her head tucked on his shoulder, watching Mady boss Sam and Eliot around as they set up the tables for breakfast for the Saltwater Cowboys before they went out for the pony drive in the morning.
"I feed you like this constantly."

She smiled and kissed behind his ear, making him shiver. "Yes, you do. Okay. I'll stay with you." He kissed the top of her head and cuddled her closer.

"So, what do you think about Sam and Mady?"

She pulled back from him and looked at his face. "What are you talking about?"

"He likes her. And I'm pretty sure she likes him."

"Now you're a matchmaker?" Veronica teased, chuckling at the absurdity.

He turned a little pink at her statement and then did that adorable thing where he ducked his head and looked up from under his eyelashes, making it seem like he was looking up at her even though his head was actually still above hers. She found it almost impossible to resist. "I was just listening to him talk about her and it reminded me of us. I just thought maybe they could use some pushing along."

"Do you have something in mind?"

"No, not really. I got him talking about her earlier and suggested he should ask her out but he just got embarrassed. We'll see."

She chuckled at him. "Okay, well let me know if I can help you with your little plan but now, can we try to find a ride home? I'm getting tired and I believe I promised you a shower, so if I'm going to keep that promise..."

He grinned and made a growling noise in the back of his throat. "All right, I'll find Bob." He set her on her feet and disappeared into the crowd.

"Veronica, are you guys ready for a ride home?" Mady was suddenly beside her.

"Yeah, actually Logan just went looking for your dad."

"I think he's working out some details for the morning but Sam's got the truck; we'll take you home whenever you're ready."

"Okay, let's find the boys and go." She stood up and they headed in the direction Logan had just disappeared. "So Mady, do you and Sam, date? You guys seem pretty tight."

Mady looked embarrassed. "No, we never have. He was always really popular in school, a stream of girlfriends, quarterback, you know the type. I'm not the kind of girl he would date."

"That was in what, high school? What about now? Does he still have that stream of chicks following him around?"

"No, I don't think so," Mady had a contemplative look on her face as she considered the question. "No. Now that you bring it up, I haven't seen him with anyone all summer."

"Hmm. Interesting." Veronica spotted Logan talking to Bob and grabbed Mady's elbow, pulling her through the crowd. "Chief, it's been a great night and I haven't even seen a pony yet. Thank you so much. I can't wait for tomorrow. I think Mady and Sam are ready to take us home though. Are you ready, Logan?"

Logan nodded at her and turned to shake Bob's hand. "Thanks, sir. We'll see you in the morning."
Plans were made for pick-up at 9:30 the next morning. By now, Veronica had figured out that they were going to go out on one of the boats that was traveling with the ponies as they swam from Assateague Island to Chincoteague, keeping them in the group and being ready to pull any struggling foals aboard if necessary. Based on the tide, the boats would go out at 10:00 AM.

They were crossing the lobby going toward the elevators when Logan suddenly pulled Veronica to a stop. "Hey, before we head in for the night, the desk lady told me when we checked in that the rose garden is amazing at night. Something about the humidity and the air cooling once the sun is down making the scents stronger. Are you up to checking it out?"

"Um, I guess," she said hesitantly. "When did you become a roses guy?"

"I'm not but she made it sound cool. I thought it'd be nice."

"Okay, sure. Let's go." She started to turn toward the exit to the garden but he stopped her again.

"Why don't you go to the lounge and get some sodas and I'll run up to the room and drop off your bag."

"All right." She handed him her bag then stretched up to give him a quick kiss before heading for the bar.

Ten minutes later, they had their drinks and were strolling hand-in-hand through the rose garden, marveling at the fragrant air. "It's so pretty out here," Veronica said quietly. "The lights on the gazebo are great."

"Come on," Logan said, tugging on her hand. "Let's go sit."

From the gazebo, the garden could be viewed from all directions, with the ocean further off and the rotating beacon of the Assateague Lighthouse sweeping past periodically. Logan sat in a wicker loveseat and pulled Veronica down next to him. They sat in silence for a few minutes, breathing in the rose scent and drinking their sodas. When they finished their drinks, Veronica leaned over and kissed Logan's cheek.

"This has been such a great trip and it's only the second day. Thank you for thinking of this."

He took her empty glass out of her hand and put it next to his on the table next to them before taking her hand and tracing shapes on the back of it. She tilted her head and closed her eyes, sighing a soft sound of contentment.

"I felt you write your name and I felt about a dozen hearts. What was the rest?"

He smirked and pulled her closer. "Maybe it was just nonsense."

"Nonsense? Logan Echolls? Surely not."

He moved his attention to her left hand with Mady's ring still on it. "So, you and Mady, hmm?"

She chuckled at him. "Well, I don't know yet. It's pretty early still. And, by the way, I did ask her about Sam."

"And, what'd she say?" he asked, brushing her hair behind her ear.

"Well, I'm starting to think you're right. It's something to watch over the next couple of days."
"See, I told you."

"Forgive me for doubting you."

"Never do it again."

"I will do my very best," she said in a serious voice, laying her hand across her chest like she was taking a solemn vow, but the mischievous smirk on her face told a different story.

He laughed but suddenly his nerves got the better of him and, of course, Veronica noticed. "Logan, is something wrong?"

"No, I'm just..." he made a frustrated sound, then decided to just jump in. "Okay, when we talked a couple of weeks ago, I got the impression that you were interested in the ring in the safe."

She took a sharp breath in, blinked rapidly several times, and then wrapped both her hands around his. "Yes, you're right, I was interested. I am interested."

"Is it too soon?"

She laughed. "Isn't it cheating to ask these kind of questions in advance of an actual proposal?"

He rolled his eyes at her. "I don't want things to get weird. And I'm kinda afraid I'm just reacting to Bob wanting to keep the old ladies off his back. I could get you the pony ring like he suggested; we could call it the pony promise ring." She snorted. "Or, I could give you the other ring, which is what I really want to do but I'm afraid it'll scare you off. Or, we can just use Mady's ring all week and it can be our little inside joke. I'm just hoping you'll give me a little direction about what you're thinking."

She was silent for a few moments, then reached out and stroked the side of his face. "Logan, you're my oldest friend. We've had a lot of ups and downs in the seven years since we met. Actually, is it closer to eight now? Anyway, some of those down times were really bad—for both of us—but the good times, with you, they've been amazing. After Lilly died, I was so alone. My mom left and I was spending my nights watching people cheat on the people they had promised to love the most." She stopped, shaking her head. "I was so sure back then that I was never getting married. It just wasn't worth the risk, especially since I knew nothing would last anyway. Sometimes I'm still afraid that's true. But when I let you in, you have so much love and devotion and for whatever reason, you give it to me. I don't know why—I haven't been worthy of how much you love me—but your stubborn pigheadedness has made me realize that it doesn't matter whether I think I deserve you loving me or not. That part's up to you. And I know that I can't imagine loving anyone else enough to take this risk."

The look on his face made her think of when he gave her the key to his suite. "You know there's no one else. I only want you. She ducked her head to escape his shining eyes and pulled his hand to her lips. She took a deep breath to steel herself, dropped his hand, and then slid down onto her knees in front of him. She heard him gasp and she leaned her forehead against his knees to try to steady her breathing. She felt his hands caressing the top of her head and then he was down on his knees with her, pulling her into him. She looked up to meet his eyes and realized they were both crying.

"This is a mess," she choked out and they both laughed. He kissed the tears off her cheeks and then sat back, pulling her left hand between them.

"Sorry Mady," he said and twisted the band off her left hand, dropping that ring into his breast pocket while extracting another ring in the same movement.
She laughed again and then wrapped her hands around the hand holding the ring. He gave her a questioning look and she leaned in to give him a long kiss. When she pulled back, she rested her forehead against his.

"I love you Logan. Will you marry me?"

He made a choking, laughing noise and pulled his hand free of hers but then caught the fingers of her left hand, extending them between them and sliding the ring onto her finger. She met his eyes and smiled before looking down to see the ring. It had three large stones, the largest in the middle was dark in color and the two side gems appeared to be diamonds. She twisted her hand a little to catch the light and the middle stone shone blue.

"Can I take this as a yes?" she asked in a teasing voice and his mouth crashed into hers. They kissed until Veronica had to pull away, gasping for air. Logan's hands clasped her face and he was breathing hard also as he gazed down at her.

After several long, deep breaths, he gave her another quick kiss and grinned at her. "Yes. I think you can take this as a yes."

Chapter End Notes

I'm assuming that many of you are aware of 'Misty of Chincoteague' and know that Pony Penning is a real event. I know I read that book about a million times as a kid so it seems like a safe guess that the pony-crazy Veronica would have also. I don't know if they do the arrested tourist thing but it's the kind of event where that would fit in.

In case you do get to Chincoteague, The Refuge Inn is there, with Logan and Veronica's Deluxe Room possibly available for you. Bike rentals on site but, sorry to say, no rose garden. Same in Virginia Beach with the Newcastle Motel, although in the year since I first wrote this, they've changed their name to Baymont Inn & Suites. Ask for the King Deluxe with Fireplace. You can tell them Logan and Veronica sent you but don't expect that to mean anything to them. :(
Promptly at 5:30 AM, just as her alarm would normally be going off, Veronica’s eyes popped open. She really wished they hadn’t; she was pretty sure she had only had about three hours of sleep altogether. She had one hand on Logan’s head which was resting heavily on her rib cage. She considered the unusual position and concluded that he had been working his way back up her body when he simply passed out from exhaustion. She wasn’t completely sure; the later part of the night was mostly a blur.

When they had finally been able to pick each other up off the floor of the gazebo and make their way into the Inn, they had been accosted by the desk clerk. Logan had asked her to deter anyone from entering the garden and had had to share his intentions to get her agreement. When they’d entered the lobby, attached to each other in as many ways possible while still fully clothed, the woman had rushed around the desk to offer congratulations and demand to see the ring. It was Veronica’s first good look at the ring herself. The center stone was indeed blue, a sapphire, in a soft-sided squarish shape; a cushion cut, the clerk had informed her. “A big one!” the woman had said excitedly. On each side, was a smaller diamond in a similar shape, and then several more even smaller diamonds inset down each side. “White gold or platinum?” the clerk asked to which Logan replied quietly, “Platinum”, causing the clerk to clutch at her chest and give a heavy sigh.

“Oh, he’s a keeper,” she informed Veronica with a dreamy look on her face.

Veronica wrinkled her nose in distaste. “I already knew that.”

Logan pressed his face into her hair and she heard him chuckling softly. “Come on, Bobcat, it’s been a long day and tomorrow’s coming early.” She rolled her eyes at him and let him steer her towards the elevator.

“So we know the desk clerk likes the ring. Do you?”

She looked up at him incredulously. "Of course I do. I love it. It's beautiful. But you do know that your taste in jewelry is not why you're 'a keeper', right?"

He pressed her closer to him and kissed the top of her head. "I was reasonably confident of that, yes." They reached their room and Logan pulled the key card from his back pocket to let them in. Once they were inside, she turned to him, expecting to be pressed up against a wall immediately but instead, he walked away from her towards the closet.

"Logan, what are you doing?"

He smiled at her over his shoulder and then disappeared behind the closet door. "I was reasonably confident of that, yes." They reached their room and Logan pulled the key card from his back pocket to let them in. Once they were inside, she turned to him, expecting to be pressed up against a wall immediately but instead, he walked away from her towards the closet.

"Logan, what are you doing?"

He smiled at her over his shoulder and then disappeared behind the closet door. She heard a thump and then he was out, closing the door and coming back to scoop her up in his arms before dropping onto the end of the bed. "When I ran up here before to get the ring, I was a little worked up, as you might expect. I couldn't remember if I'd locked the safe again. Luckily I did but I had to make sure."

She gave him a confused look. He smiled and kissed the crinkled skin between her eyebrows. "I've got the ring; why does the safe need to be locked?"

"Oh," he nodded. "I forgot you wouldn't know. There are two more rings in that box." He looked a little embarrassed.
She shook her head at him, still confused. "You had other choices? Today just felt like a sapphire day?"

He laughed. "No, it's the wedding bands." Her mouth fell open in surprise. "I wanted the bands to match and with a gemstone instead of a diamond in the engagement ring, I thought it would be better to coordinate them from the start. I didn't want the gems in the bands to have a different intensity than the one in your ring so I chose them all together."

She blinked up at him. "So, you chose all these stones individually? Did you design all these rings yourself?"

He looked embarrassed again. "Umm...mostly. The side diamonds in your ring, those were my mom's. I pulled them out of a necklace that she wore when she won her Emmy. All her jewelry was stored in a safe deposit box so they didn't get messed up when the house burned. There were rubies in that necklace too but I wanted blue to go with your eyes so I picked sapphire."

She dropped her head onto his chest with a thump. "You are the gushiest, smooshiest, girliest hot guy I have ever met."

"That's okay with you, right?"

She looked back up at him with a smile, caught his face in her hands, and gave him a long, deep kiss. "It is absolutely okay with me."

After that, things had gotten intense, and after a while, fuzzy. They were already on the bed but then they decided to try out the tub and later, he did have her pressed up against the wall and at one point, god help her, they were out on the balcony. She hoped they weren’t going to end up evicted from this delightful inn. She didn’t think they would have anywhere near as much fun the rest of the week if they ended up needing to crash on Mady’s living room floor. She smiled and combed her fingers through Logan’s hair as she pieced the events of the night together. Her movement seemed to break through his sleep and he mouthed at her skin and pulled his arms around her more tightly. “Love you, V’ronica,” he mumbled against her and stilled again.

She scrunched down a little to kiss the top of his head. “Love you too, sleepy boy.” He murmured unintelligibly this time but otherwise didn't move. She closed her eyes also and let sleep take her back.

She woke up some time later at the sound of a knock on the door. She felt Logan stir beside her and roll to the side of the bed. She opened an eye to watch him walking naked to one of the chairs to grab his jeans. While she watched with interest, he tugged them on, calling, “Hang on, I’ll be right there.” He turned back to her and smiled. “Breakfast. I ordered it last night.” He moved to her side of the bed and bent back down to kiss her while he pulled the comforter back up from the bottom of the bed to cover her.

She smirked at him, then rolled over to snuggle down into the pillows. “So I shouldn't flash the waiter?”

“That's a little more of a tip than I'm comfortable with." He went to the door and she heard him greeting the server. There were a lot more words going on than she was used to from a room service transaction but she was buried too far into the pillows to catch much of the conversation.

“Up and at ‘em, sleepyhead. Apparently our news is circulating through the staff. They sent fancy with our breakfast.”
She sat up and pushed back to lean against the headboard, pulling the sheet up with her. He made a pouty face. "Getting a look at all of you was too much of a tip for the room service guy. That doesn’t mean you have to stay all covered up when it’s just me here.” He tugged gently on the sheet but she kept it tucked firmly under her arms, giving him an amused look, challenging him to make a move. “Eh, whatever,” he responded to her actions in a nonchalant tone. “Nothing I haven’t seen before anyway.”

Her look of amusement turned to mock outrage and he laughed out loud and ducked as she swung one of the pillows at him. “Hey, careful, I’m trying to feed you here. I would think that entitles me to a little consideration.” He turned to the room service cart which was partially hidden behind him and turned back with a bed tray. He unfolded the legs and placed it over her lap.

“What did you mean, our news is circulating?”

“Well, these—” he turned away from her again and then turned back with a large vase of roses which he set on the nightstand beside her, “—are from the management.” He handed her a little card to read.

“Congratulations on your happy news. Be sure to come back for your first anniversary.” She looked up at him, surprised. “I guess this means we weren’t too shocking out on the balcony last night. I was halfway expecting them to kick us out after that display. But I would have expected them to invite us back for a honeymoon. Why skip an event by jumping to an anniversary?”

“I don’t know. They also sent mimosas.” He placed a pair of champagne flutes on the tray.

“So apparently no one was checking our I.D.s when they decided to help us celebrate with alcoholic beverages.”

“Oops,” he said with a grin. He sat down carefully on the edge of the bed. “So, how about a toast?” He handed her one of the glasses and took the other for himself. “To the only woman in the world for me. ‘For you see, each day I love you more. Today more than yesterday and less than tomorrow’.” He raised his glass to her and then drank.

She watched him with a warm feeling building in her chest. “So, to whom do I owe thanks for that toast?”

“You don’t think those were my words?”

“Logan Echolls, king of the quotes?” She gave him a teasing smile. "Let's just say I suspect you had some outside input.”

“Okay, you’re right. Rosemonde Gerard.”

“My turn.” She lifted her glass. “May we love as long as we live and live as long as we love.” She tipped the glass towards him and delicately clinked it against his before drinking. As she lowered her glass, she noticed him smiling at her with his eyebrows raised.

She raised her eyebrows back at him and shrugged her shoulders at him in a questioning manner. “What?”

“Credit for your quote? Which I love by the way. It basically makes me immortal.”

She looked at him, wrinkling her forehead while she tried to figure out what he was trying to say. "Oh, I get it. As long as you love, you live. But sorry, I don’t have the foggiest idea if there’s someone to credit. As far as I know, it’s an old Irish toast. No one in particular to thank except me.”
“Okay then.” He leaned forward and gave her a gentle kiss. “Thank you.”

“And thank you.” She kissed him back. “But now, may I have my breakfast? I’m famished.”

He set his glass down on the tray next to her with a stern look. “Don’t drink my drink.”

“But honey, what’s yours is mine, right?”

“Not yet. Drink your own.” He stood and pulled one of the covered plates from the cart, placing it on the tray across her lap before lifting the lid with a flourish. “Scrambled eggs, double bacon, country potatoes—extra crispy, and an English muffin with grape jelly.”

“Ooh, yummy.”

He pushed the cart over to his side of the bed and pulled the other tray out from the bottom of the cart. He set it on the bed and then turned away from the cart and pulled his pants off before carefully climbing back into the bed beside her. He scooted up to lean against the headboard beside her and settled the tray over his legs before reaching for his own plate. Once he was settled, he reached over to her tray and plucked his glass off of it. He smiled at her and took a sip.

“Thank you for not drinking my mimosa.”

“I guess. I still think what’s yours is mine.” She gave his plate a speculative look. “Like those sausages.” She stabbed one with her fork and raised it to her mouth, pausing to gauge his reaction. He only looked amused so she took a bite but then held the remainder back up to him. He opened for her and she fed him the rest of the sausage.

“And will you be sharing that double order of bacon?” She furrowed her brow at him and he laughed. “I’ll take that as a no.” They ate in silence for a few minutes.

“So how long until our ride arrives?”

“Um, let’s see, what did Mady say, 9:30 AM? We’ve got about two hours.”

She looked at him with a frown. “Geez, why did you have breakfast come so early?”

“Well, I was thinking leisurely breakfast followed by working off said breakfast.” He waggled his eyebrows at her and she rolled her eyes in response.

“I’m really not feeling up to the gym this morning. Someone kept me up too late last night.”

He made a scoffing sound. “Weak quip, Mars. Like anyone would ever think you would go to a gym.”

"Ooh, you cut me. So, if not the gym, what was your plan for a workout? Jogging?"

"I'm not even talking to you anymore," he said with a pout, reaching over and stealing her last piece of toast from her plate.

"So a few minutes ago it's undying love and now you won't even talk?" She snatched the toast back out of his hand and took a bite, smirking at him. She watched him struggle not to smile at her, then offered the last bite of toast back to him. He took the bite, chasing it with the last of his mimosa before sliding to the edge of the bed and clearing his dishes. When his setting was out of the way, he turned and looked at her tray as well. She was finished other than her drink so she snagged the glass from the tray and he cleared it from in front of her. He then plucked the glass out of her hand, drank
the last swallow and pushed the cart a little ways from the bed.

"Hey! I wasn't done with that."

"Now you are. So, the working off part." He lunged at her, pulling her down from her seated position against the headboard. She let out a startled yelp and tried to wriggle away but that was short-lived as her focus was drawn to what he was doing to her with his mouth and his hands. Any urge to escape disappeared and soon she was moaning his name.

After too short a time, they were in the shower, then getting ready to go to the boat. They were seated together on the bench at the Inn's front gate when Mady pulled up to get them.

"Come on, lovebirds, let's go," she called through the open window.

Veronica jumped off Logan's lap and turned to pull him off the bench. "It's pony time!"

As Logan pulled the truck door open and turned to lift Veronica in, Mady stopped him.

"You should get in the back, Veronica, so you've got extra room to try on the boots." Logan opened the back door and they peered into the second row seat at a pile of cowboy boots. "There's some for today and then there's some nicer ones for the dinners if you prefer. They were in my sister's and my closets but when we tried them on last week, none of them fit so we got new ones. These were piled up to donate to the Thrift Shop but no one has had time to drop them off so I thought you might want to try them on. Logan said you were a six so some of them should fit you."

Veronica scrambled up into the back seat but when Logan started to follow her, she stopped him. "No, just sit up front so I don't kick you when I'm trying these on." He pouted at her but closed her door and climbed in front. Veronica dug through the pile of boots, finding both plain and fancy pairs. She immediately pulled out a pale, almost champagne colored pair with a slightly higher heel and darker-colored, decorative stitching up the sides and around the top. "Ooh, these are kinda sexy. Cross your fingers." She pulled her own regular boots off and worked her right foot into the fancy boot. "Feels pretty good." She leaned back and stuck her leg up into the air so the boot could be seen. "Logan, what do you think?"

He smirked at her over his shoulder. "I like them. They give me impure thoughts."


"I always liked that pair but make sure they're not too tight. You'll be sorry later if they're pinching you now."

"No, I think they're okay. All right, cool. Now, let's find an everyday pair." She continued with her boot search while Logan and Mady talked about the day's upcoming events.

"You guys will come on the boat with me. The Saltwater Cowboys drive the herd into the water and pick them up on the other side to get them through town but the boats keep them moving in the right direction while they're swimming. Mostly, they know where they're going but once in a while, a boat has to head them off. Or, sometimes if a pony is struggling, they might need some help."

"Okay, I'm set," Veronica climbed over the back of the seat wearing her second-hand boots and dropped into the space between Mady and Logan. "All ready for horse-related activities. So, you were talking about ponies struggling. Do they all swim? Even little tiny ones?"

"No, if a foal is too small, they transport both the mare and her foal. The vet checks all the horses the
day before to make sure there's no injuries or anything that would cause a problem in the swim."

"Oh, that's good. Oh yeah, Logan, Mady's ring." Logan dug into his shirt pocket and produced the ring, which he handed to Veronica.

"Hey, did you get the pony ring my dad was talking about last night? When did you have time?" She reached to accept her ring that Veronica was holding out to her and caught sight of the ring on Veronica's finger. "Holy crap, that's no pony ring."

Logan burst into laughter. "Yeah, I hope not or I really made a shopping mistake."

"Oh my god, congratulations! I'm so excited. So you were planning all along to get engaged this weekend?"

"No," Logan admitted. "Not really. I don't like to leave it in the hotel safe if I'm not actually there so I just tucked it in my bag and dropped it in the safe here. But then, your dad...kinda made me decide to just go for it."

"Oh ho, wait 'til he hears. He's going to want all the credit." She pulled the truck into a small restricted lot and parked.

"Geez, there's a zillion people here."

"We get about 40,000 people here throughout the week. Things get pretty crowded."

"We're lucky we're so stinking cute, honey." Veronica poked Logan in the side to prod him out of the truck. "We'd be standing with the masses behind the velvet rope if we weren't."

"That's really true. You got super lucky getting the hotel but she's right, you'd be standing behind the barriers waiting for another two hours before you saw a single pony if you hadn't grossed out Gil yesterday at the carnival. Now, let's move it before we miss the boat."

They headed for the dock. There was only a short period before everyone was aboard and buckled securely into life jackets and then they were underway.

"The Coast Guard Utility Boat in the center of the bay will sound its air horn and set off a flare when the ponies enter the water so everyone knows it's begun. If you watch over there," she gestured to a point on the Assateague side, "you'll see the herd before they get to the water."

"Mady," a voice bellowed from the front of the boat, "you've got a call on the radio."

"Okay guys, you stay here and have fun. I'll catch up to you when we dock and I'll get you to the Fairgrounds ahead of the herd so you can see the Cowboys bring them in."

"Thanks, Mady."

Veronica leaned against the boat's side, watching anxiously where Mady had directed her attention. Logan stood directly behind her with his hands on the side rail, leaning into her and locking her in place. He kissed her temple, then her cheek, then her ear, but the expected kiss to her neck never came. Instead he sighed.

"This stupid life jacket," he grumbled as he gently bumped his cheek against the shoulder of the vest that was riding up so it covered her neck. He pressed her more tightly against the rail and kissed the top of her head before resting his chin there. She leaned to the side so she could twist toward him for
a kiss on the lips.

"I know I've said this a million times but I'm really excited to be here. Thank you for planning this for me."

"I'm glad you're having such a good time. The only downside is tomorrow when you're going to want me to buy you a pony at the auction and I'm going to have to be the one to remind you that you don't have anywhere to keep it."

She laughed and kissed him again. "I can see where that would worry you. Fear not. I actually have some ideas about this."

He made a dubious face at her. "You really don't have anywhere to keep it."

She laughed again, "I know. Don't worry. I will be a rational person tomorrow, I promise. Not taking any ponies home—this trip. It's just that last night at dinner, I heard about...oh look, there they are!"

A cluster of horses, some with riders, some not, appeared right where Mady had directed them to watch. The horses with riders were on the perimeter, keeping the herd in a fairly tight group. They reached the water and the Cowboys in the front spread out to the sides and those in the rear kept coming, urging the herd into the Channel. The promised air horn made everyone jump and the red flare was lit. Cheers erupted from crowds of people on the land and in the multitude of boats. As the swimming ponies pulled adjacent to their boat, Veronica whooped and leaned back in Logan's arms.

"This is the coolest!"

The Channel was not wide and the front of the herd reached the Chincoteague shore fairly quickly. As the last of the herd passed their boat, they began to move slowly back to the dock. A few minutes after the ponies had all reached dry land, their boat docked and they disembarked. Mady was off quickly and gestured for them to follow her. "Come on, if we hurry, we can get to the fairgrounds by the back roads. If we don't get ahead of this, we'll get stuck in traffic and you might not get to see anything." Once off the boat, they ran for the truck, managing to beat the crowds. When they reached their destination, Mady again pulled them into a restricted lot and parked the truck facing the road.

"Okay, y'all climb up back and you'll be able to see the whole herd as they bring them in. You can climb up on the roof of the cab if it helps you see better. It's reinforced but Veronica, no getting over-excited and jumping around. One, I don't want you guys falling off the roof and two, my dad will kill me if it gets dented again. And oh hey," she reached back into the back seat of the truck and pulled out cowboy hats that she tossed to them. "You guys should wear these. Keep your scalps and your necks from burning to a crisp." She pulled sunblock out as well. "I'd get some of this on you too, necks and Veronica's shoulders. It's hazy out here but it will burn you before you even realize it. Logan, your ears too." Veronica laughed and reached up to flick one of his ears but Mady responded, "Hey, I'm not kidding, blistered ears are gross."

"So it sounds like you've got other stuff to do," Logan said, cupping his hand over his ear protectively and wrinkling his nose at Veronica.

"Yeah. Once the ponies are all in the corrals, you guys can come in to look at them or wander around the grounds, go to the carnival, whatever. Text me if you need anything. The rest of the day is open for you until the banquet at 6:00 PM. You can go back to the Inn whenever you want; let me know and I'll send someone to drive you back and we'll make sure someone picks you up before dinner. Does that all work for you?"
"Yeah, definitely. Don't worry about us. We can be very self-sufficient, right, Veronica?"

"Yes, very. Thanks, Mady, for everything."

"No problem. I'm glad you're having such a good time. I'm leaving the keys in the truck so any of the volunteers can drive it. You don't need to lock it when you leave it to go into the fairgrounds. It's fine in this lot."

"Okay, thanks, we'll see you in a while," Veronica said.

As Mady headed for the fairgrounds, Logan lifted Veronica up onto the truck's rear bumper so she could climb into the truck bed and he followed. "So, first things first, sunscreen." He popped the tube open and liberally smeared the lotion onto Veronica's shoulders, the back of her neck, and her chest.

"Watch it, buddy. No funny business."

He smoothed his hands down her arms slowly and leaned his mouth to her ear. "Are you sure?" He breathed gently in her ear and grinned at her when she shivered. He then stepped deliberately away from her and applied his own sunscreen to the back of his neck and on his ears as instructed. He rubbed a little on his nose and reached over to dab Veronica's nose and cheeks as well. She continued to lean back against the cab where he'd left her, watching him appraisingly. He raised his eyebrows at her as he rubbed the lotion in. "What? Having impure thoughts?"

She absolutely was but she wasn't going to admit it outright. Instead, she just smiled demurely up at him and tilted her head. "Maybe, but I don't really think this is the place for that kind of stuff."

He snapped the lid back on the sunscreen and tossed it into the corner of the truck bed before advancing on her. He put his hands on her hips and bent at the knees to get down to her level, nosing in under her chin and licking her throat from the hollow between her collar bones to her jaw. She gasped and giggled as he pulled her off her feet, straightening his legs as he lifted her. She wrapped her legs around his hips and he pressed into her, pinning her against the truck cab while he continued to kiss her neck. Her head fell back and she tightened her legs around him.

"This place is working for me," he whispered in her ear. She was softly moaning her assent when a loud voice broke their moment.

"Boy, you can't defile your brand-new fiancée in the back of my truck in broad daylight. That will really bring the wrath of the old ladies down on me."

Both their heads snapped up and they gazed at each other, mortified. Veronica unhooked her ankles and slid back down to her feet before looking up to find Bob looking at them with an exasperated face and Sam standing behind him shaking with silent laughter.

Logan's face reddened with embarrassment but he made a valiant effort. "Not defiling, sir. Adoring."

"Uh-huh, you say potato..." Bob answered but he looked amused now. "So, missy, let's see this ring that has my daughter in such a tizzy." Veronica moved to the edge of the truck bed, knelt down, and extended her arm towards Bob and Sam. "Nice. Very nice. You were right when you said you thought you could do better than a pony ring. I guess congratulations are in order then."

"Thank you, sir. And thanks too, for the prod yesterday. I've been a little nervous but I couldn't let you take the hit from the old ladies."

"Well son, while I do appreciate that, you know that's mostly a joke, right?"
"It doesn't matter. It got me to do what I've wanted to do for quite a while." Logan extended his hand to Bob for a handshake which Bob returned with a smile.

"Well, then, you are very welcome. I expect the herd should be coming through pretty soon so I'm leaving you to it. Try to keep the PDAs at PG-13 if you can."

Bob moved away towards the corrals and Sam came up to the truck. "That was hilarious, man. I gotta say though, you stayed a lot cooler than I would have."

"It's years of dodging Veronica's dad. I'm still afraid of him killing me slowly."

"Yeah, girls with scary dads. Too much effort."

Veronica raised her eyebrows at Sam and Logan laughed, putting his hands up between them. "Down, Bobcat, I've got this. Sam, don't be a dumbshit, it's about the girl, not her dad. If the girl is worth it, you figure out how to live with the dad."

Sam looked like he was considering Logan's words but just then, the noise from the crowd on the road increased. "Oh, sounds like they're nearly here. You should get up on the roof of the truck. Much better view from there."

"That's what Mady said too. Come on Veronica, let's get you up there." Logan lifted Veronica onto the roof and she spun around so she was facing the road. She heard him follow her up before asking Sam, "Are you watching with us?"

"No, I've got stuff I'm supposed to be doing. I'll see you guys in a while," Sam said, giving them a wave as he walked away.

Veronica waved a distracted hand at Sam, her attention riveted to the road where mounted cowboys could be seen leading a parade of ponies. She moved behind Logan, leaning against his back with her arms around his shoulders. She gave him a loud, smacking kiss on his temple. "Love you, Pookie."

He grinned up at her but said, "I'm voting no on Pookie."

"It's sweet that you think you have a vote." She kissed him again and then raised up on her knees. "Ooh, look at that one. All white except the dark face. That's cool." She continued a running commentary as the herd swept past on coloring and markings and general cuteness. A couple of times, a pony would break from the group and when one made it through the barriers and ended up right next to the truck, she was so excited that Logan wrapped his arm firmly around her waist like he was afraid she would pitch off the roof. He didn't loosen his grip until the pony had been herded back to the main path by a cowboy.

"Oh my God, that was the coolest thing. He was right here next to us."

"Anyone listening to you would think that you just encountered Sean Connery or someone super famous," Logan teased.

"Logan, we've both met famous people. Not one of them have lived up to expectations. That pony though, he was awesome."

"Okay, I'll give you that. I think they're all through; I only see cowboy-covered horses still coming. Are you ready to get down and go meet the ponies close up?"

"Absolutely."
They wandered through the grounds for about an hour, admiring the herds when Logan was jerked to a halt by Veronica's sudden stop. "I wonder if the buy-back ponies have been identified. Let's find someone we know to ask."

He stepped back to her side and tapped the front of her hat. "I don't know what a buy-back pony is."

She knocked her hat back up and swatted at his hand. "Didn't I tell you this morning on the boat? Oh, no, I didn't, we got interrupted. Buy-backs are ponies that they keep to replenish the herd but they 'sell' them to buyers as a fundraiser and then the buyer gets to name them before they go back to Assateague. That's what I was starting to tell you this morning; I know we can't actually buy a pony but I thought maybe we could do a buy-back? If you don't mind, of course." She squinted up at him. "I am kinda spending your money; I certainly don't have buy-back cash lying around."

He snuggled up to her. "I am happy to buy-back a pony of your choosing. The fire department folks have been great to us; I'd be into participating in their fund-raising. Do I get to name it P.I.?"

Logan grinned at her dismissive scoff. "That's not very ocean-y. A lot of these ponies get ocean-related names."

"There's always Neptune...Triton...Pirate."

He laughed outright as Veronica's nose wrinkled more with each suggestion. "You're starting to make me like P.I. We've got time to kick around more names anyway." She linked arms with him and led him out of the penning area. "The other option I heard about was The Feather Fund. This lady used to help children buy ponies after she beat cancer. She died the same year Lilly did but they still keep up the charity."

"I like that one too. I'm cool doing either or both if you want. But that makes me think, we could always name a buy-back pony Lilly."

"Do you think she would haunt us if we named a horse after her?" Veronica asked skeptically.

"Maybe. But if it was a pretty enough horse, she might like the shout-out." They both laughed at the thought of Lilly as a horse's namesake.

"And you know what the best part would be? Running into Celeste and telling her we'd named a horse Lilly. Oh hey, Logan, look, there's Bob. He'll have the answers we're looking for." They headed over to the Fire Chief who was chatting with Irv, their judge from the night before.

"Well there, miss, I'm happy to see you've gotten the right kind of footwear for this week," Irv said with a grin. He frowned disapprovingly at Logan. "I can't say the same for your young man."

Logan laughed. "I'm not really one for boots, Judge. I'm just doing my best to watch my step."

Veronica jumped in. "We were wondering about the buy-back ponies. Are they already identified so we can see them or do we just have to wait until tomorrow? And, is there someone around to talk to about The Feather Fund?"

Bob and Irv looked at each other speculatively before Bob spoke. "I can take you over to the buy-back pen. They chose the new ponies they wanted to cycle back into the herds yesterday but they may not have all of them corralled in the same place yet. They should have most of them though. There's usually only around six in the group."

Irv chimed in, "If you're going to take them over there, I'll hunt up Ed from The Feather Fund and
Bob turned Logan and Veronica back in the direction of the corrals and put an arm around each of their shoulders. "You two are certainly joiners, aren't you? How did you even hear about our programs?"

Veronica laughed a little at the first part of his statement. "Joiner would not be a description most people would use for me, I'm afraid. But I met a lady last night at dinner and she told me those were ways to buy ponies when you can't actually take a pony home. I told Logan today and he liked the idea although I think if we have to pick one or the other, I'd put money on him wanting to do The Feather Fund to help a kid rather than just making sure the herd stays well-managed."

Bob looked at Logan who shrugged and nodded. "She's pretty well got my number. But I wouldn't think we would have to pick one or the other. We agree to cover a Feather pony and then we'll try to win the bidding on a buy-back pony. Shouldn't be too hard."

"Okay then, here's your buy-backs." There were eight horses in the pen. One of the foals was young enough that it was still with its mother. "Looks like we've got seven available this year." Bob addressed the cowboy in the pen. "Terry, can you tell our potential buyers about these foals?"

The cowboy gave a rundown on all the ponies. One was a palomino filly. "Her sire is Surfer Dude," Terry explained. "He's a pretty well-known stallion around here so she is probably going to go for quite a bit."

Logan barked out a laugh. "A blonde horse with a dad named Surfer Dude? I think you've found your Lilly."

"And we can come back later and try to find any foals she has," Veronica clapped her hands. "This is perfect."

"You can't get your heart too set on a particular horse," Terry warned. "You could get outbid."

Logan looked at Veronica watching the filly with a huge smile on her face. "Nope. Not a chance."

Irv showed up at that moment with a man in tow. "Logan and Veronica, this is Ed Suplee. His late wife, Carollynn, was the inspiration for The Feather Fund. He can answer any questions that you have." Their only questions had to do with the application and selection process. Once they were satisfied with how a child was selected, Logan's only remaining question related to logistics.

"So you hook us up with your chosen bidder and when they're done, I pay the bill?"

"You're not just donating money? You want to support an entire purchase?" Ed asked, clearly surprised.

"Sure. How else do I get to enjoy the excitement of the new pony owner? Between Veronica getting her Lilly in the buy-back auction and some kid getting their dream pony, I'm going to be swimming in pony happiness. And, it has occurred to me—" Logan turned back toward Bob and Irv "—if you don't mind, I could give your cashiers a web address to give to each of the buyers to send in a picture of their new pony if they want. It's a website called 'Grade My Pony'. No charge for entering their picture. Just a chance to show off their new purchase and maybe bragging rights if the people who access the site give their pony a high rating."

Everyone except Veronica, who was clucking quietly to the filly, trying to coax her over to the fence, was looking at Logan skeptically.
"Logan, these animals can go for several thousand dollars," Irv said. "The high bid to date is $17,500. The buy-backs tend to go for more than the regular purchases."

"That's fine." The men continued to look at him strangely and he finally understood why they looked so skeptical. "Oh, now I get it. I'm good for the cash. If you want to run my card now for the high bid twice, I'm okay with that. If the winning bids end up lower, we'll just reverse today's transaction and run it again for the right number. I understand your concern, especially with the Feather pony; you don't want to get some kid's hopes up and then have me turn out to be a flake. It's perfectly fine."

Veronica had come to stand by him as he spoke. She slipped her hand into his and in a low voice commented, "Interesting to be so fully anonymous, isn't it?"

He looked at her with wide eyes. "It's weird." He looked at Bob and Irv. "Seriously guys. Find me someone with a credit card machine and we can do this right now."

Bob shook his head. "That's okay, we're good on the buy-back. Ed?"

"If you're satisfied, I'm good too. Why don't you give me your cell number, young man. I've got to take a look at the rest of the applications and make some calls to figure out who I can match you with. As soon as I've got a kid for you, I'll let you know." Ed reached out to shake Logan's hand, clapping him on the shoulder. "We really appreciate your generosity."

"Happy to help, sir." Logan grinned back at him.

"So, Veronica—" Irv put his arm around her shoulders and led her back to the buy-back pen "—this little filly is your choice, hmm?" He produced a handful of sugar cubes from his pocket and made a chirruping sound to the little horse. When she moved closer to them, Irv took Veronica's hand and pressed it out flat, palm up, dropping a couple cubes of sugar on it. She looked at him apprehensively but stuck her hand through the bars of the fence. "Just hold it flat. It will tickle when she takes them but don't be scared."

Logan moved up beside her, watching her face as the pony came closer. She made a kissing sound and the filly took the last steps to her and lowered her head to whisk the sugar off her hand. Veronica giggled and leaned into Logan. "That did tickle," she said, smiling up at him. "You should try it."

He kissed her temple and shook his head. "Nah, I'd hate to make her like me more than you. It's bad enough that your dog prefers me."

She harrumphed loudly, which made the filly jerk away. Logan laughed, getting a smack in the chest for his trouble before Veronica turned back to croon at the pony until she stepped back to the fence. Her eyes glued on the filly, Veronica held her hand out towards Irv who laid two more sugar cubes in her palm without a word. As she fed the pony again, Logan stood watching the scene with a smirk. When Irv glanced up and saw Logan looking at him, he shrugged. "She's hard to say no to."

Logan rolled his eyes with a laugh. "You're telling me? You don't know the half of it."

After another pair of sugar cubes, the filly, who Veronica was now openly referring to as Lilly, was sticking her head through the fence trying to get to Veronica, who was scratching behind her ears and stroking her neck. "So, when we come back in a year or two, is there any chance she'll remember me?"

"That's hard to say for sure. I'd wager that she will know you tomorrow though," Terry answered. "I'd definitely make sure to have some sugar on hand tomorrow and when you come back next year."
"I'm guessing that Irv will get you set up for tomorrow. We'll have to see about next year," Bob laughed.

Veronica gave the pony one last scratch and turned to Logan. "Would you mind going back to the Inn now, if Mady can find someone to take us? I seriously need a nap." In an undertone, she added, "Seriously Logan. A nap."

Irv spoke up. "I've got to run home; I've got some paperwork to do for the ceremony tomorrow night. I'll take you if you want."

"That would be great," Veronica answered. "I've got stuff in the truck; can we go by there?"

"Sure, I'm probably in the same lot. Bob, do you need me to pick them up before the banquet tonight?"

"No, actually, Carol—that's my wife—and I will come get you at 5:30 PM. Tonight's just dinner, no ceremonies, no dancing. We'll have you home again before 9:00 PM."

"That sounds great. We've got to be back here in the morning by 8:00 AM, is that right?" asked Logan.

"Yeah," Bob agreed, "and by then, Ed should be able to hook you up with your Feather Fund kid. It will be fun for all of you if you're with them while they bid."

"Ooh, tomorrow is going to be a blast," Veronica said in an excited voice. They had reached the truck and she quickly dug out her own boots plus the dress boots she had chosen. They parted from Bob and went to Irv's truck which was parked nearby.

"So what is the ceremony tomorrow? Something to close out the week?" asked Veronica.

Irv chuckled. "In a way. We've got one last tradition for the week. Way back in the early pony penning days, some friends decided to have a double wedding once all the pony action was completed. Everyone was already in town and it was an easy way to get some of their guests who had left the island to be at the wedding. It worked out pretty well so the next year, two other couples decided they would do the same thing but they weren't close friends like the first pair of couples had been so they started out each planning their separate wedding. However, there was only one minister in town so in the end, they decided they would have a double wedding also. After that, every year there was a wedding at the end of Pony Penning week. Sometimes it would only be a single couple but after several years, it got so there was always at least two couples and sometimes more. Then, some of the original couples started doing vow renewals at the same time. These days, it's usually no less than five couples, some initial weddings and some just vow renewals."

Veronica and Logan looked at Irv incredulously. "This is a very interesting place," Veronica said. "Ponies running through town like dogs, auctions, dinners, carnivals, and now weddings. All in the course of a week." She looked at Logan with a smile. "It's fun here. I'm so glad you brought me." Logan pulled her into his side and kissed the top of her head.

Irv looked at them with a gleam in his eye. "So, Bob and Carol, they got married in 1979 on Thursday of Pony Penning Week. It was July 26. Five years later, July 26 fell on Thursday of this week again. Mady had been born the year before and Carol could get back into her wedding dress so she decided that was a sign that they should renew their vows." All three laughed. "Since then, whenever July 26 falls onto the Thursday, they do it again."

Veronica said, "Can she still wear the dress?" at the same time that Logan said, "Tomorrow's the
"Yes to both," Irv said. "She can wear the dress and she will be tomorrow. It will be their 28th wedding anniversary."

This time, Logan said, "That's great", at the same time that Veronica said, "I know what happened." Logan looked at her with alarm. "That is not a phrase I like to hear you say when we're on vacation."

"Remember this morning, when the Inn sent the roses and the card, congratulating us and telling us to come back for our First Anniversary? I couldn't figure out why they didn't say honeymoon but now I know. They think we're getting married tomorrow."

Irv nodded. "Yeah, I can see why they would think that. Everyone around here knows about the wedding tradition."

"What paperwork are you going home to do for this wedding...or weddings?" Logan asked.

"Well, I am the mayor of Chincoteague but that's not really a job. My actual job is that I am the County Clerk for Accomack County. I have to issue the marriage licenses. I've got a couple that still need to be finalized before tomorrow."

They pulled up in front of the Inn. "Here you go, front door service. You can go take your naps and we'll see you at dinner." Logan gathered Veronica's boots and slid out of the truck, turning back to help her out. He looked up to thank Irv for the ride but before he could say anything, Irv held up a hand, a questioning look on his face. "Hey, before you go in, I should ask—any chance you two want to get married tomorrow?"

Chapter End Notes

So, yeah, I made up the wedding tradition to suit my needs. But pretty much everything else is real, including the buy-back ponies, The Feather Fund, Ed and (the late) Carollynn Suplee, even Surfer Dude was an actual stallion on Assateague in 2007.

Hope you're enjoying LoVe's pony vacation.
"Veronica, you can't seriously be considering this." Logan's pacing took him back to the door again and as Veronica watched, he stopped and thumped his head gently into the door jamb.

"Why not, it's like kismet. The perfect ending to this perfect week."

"I've only have two words for you." He looked back over his shoulder at her, a grimace on his face. "Keith Mars."

"He'll understand. He'll be a little miffed at first—" Logan thumped his head against the door jamb again, snorting in disbelief at that understatement. "—okay, a lot, but he'll understand that it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for us."

"So call him right now and tell him we're getting married tomorrow," he challenged, pacing back toward her.

"No, that isn't a good idea."

"Because you know he won't approve."

"No, of course he won't approve. I don't want to tell him before we do it but once it's done—when we get home—we'll tell him then and he'll get over it."

He stopped pacing and looked at her incredulously. "He'll get over it with you. Me, he's already iffy about. This'll make him hate me til I die. He was finally warming up a little. This will wreck everything."

"It's better to beg forgiveness than ask permission. Once he sees how happy we are, he'll work through it. Grandkids. Cute grandkids." She nodded sagely. "Yep, that'll do it."

"Oh my God." His hands flew in the air. "You're trying to tempt me with kids? Who even are you!? Where is Veronica? This is so far from what the real Veronica would do—you've got to be a pod person."

"Don't be dumb, Logan. Don't you want to marry me?"

He fell back into the nearest chair and dropped his head into his hands with a loud groan. He'd been pacing and pulling at his hair since they made it up to the room after Irv dropped his bombshell question. Veronica's immediate response to Irv had been, "Could we really?" Irv's answer of, "Sure, I can have the paperwork done before dinner" was mostly drowned out by Logan's simultaneous shout of, "Are you nuts?"

Veronica knelt down in front of Logan and put her hands on his knees, peering up into his face. "Logan? You really don't...you don't want to marry me?"

A cry of frustration burst out of him. "You know I want to marry you. But not thinking it's a good idea the day after we get engaged—without your dad here, or even knowing that we're doing it—is not the same as not wanting to do it ever."

She leaned her head against his knees briefly and then stood up and moved to the bed. "Okay, you're right. I'll drop it." She curled up in the pile of pillows and closed her eyes. "We came back to have a nap. I'm going to do that." She could feel the intensity of his gaze burning into her back but she
knew that if she looked at him he'd try to renew the discussion and she needed a break. She was as surprised as he was that she wanted to do this but she really, really did. The idea that he didn't agree hurt, even though she understood how unrealistic the whole concept was. She just wanted her nap and maybe she'd come back to her senses once she'd had it.

She woke up a short time later to Logan pulling her out of her nest of pillows and spooning up behind her. She squirmed at first, pretty sure she was mad that she wasn't getting what she wanted but when he sighed and pulled away, even her half-asleep mind knew that wasn't what she wanted either.

"No, don't go," she mumbled.

"What do you want, Veronica?"

"You. I only want you."

He sighed again and tucked her back into his embrace. "And I only want you." He kissed the top of her head and she settled against him, falling into a somewhat uneasy sleep.

She woke later, lunging forward in her sleep, from a dream where Keith had pushed Logan over the railing of the second-story of the Camelot. "Logan, NO!"

She felt hands catch hold of her as she tried to stop him from falling in her dream. "Veronica! Wake up! You're dreaming." The sound of Logan's voice startled her into consciousness and she sat up abruptly, looking around her in confusion. Her eyes landed on Logan, sitting next to her, holding her back from the edge of the bed. She watched him realize she'd wakened fully and he pulled his hands back so he wasn't touching her except where their legs rested against each other. He had an uncertain look on his face, clearly confused about what her outburst had signified. Not able to bear his reticence, she threw herself at him, wrapping her arms around him and snuggling in as close as she could get. She took several long, deep breaths, trying to calm down.

When she felt like she could trust her voice, she sat back a little and said in a self-deprecating tone, "Well, I sure know how to wreck a perfectly good nap, don't I?"

He smoothed her hair back behind her ears and studied her face. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, just a bad dream. Sorry I got all weird."

"What did I do?"

She looked at him, confused. "What do you mean? You didn't do anything."

"You shouted, 'Logan, no'. That makes it sound like I did something." The lost look on his face made her heart ache and she snuggled into him again.

"No, it wasn't like that. You were falling; I was trying to catch you."

"Oh." The revelation that he was not at fault in the dream seemed to relax him a little. "Did you catch me?"

She made a face as she considered. Finally, she smiled at him and squeezed him more tightly. "It seems like I did."

"You know I meant in the dream."
"Yeah, but I don't know for sure in the dream; I woke up. And you're here and in one piece—" she patted up his arms and laid one hand on his cheek "—so it's okay."

"I'm sorry we were fighting." He closed his eyes and nuzzled against her hand on his cheek. "That's probably the reason for the dream."

"It probably is but we weren't really fighting. We just have different opinions on the subject of a wedding tomorrow."

"It felt like fighting."

She wrapped her arms around him again and laid her head on his chest. "I know what you mean. It did feel like fighting. But disagreeing doesn't have to be fighting. We just need to get used to having different opinions and learn how to disagree without hurting each other. We're going to have different opinions. It's kinda inevitable."

"Yeah," he said and she felt him rest his cheek on the top of her head. "This won't be the last time this happens, so we better figure out how to do this without scarring each other."

She chuckled and lifted her head to look up at him. "Knowing us, that might be difficult. Neither of us are exactly known for avoiding the verbal low blow, even when we should know better."

He snickered. "Yeah, you're right about that." He lifted her into his lap and leaned back against the headboard. "So let's practice. I believe we established on the day we got back together that sitting together was a good thing in times like these." She nodded in agreement. "Okay, so, we have different opinions on this wedding thing. As much as I am dying to marry you, I'm afraid of rushing into this and, frankly, I'm afraid of pissing off your dad. And you—the girl who was never going to get married—all of a sudden you're ready to get married after a single day's engagement. Why?"

She raised her eyebrows and gave him an exaggerated offended look. "It would be a two day engagement, thank you very much."

He shook his head at her and harrumphed. "Oh, I am so sorry. My bad."

"I'm glad you recognize that." She couldn't keep the haughty tone up when he took advantage of her position on his lap to tickle her sides.

"Logan, stop, stop," she giggled and slapped at his hands.

He stopped tickling, curling his hands around her. "What'll you give me?"

"I've already offered to marry you tomorrow. What more can I possibly do?"

"Ooh, that backfired on me, didn't it?"

"Yes, I think that it did." She kissed his cheek and laid her head on his shoulder. "So, why do I want to get married tomorrow? Well, these last few weeks, even only seeing each other on the weekends, have been so great. It's been all the best things that we are together. I don't want that to end. I feel like we'll be able to keep that up if the world—our world at least—knows that this is how it is. They can't get between us."

She straightened up so she could see his face. "Look, I know this is completely out of the blue and I freely admit, I would never have thought of us doing this on my own. But right now, with this opportunity in front of us, the best way I can think of to show that we're really committed to each other is to be married. Even as your fiancée, the Piz's and Madison's of this world are going to keep
on trying to get between us."

He frowned and shook his head. "A wedding band doesn't stop that. Ask my mother. Or your father."

"A wedding band stops a lot of it if the person wearing the ring is willing to tell the jackasses who bother them no. That's where your mother and my father went wrong; the people they married weren't willing to be faithful. But I'm certainly not afraid of that where you're concerned and I hope you feel the same about me."

He cut off her words with a gentle kiss. He pulled back after too quick a moment and she caught his face in her hands and pulled him back to her, wanting to be sure that he felt just how sure about him she was. The smile on his face when they broke apart again assured her that he did, so she resumed her explanation.

"Beyond the outsiders who might want to bother us, being married tells the people that we love that we aren't something they can talk us out of. Even though they are important in our lives, they're outside of us, and the choices we make are ours, and their input doesn't matter."

"You really want to tell your dad that his input doesn't matter?" His raised eyebrows made it pretty clear what he thought the answer to that question was.

"No, obviously that's not my first choice but I will if he won't accept our decisions. I do know that I can be weak where he's concerned and if we go back and say to him and everyone else, we are bound to each other, in every way including legally, and this is just how it is, eventually they will have to fall in line."

He still looked skeptical. "That isn't necessarily true. Even if we're married when we get home, if your dad makes a good enough case and convinces you, a marriage can be undone without too much trouble. Your dad will have Cliff drafting the papers as soon as he hears."

"Logan, you've obviously got the upper hand here. I can't marry you tomorrow if you won't marry me. It just seems...meant to be." She took a deep breath and laced their fingers together. "This trip, not even planned until a week ago. This totally out-of-the-blue fake arrested thing that made us aware that they even have this wedding tradition."

He laughed. "Who else in the world besides you and I could find being arrested romantic?"

She chuckled and stretched up to kiss his cheek. "That does sound uniquely us, doesn't it?" They smiled at each other for a moment. "So, some other things that make this seem perfect...Bob and his wife, renewing their vows after twenty-eight years, at the same time we would be making ours. Not to mention the fact that you've got rings just waiting to go on our fingers. Deciding to skip this opportunity seems like we're throwing away this perfect, sun-kissed moment. But, if you're still too worried about Dad, I understand. I'll be sad to miss this chance but I'll wait until you're ready. Maybe we can come back next year or whenever and do it then."

"But then we won't share the day with Bob and his wife."

"That is true, although if that's important to you, maybe we wait for five or six years until July 26 is on a Thursday again. Add that to your list of pros and cons and get back to me when you've decided for sure." She kissed his neck and then scooted down to lay on the bed with her head in his lap. "I'm going back to sleep. Please let me know when it's 5:00 PM so I can clean up for dinner."

"You're done talking?" The surprised look on his face made her smile.
"I've given you my thoughts. This ball is in your court. I'll do whatever you decide and I promise not to be bitchy if you decide we need to wait. I'll respect whatever decision you make." She picked up his hand and rested it on her head, moving it along her hair a couple of times before pulling her hand back and leaving his there. He took the hint and stroked her hair as she drifted off to sleep.

When she woke up, he was stretched out beside her, still stroking her hair and watching her sleep. She gave him a sleepy smile and he leaned over to kiss her.

"Better dreams this time?" he asked.

"I don't remember dreaming."

"You were. Your eyes were flicking around like crazy so I know you hit REM sleep."

"I guess it wasn't traumatic this time."

"Good. It's nearly 5:00 PM—were you going to change?"

"Oh, yeah, I'll get up and do that." She got up to get ready to go. She was curious what he was thinking about the wedding idea but she decided that if he wanted to talk, he would. No news seemed to mean that he wasn't convinced, but she had said she would accept his decision and she intended to keep that promise no matter what he decided.

By 5:30 PM, they were again waiting out front for a ride. Bob and Carol picked them up promptly to drive them to the hall. Once they were settled into the truck, Logan glanced at Veronica, and then leaned forward. "So Carol? Your husband's buddy, Irv, is trying to entice us into taking part in your wedding celebration tomorrow. Why did you two decide to get married in this big group production?"

Carol twisted in her seat and smiled back at them. "Honestly, doing it like this kept it from being a big production. It really made our wedding more casual while still being about us. There was no big planning of our own to do, and definitely not a big, fancy event like a lot of weddings that you see. Bob was involved in the fire department so we liked being part of that. My best friend did the whole elaborate wedding thing a couple years later and it was a circus. It was the Eighties, of course, so the gown was...crazy, and the number of bridesmaids and ushers was crazy, and the hair was huge and crazy. Everything—and I really mean every little thing—turned into a big deal. You've seen 'Steel Magnolias'?" Logan and Veronica both nodded and Carol laughed. "Remember that pink church? Sorry...blush and bashful? We lived it that day. I just kept thinking how glad I was that we hadn't had to do any of those things."

"It sounds nicer your way," Veronica said. "Planning a big wedding seems like such a production and in the end, do you even remember why you're there? Or are you too busy throwing the party of the century? It's the stuff of sit-coms and crazy movies. Doing it in a way that let's you just enjoy yourself seems smart."

"In a way, it was like eloping without having to be completely on your own. And now, we do the renewals whenever the days match up right just to enjoy the tradition and keep the romance alive." She turned towards Bob and laid her hand on his arm. "Isn't that right, honey?"

"Yes, dear," Bob said in a teasing voice, smirking at Logan and Veronica in the rear view mirror when Carol poked him.

They pulled up to the hall and Bob took Logan to his office to deal with some paperwork so 'Rate My Pony' could officially become a sponsor of the auction the next day. Carol escorted Veronica...
around the room, introducing people she hadn't met the night before. There had just been an announcement that dinner would be served in a few minutes and Carol led Veronica to their table. She saw Logan making his way across the room to her when Irv dropped into the chair next to Carol, directly across from Veronica.

"So, Miss Veronica—all ready to become a Mrs. tomorrow? I've got the application for your marriage license all ready to go; it just needs both of your identifying information completed so I can sign it and you're ready to go."

Veronica looked at him uneasily. "Irv, I'm not sure..." She glanced up as she felt a hand drop onto her shoulder.

Logan looked at her with a smile, then his gaze shifted to Irv. "We can have it filled out and back to you before we leave tonight. Is that okay?"

Veronica blinked rapidly as his words sank into her brain, her mouth dropping open slightly. Irv grinned at Logan and held out his hand. "Absolutely. Congratulations." As they shook hands, Irv glanced over to Veronica's shocked face and he chuckled, then reached across the table to chuck her under the chin. "Don't worry, you're going to make a lovely bride in cowboy boots."
Veronica was confused as she got out of the shower. She'd been in there longer than she had planned, expecting Logan to join her, but he never made an appearance. With the water off, she could hear the rumble of his voice but she couldn't hear anyone else. She wrapped her hair in one towel and dried off with another before shrugging into one of the luxurious Inn robes and exiting the bathroom to see what was distracting her husband-to-be before they were even married.

Logan was sitting in a chair with his eyes closed, a peaceful smile on his face. She sat in his lap and his eyes opened before he tipped her back and began to kiss her neck.

"It's about time you got out of there," he said between kisses.

She raised her eyebrows. "I was kinda expecting you to join me."

He chuckled and straightened up. "That was the original plan but then Ed called. He figured out a Feather Fund kid to match us up with. Fifteen year old boy, which I didn't expect, um..." he consulted a notepad on the table next to them, "Ryan Hendricks, who is looking to get his third horse to train for a camp for autistic children. Cool, huh?"

"Wow. That is cool. He's fifteen years old and he's already trained two horses for this camp?"

"Yeah, Ed says he did the first one with his dad but he was pretty much solo the last time and probably will be doing it entirely by himself this time. Pretty impressive, right? When I consider what I was doing at fifteen, it's a little embarrassing." He ran a hand nervously though his hair. "Eh...make it a lot embarrassing."

"I see what you mean but you didn't exactly have a parent helping you with that kind of thing when you were fifteen. You had to figure things out on your own and after a somewhat rocky start," she gave him a mischievous smile, "you haven't done that bad of a job. You're doing something pretty impressive now, you know that, right?"

"It's just money, Veronica. It doesn't require anything significant from me."

"So maybe he'll let you come learn to train a horse with him." She smirked a little at that thought.

"Mmm, no, probably not. But, I told Ed, if this guy wants to keep doing this, maybe I can just fund a new pony for him every year. Yesterday, when we talked about doing this, I was thinking about doing it for a little girl who'd be all loopy about her pony like you get but this is actually better. This way, lots of kids will get to benefit."

"Absolutely. I'm very proud of you."

He scrunched his eyebrows down and gave her a skeptical half-smile. "Proud of me? Just for doing something less frivolous than usual with money I didn't even earn? That Aaron got for crap-fest movies? That seems a little excessive, dontcha think? I mean, it's a tax deduction. I'm getting plenty out of this."

"You're getting a lot out of this but it isn't just the tax deduction. And yes, I'm proud of you. Not everyone with money to spend does do anything more than the frivolous things that only benefit
themselves. As soon as you heard about this, you stepped up and you're all ready to commit to something in the longer term. Face it. You're a good guy, Logan Echolls, whether you're willing to admit that or not."

He ducked his head and colored a little before looking back up at her from under his eyelashes. "Thanks."

"Anytime," she answered warmly and stretched up to kiss him. "So, how long did that call take? I'm not crazy about the idea that you're already finding other things to do rather than shower with me."

"Oh really?" he said in a teasing voice and dipped his head to nibble on her neck. "Am I neglecting you?" He chuckled as he sucked at the skin over her collarbone.

She swatted at him. "Do not leave marks on me that can be seen."

"Ooh, that's interesting." He sat back to tug at the front of her robe. She rolled her eyes and swatted him again.

"Okay, fine." He pulled back and straightened in the chair. "I also called Mac once I was off the phone with Ed."

She looked up, startled. "It's barely 4:15 in the morning there now."

"Uh...yeah, she reminded me of the time difference quite loudly and forcefully when I called. I thought I should make sure she had emailed the sponsor paperwork for 'Rate My Pony' over to Bob."

"And was her response, 'of course, I did, you dumbass; I told you last night that I would'?"

"Pretty much, yeah," he said ruefully. "I believe she also said something to the effect of, 'I am more reliable than Dick, ya know?' and then she threatened to cause me great bodily harm if I called her before 8:00 AM in her time zone ever again."

Veronica laughed loudly. "That sounds like Mac. Does she already have the website updated?"

Now Logan laughed. "Yeah, she's nothing if not efficient. She's already got the artwork up on the landing page showing us as a sponsor of the event. If the website takes off, we can do this every year." He made another move at the front of her robe and this time she didn't swat him away.

Forty-five minutes later, they were once again waiting in front of the Inn for their ride. "We rented those bikes and they've been in the back of the Range Rover ever since. If we aren't going to use them, Logan, we should just return them."

"After the events are all over today, we might have reason to use them again before we have to head back to reality on Sunday."

"I guess maybe on Saturday. I have a hard time believing that we'll step foot outside this room tomorrow."

He pulled her up close to him and smirked at her. "That's probably true. By Saturday though, I know that Irv will at least make us come out for dinner. He already invited us last night." He ducked to kiss her neck, sucking gently on her skin again before pulling away. "No marks." He pulled on the neckline of her shirt and leered down it. "That can be seen."

She gave a derisive snort and wriggled out of his grasp. "Behave yourself."
"You know you don't mean that," he teased, trying to tug her back to him, just as Mady pulled up.

"Come on, you guys, let's go," she called.

The ride over to the fairgrounds was quick. The crowds were still large but not as bad as they had been the day before. "Come on, I'm supposed to be taking you to Ed to meet your Feather Fund kid." Mady wound them through the crowds to a table past the corrals. Ed was standing in the center of a small group including two young girls, a teenage boy, and several adults.

"Logan! Over here," Ed called as he spotted them coming towards the group.

"Okay, guys, consider yourselves delivered. Good luck on your bids. Veronica, Mom wants you to come over to the house before the ceremony this evening to get dressed. I hope that's all right with you."

Veronica smiled at Mady. "That would be nice." She turned to Logan. "Do you mind?"

He kissed her temple. "Of course not. I think that sounds good." As he looked over to Mady, he asked, "Will you get your dad or Sam or someone to take me back to the Inn to get cleaned up and then back to wherever the ceremony is?"

"Sure. Your presence will be required," she answered with a grin.

"Yeah, I expected that. Thanks." Mady chuckled at his response, then gave them both a quick wave and took off, disappearing into the crowd. Veronica slipped her hand into Logan's and they headed over toward Ed and his group. Ed noticed them as they approached.

"Good morning! Logan and..." Ed paused and looked embarrassed.

"Veronica," Logan supplied.

"Yes, sorry, Logan and Veronica, meet Ryan Hendricks and his parents, Elsie and Richard."

The Hendricks family looked a little surprised at their first glimpse of Logan and Veronica but after handshakes all around, they all went out wandering around the corrals looking at the various ponies that Ryan was interested in acquiring. Veronica fell a few steps behind Logan and Ryan, listening to Logan ask questions about Ryan's preferences in the horses, the training that he did, and the camp where Ryan's ponies ended up. She glanced over her shoulder to the parents and dropped back another couple of steps to walk with them.

"How long has Ryan been training horses?" she asked.

"He's had a horse of his own since he was six but the training part only started when he learned about the camp," Elsie answered.

"How did that happen?"

"My brother's son is autistic," Richard said. "He went to this camp and when Ryan heard about how well his cousin had responded to the program, he decided this was a way he could support them."

Veronica smiled. "You must be really proud of him. Not too many teenage boys that I've known would take their own time for something like that."

"We are," said Elsie. "You must be proud of your young man also. Philanthropy in someone so young is unexpected."

"Of course not. I think that sounds good."

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"We were a little surprised to meet you both," Richard added. "Ed hadn't said anything other than he had found a new sponsor and could we make it out here this morning. I guess we were expecting someone...older."

"I can understand that," Veronica began but any further thought was interrupted by a large male body jumping in front of her.

"VERONICA! Engaged one day and getting married already?" Sam spoke in a loud, excited voice.

"It's two days, thank you very much," Logan called back over his shoulder.

Veronica rolled her eyes. "You know, this is really your buddy Gil's fault. If he just would have left us alone that first day at the carnival, this probably wouldn't be happening."

Sam cackled wildly. In his exuberance, his resemblance to Dick Casablancas was startling. He whirled away from Veronica and the very startled Richard and Elsie to grab Logan from behind and swing him in a circle.

"Sam, dude, chill." Logan pushed Sam away from him, trying to regain his composure. Ryan laughed as he watched.

"If you break him before I get to marry him tonight, I will kill you, slowly."

"And trust me...she can do it," Logan told him in a serious voice. "She only looks tiny and defenseless."

"You're getting married? Tonight?" Elsie asked, sounding shocked.

"Yeah, you know they do a kinda group wedding thing at the end of the week's festivities? Well, this whole week has been one awesome surprise after another, so we decided that everything was just coming together for us so why not?" Veronica looked up at Logan, now standing in front of her, smiling.

"Ugh, don't let them get started, they're nauseating," Sam said with a grimace.

"Everything was fine before you got here, Sam," Logan responded. "And we don't have time for anything too nauseating right now anyway." He stroked his hands over Veronica's arms, grinning at her when Sam groaned from behind them. He slid his arm over her shoulders as he turned back to the group. "Ryan needs to figure out which of these horses he wants to bid on and I think we've only got about fifteen minutes more. So, get lost, Sam; go bug Mady."

Sam laughed. "No problem, I do have other people to hassle this fine morning. Good luck with your bids."

Logan gave him a farewell salute and tipped his head to kiss Veronica's temple before turning back to Ryan. "Do you know which other horses you're interested in?"

"Yeah, there's only like two more that I want to get a close-up look at," Ryan answered.

"You guys go on without me," Veronica said. "I'm going to run over to the buy-back corral and see if they know when Lilly is coming up for bid. I want to make sure we don't miss her." She stretched up to give Logan a quick kiss, waved to everyone else, and then hurried away to the corral they had visited the day before. Once there, she questioned the cowboy about auction times on the buy-backs
and then went to the fence to try to lure the little palomino filly to her. As Terry had predicted the previous afternoon, she seemed to recall Veronica and came to the bars, nosing for treats. Veronica was all set, having been loaded down with sugar by Irv at dinner the night before. She was making kissy noises and talking nonsense to the foal when she felt Logan's hands on her hips and his mouth on her neck.

"Come on, Bobcat, we've got to get over to the auction area." She fed one last sugar cube to the filly and then let Logan piggy-back her to where the Hendricks family was waiting.

Ryan had narrowed his choices down to three horses: two fillies and a colt. His first choice was scheduled to be the second one of the three to come up for bid so when they arrived at the bleachers where Ryan's family was sitting, he was weighing the pros and cons with his parents of bidding on the first of the three and possibly getting it before he had a chance to bid on the one he wanted the most. Logan asked him to outline his rationale for his rankings. Ryan first talked about bloodlines and then explained that he was hoping for a pony that was expected to be on the larger side so the older kids at the camp would be able to ride him. "They have quite a few smaller ponies because so many of the kids are younger. I would like to go a little larger this year."

"Okay, pass on the first pony. Just bid on the one you really want," Logan recommended.

"But that makes me worry a little. If I get outbid there, I've only got one other option or else I have to just start bidding on everything that comes up."

"Don't worry. We'll make sure you get your top choice."

Richard spoke up. "Ed said the bid cap was $12,000."

Logan shook his head and grinned. "Eh, obviously I'd prefer that but I want us to get the horse Ryan wants." He looked over at Ryan. "Knock yourself out, kid." Ryan gave him a grateful look and a thumbs up. "So, is that the Foundation's cap for everyone?"

Elsie nodded. "Yeah, that's my understanding."

"Hmmmm." Logan looked at Veronica and raised his eyebrows. She smiled and raised hers back at him.

"Your money, snookums."

He gave her a pained look—she wasn't sure if it was the money issue or the previously banned 'snookums' that was disturbing him—and reached for his phone, typing out a quick text.

"To Ed?" she asked. He nodded at her. She could see Ed on the opposite side of the arena, sitting with the other two recipients and their families. After a minute, she saw him digging his phone out of his pocket and looking at it. As she continued to watch, he looked at the girls next to him and smiled, then began to search the area, presumably looking for Logan. When his eyes caught Veronica's, she smiled and raised her hand in greeting and looked at Logan who was now chatting with Richard. She reached over and drummed her fingers atop his knee. When he looked up at her, she smiled and, with one of the fingers now resting on his leg, pointed over towards Ed.

Logan looked up at Ed who raised his phone and wagged it, giving a quizzical look. He mouthed something that Veronica interpreted as "Really?" Logan grinned and nodded, copying Ryan's earlier thumbs up gesture.

"You just took the cap off those little girls' bids too, didn't you?" Richard asked in a low voice.
"Seemed only fair, ya know?" Logan answered, fidgeting a little in his seat. Watching him, Veronica realized that he was getting uncomfortable with the attention. She thought that if he had long sleeves, he'd probably be tugging on them. She reached over and caught his hand in hers, waiting for him to look up at her before smiling brightly at him and pulling his hand up to her lips and kissing it. He smiled back and tugged her into his lap, leaning his head against hers.

"When are they getting this show on the road?" she asked, right before a man walked to the middle of the arena with a microphone.

"Welcome to the 2007 Chincoteague Pony Auction!"

By the time the auction was over, total sales had hit a new record high and everyone in their extended party had their chosen ponies. Ryan had taken Logan's advice and only bid on his first choice, a chestnut colt with dark mane and tail. The little girls had both gotten pintos, one with bay markings and the other primarily buckskin with a few white patches and a multi-colored mane. Veronica's enthusiastic bidding had acquired her naming rights to the palomino filly although Logan's intervention by way of a constant grip on her belt loop and an occasional steadying arm around her waist had been required to keep her from plunging off the bleachers when the bidding started to creep up to what became the third highest bid of the day. Of the three Feather Fund acquisitions, only the unusual looking buckskin ended up exceeding the original cap.

At the conclusion of the bidding, Logan was compelled to pose for photographs with Ryan and his family with his new pony and then Ed dragged him away for a shot with the buckskin pony and his new family. Veronica declined his attempts to pull her into those photographs, instead wandering away for more bonding time with her filly.

About a half hour later, Logan escaped from the group with Ryan's bidding feather tucked in his back pocket. He headed straight for the buy-back corral and found Veronica sitting on a wooden box inside one of the corrals with the little filly sitting beside her with her front legs sprawled out in front of her. He leaned up against the gate, watching her interact with the pony, rubbing the underside of her jaw, combing her fingers through her mane, and cooing at her. He was pretty sure he'd never seen anything cuter. She glanced up as she was holding out a treat and noticed him, her face turning pink, undoubtedly due to being caught with her tough girl persona in tatters.

"You're bribing that horse, aren't you?" Logan said in a teasing voice. "You're going to make her diabetic with the amount of sugar you've probably fed her today."

She harrumphed at him, making the pony's ears twitch. "Shows what you know." She pulled a sack of mini carrots out of her bag which brought the filly's head into her lap. She pulled a carrot out of the sack and dropped it back into her bag, before laying her carrot-covered palm out before the horse to be lipped clean.

"Where'd that come from?" he asked as he opened the gate and cautiously made his way over to her. The pony snorted and started to struggle to her feet but Logan stopped where he was and Veronica made shushing noises before producing another carrot.

"Irv brought it to me," she answered in a low soothing voice. The pony's attention was now on the carrot. "Okay, Logan, keep coming but do it slow."

He smiled at the thought of the various innuendoes he could come up with from that statement but refrained in the interests of pony calming. He walked up slowly on Veronica's side opposite the pony and then straddled the box to slide up behind her. Seated, he was apparently less intimidating and the filly bumped her nose against his leg, like a dog looking for a treat.
"You're going to send this animal back into the wild? She'll be sidling up to any human who sets foot on that island, looking for handouts."

"Nuh-uh, that's not true, is it, Lilly?" Veronica crooned to the pony, scratching behind her ears. "You'll only love us, not all those other weird people."

"So, it's done, hmm? Her name is Lilly?"

Veronica's face scrunched up a little. "Yes, but what I'm not sure about is whether it's just Lilly or if there is something more we can add to the name to make it more interesting. Princess Lilly. Queen Lilly. Lilly of Neptune. Lilly of Assateague. Lilly Mars. Lilly Echolls. Lilly Mars-Echolls. Got any thoughts on this?"

He wrinkled his nose. "None of those with my last name. That feels wrong to me. I could maybe live with Mars but even that...eh, I'm not a big fan. Not 'of Neptune' either. We already had a Lilly of Neptune; I'm personally not ready for another. If she's going to be 'of' anywhere, I guess that's where you could use Mars. Of course, if we do that, we're gonna need to get another horse to name John Carter." He chuckled at his own joke, knowing she wasn't going to know the reference.

"Lilly of Mars?" She reached down to stroke the filly's soft nose. "What do you think about that, little one? Is that your name?"

Unexpectedly the pony sneezed and snorted, causing her head to shake back and forth. Veronica's mouth dropped open in surprise.

"I'm thinking she doesn't like it," Logan said in a wry voice.

"Okay, just Lilly then. Does that work for you, prima donna pony?" Lilly ducked to scratch the side of her head against her foreleg, giving the appearance of nodding.

"All righty then, guess that's decided. Is there anything we need to fill out?"

"I left the paperwork with the cashier. Told 'em we'd be back after a while with a name."

Veronica reached to tug gently on Lilly's forelock, pouting a little as she did so. "I think we're going to have to go now, missy. You better know us when we come back."

Logan reached around her to stroke the pony's neck, snuggling in to kiss behind Veronica's ear at the same time. "No one forgets you, Bobcat."

"We'll see." She rose to her feet and reached back for her bag. "Maybe a few more carrots." She pulled the little sack out, checked out her carrot situation and then reached for Logan's hand, pouring the last half-dozen or so into his palm.

"Veronica, I don't know," he started but she cradled his hand flat in both of hers and pulled a little closer to the pony who immediately whisked her fuzzy lips over his hand, tickling him and making him giggle nervously. Veronica laughed at his response and twisted to kiss the top of his head. Lilly mouthed the last carrot off his palm and he pulled his hand back, rubbing it against his jeans trying to relieve the tickling feeling.

Veronica rested her hand against the back of his head, dragging her fingers through his hair. "All right, buckaroo, let's go finish our business and then we have a wedding to get ready for."

He pouted at her. "Why do I feel like you're making fun of me?"
"Mmm, I might be a little," she smiled. "But you're awfully cute so your complete lack of cowboy
tough is acceptable." She held out her hand and pulled him up from his seat on the wooden box. The
pony struggled to her feet also and followed them to the gate. Logan opened the latch and blocked
the pony while Veronica slipped out past him, then he backed out and secured the gate. Lilly stuck
her nose out after them and nickered softly.

"Got any more sugar to occupy her so we can make a clean getaway?" Logan asked, rubbing
Veronica's back soothingly as she watched the pony with suspiciously shiny eyes.

"She'll scarf it down and be looking for more before we can get clear." She looked up at him sadly.

"Okay, I'm taking this hit for the team. Hand over the rest of the sugar, Mars." She dug into her bag
and produced the ziplock that Irv had filled for her from the coffee service the night before. A few
cubes remained. "Okay, sweetheart, tell her goodbye and head for the cashier table. I'll be behind
you in a couple minutes." He pulled her to him and kissed her nose before leaning back to smile
down at her. "Will that work for you?"

She gave him a rueful smile and then a fierce hug. "I wasn't thinking about this being so hard," she
mumbled into his chest. She stepped back from him abruptly and caught his hands in hers, clasping
them to her chest earnestly. "But that doesn't mean that this was a bad idea. This was the sweetest
thing anyone's ever done for me and I really am so grateful that we've done this." She hugged him
again and they swayed together for a moment before she leaned back to look him in the eyes again.
"I love you so much."

He smoothed her hair back and then pulled her back against him, tucking the top of her head under
his chin with a hand wound through her hair. "That's a big relief since I'm planning to marry you in
about five hours."

She leaned back again to look at him with astonishment.

"Please tell me you didn't forget," he said apprehensively.

She laughed. "No, I just mentioned it a few minutes ago, silly, I just hadn't thought about how soon it
is. I'm still not even sure what I'm wearing." She raised up on her tiptoes and gave him a open-
mouthed kiss that he returned with enthusiasm. She smiled brightly at him when she broke the kiss,
brushing her hand down his cheek. She then turned to the pony who was still leaning against the bars
of the fence, trying to stretch her neck far enough to reach them. Veronica stroked below the filly's
jaw, where it met her neck, and then reached higher to scratch behind her ear.

"We'll be back to see you as soon as we can. Be a good girl." She stepped back again and leaned
into Logan's side. "Thank you," she whispered and, with one last look at Lilly, hurried away.

Logan watched her until she disappeared past the arena before turning back to the pony who was
now nickering insistently. He dropped a couple of the sugar cubes into his palm and held them out to
her. He shivered a little at the tickling feeling. "You'd think I'd be used to tiny blondes nibbling on
me by now." He rubbed his knuckles across the whorl of hair on her forehead and chuckled when
she bobbed her head to intensify the scratching motion. "A pushy tiny blonde, no less." He pulled
back to pour the last of the sugar into his hand. "Okay, this is it for a year or two." He held his palm
out again. "Don't get into any trouble out there in the wilderness." He scratched behind her ear one
final time and then backed away. She whinnied at him and he grinned. "See ya, Lils."

He headed back to the cashier's table, spotting Veronica there with Irv. She appeared to be finishing
the paperwork for naming the buy-back pony. He had nearly reached the table when he heard his
name being called. He glanced toward the voice and found Mady and Sam approaching.
"Hey guys," Logan answered. "I think we're close to being done here. Ponies are paid for, I think Veronica's finishing up the paperwork, and then we're ready for whatever comes next."

"Yeah, Veronica texted me the same thing a couple minutes ago," Mady advised. "I'm going to run her back to the Inn for some things and then we're going to my house. I think we've got something there for her to wear but if she doesn't like it, or it's too big, we're going to have to make a quick run into the village and try to find her something."

"If you end up doing that, call me when it's time to pay and I'll give them a credit card number over the phone, if that works for the store."

Mady nodded. "If we have to. I've got something that I love but it's shorter on me than I feel comfortable in so I've never actually worn it. I think it will be a great length for Veronica though and I think it should fit fine. It just depends on what she thinks about it."

As they reached the cashier, Irv clapped his hand on Logan's shoulder. "Well, I see my charge has arrived."

Logan looked at him quizzically and slid his arm around Veronica's waist, looking down at her with raised eyebrows. "You're assigning a keeper now?"

She laughed and shook her head vigorously. "Oh no, I have nothing to do with this."

"Nope, assigned myself to this gig. The ladies are taking your blushing bride for the afternoon, I'm taking you." Almost as an afterthought, he glanced over at Sam. "Eh, you can come too, Sam."

"Is this a bachelor party?" Sam asked eagerly.

"NO!" The vehement response came from both Logan and Veronica.

Irv cuffed Sam on the back of the head. "Ya dope. We've got like four hours 'til this wedding—do ya really think I'm taking the boy out and getting him drunk? I'm going to take him into the village and make sure he's dressed appropriately for his wedding and then keep him from freaking out while he waits."

"Why would he freak out while he waits?" Sam asked.

Logan grinned at him and pulled Veronica in closer to his side. "I'm freaking out a little standing here. Sitting alone in our hotel room counting down the minutes would probably be hard."

Veronica looked up at him, worry and sadness in her features. "We don't have to do this if you don't want to. I told you that yesterday."

He moved to stand in front of her, leaning down to press his forehead to hers. "No, I can't wait. I just know I'll sit around worrying that you're changing your mind. I have something of a melodramatic streak—in case you hadn't noticed." He smirked down at her, stroking her cheeks with his thumbs. "So actually, I'm kinda glad that Irv has declared himself the keeper of the groom." He kissed the end of her nose and stepped back to grin at Irv and Sam. "And Sam, come on, man, you come too. We'll have a good time."

"Alrighty, then. Mady, come talk to me for a minute. Kiss her good-bye, Logan and we'll be off." Irv walked a few steps away to confer with Mady, Sam trailing behind them. Logan caught Veronica around the waist and twirled her around, peppering kisses on her face and neck before stopping to bend her back for a deep kiss. After a moment, he pulled her back upright and tugged her tight against him.
"I think the next time I really get to kiss you, it'll be because someone tells me I may now kiss the bride." He felt her arms tighten around him when he said that, but then she pulled back a little and smiled at him.

"I like how that sounds." She stretched up to kiss him again but before their lips met again, Irv's voice interrupted.

"Break it up, you two. Places to go."

They shared a final, chaste kiss, and broke apart, hands still clasped as the little group walked towards the parking area. They reached the fire department pick-up and Sam unlocked and opened the driver's door and handed the keys to Mady who climbed in.

"Okay Veronica," Irv said, "Mady's going to take you back to the Inn to get anything you need from there. Logan, we're going into the village first, then to the Inn. We'll regroup at Chincoteague Center later, all ready for weddings." Logan and Veronica shared a smile and he walked her around to the passenger side where he opened the door for her and lifted her up into the seat. She didn't swing into the cab but instead pulled him to stand between her knees, giving him one more kiss as she stroked his face.

"I love you."

He smiled at her words and took a step back. "Love you too, Bobcat. See ya soon." She swung into the cab and he closed the door behind her, then moved back, keeping his eyes locked on her as Mady pulled the truck away.

Chapter End Notes

I don't think I've mentioned it for a while but KMD0107 and Irislim were great help as I put this story together and KMD0107 continues to help me out every week with a final run-through before I post. I couldn't do this without them.
"What I've got at home is a creamy, crocheted lace dress with spaghetti straps," Mady explained as Veronica lead them to her and Logan's room at the Inn. "It'll probably hit you about the knees. It should match those boots you picked out too. Make sure you grab those."

Veronica let them into the room and hurried to the closet for her overnight bag and the boots, checking them off her mental checklist. She then went to the dresser to dig through her limited store of lingerie for something that was worthy of a wedding that would also work with spaghetti straps and a pale colored dress. While she considered her options, Mady roamed about the room, apparently giving herself a tour.

"This is a great room," Mady said, stepping back in from the balcony. "I love the whirlpool tub. And the view from the balcony is so pretty with the gardens and down to the water." She plopped down into the love seat and twisted around until she was reclining with her feet up.

"Yeah, Logan's good at picking hotel rooms. The one we stayed at Monday night was even better—the shower had two shower heads and it had a whirlpool tub too but it had a fireplace right above it. I think I'm going to push for getting one of the double showers installed wherever we end up living. Maybe the whirlpool too. I think we've both enjoyed that quite a lot." Veronica felt her face heat as she realized what she had just admitted and ducked into the bathroom to the sound of Mady's laughter.

She emerged a couple minutes later with her bag much more full than it had been. "Well, I think I've got everything I need to get ready. The lingerie isn't quite what I probably would have gone for if this wedding had been planned a little further ahead than a day but if this stuff works with the dress, then I'll be okay with it."

"Now I know I haven't known either of you for very long but my impression is that Logan will be okay with it too," Mady teased with a smile. "He seems perma-enamored."

"He does, doesn't he?" Veronica responded. "I'm pretty enamored too."

"Yeah, I might have noticed that also," Mady said with a smirk. She nodded toward the pile of carnival stuffed animals that Veronica had arranged around the vase of roses on the dresser top.

Veronica smiled sheepishly and shrugged. "I had to put them somewhere."

Mady's smile softened as she asked, "How long have you guys been together anyway?"

Veronica dropped her bag by the door and walked over to sit in the chair across from Mady. "Well, that's a much more complex question than you realize and I think we'd miss the wedding entirely if I gave you the complete answer. Suffice to say, on one hand, we've been in each other's lives for seven years, give or take, and on the other hand, we've been back together as a couple for about seven weeks."

"Seven years?! You haven't had the same boyfriend for seven years."

"No, no, definitely not. We first became friends seven years ago, when we were twelve. Although I have to admit, in light of current events, I really did have a crush on him right from the start. He was
a beanpole back then, and a goofball, but he just had this charisma—I didn't think of it as charisma when I was twelve obviously—but he just drew people to him, and I was pulled in right from the start. His best friend was my best friend's brother and the four of us were inseparable for a while. We sorta paired off after a year or two—"

"Wait—that has to mean you got the best friend's brother and your best friend got Logan!" Mady interrupted in a shocked voice.

"Yeah, that is what that meant. And then some bad stuff happened and Logan and I spent a little over a year where we absolutely were not friends. We actually spent a fair amount of time torturing each other. He started it, but I can retaliate like nobody's business." Veronica smirked as she thought about some of that retaliation. *Foreplay, indeed.*

"So when did you actually get together?"

"Seventeen. Then we broke up. Then we got back together. Then we broke up and I got back with the brother. Then we broke up and Logan and I got back together again. Then we broke up. And back together. And broke up. And, about seven weeks ago, back together again."

"Holy smokes! That's a lot of on again, off again. Does getting married seem like a good idea when you break up so much?" Mady looked at Veronica with what seemed to be concern in her eyes.

"Well, we've talked about that and we don't want to break up anymore. We're gonna make this work or I'm pretty sure we'll be doomed to be alone. That's true for me at least. There isn't anyone else that I want to be with all the time, even when we're fighting. Generally, our problems have stemmed from one or the other of us being unsure that the other one was really serious about the relationship, and what says serious like, 'til death do you part'?"

"I'm not positive this would be a relationship approach endorsed by Dr. Phil but hey, maybe you're onto something." Mady laughed and shook her head before rising from the love seat. "Well, for better or worse, let's get this show on the road. Time's ticking away."

They returned to the truck and drove out to the Cooper home where they were met at the door by a very tense Carol.

"It's about time you got here," Carol said, clearly exasperated. "What if that dress doesn't fit Veronica? Or she hates it? You're cutting it really close."

"Don't worry, Mom, we've got enough time. We'll get her right into the dress so we know if we have to go back to town. Calm down." Mady led Veronica through the house and back to her room where they found Mady's younger sister asleep on her bed.

"Geny, what are you doing in here?"

The girl woke with a start. "Oh, you two are finally here! I've been waiting around to see if the dress fit and worked with those cream-colored boots you said she'd picked a couple days ago. I always loved those boots but they never really fit."

"Veronica," Mady said, "Did you meet my sister Genevieve at dinner the other night?"

"I did," Veronica said with a smile and a wave. "How're you doing, Geny?"

"Good. I'm glad you got here; Mom's been so nervous that you weren't going to get here in time to get dressed. I've never seen her get this worked up about their vow renewals. I'm not sure why she's going so crazy about someone else's wedding."
"I think she thinks she talked them into this so she wants it to be perfect," Mady answered and Geny laughed and nodded.

Veronica looked at both of them with surprise before responding.

"I was into it before I even met your mom so she doesn't need to worry about anything where I'm concerned. She might have been part of what finally swayed Logan but he really was totally into it too; his main reservation has to do with my dad not knowing and not being here and possibly killing him when he does find out."

Mady and Geny burst into laughter. "Actually," Mady suggested, "maybe that's what it's about. Since our dad heard you guys had decided to do this he's been saying that it was probably a bad idea without your families being here." She opened a door and disappeared behind it. "He gave Irv an earful this morning about bringing it up to you guys at all."

"Well, we're pretty light in the family department so that would be limited to my dad," Veronica said. "He's definitely going to be upset but I've kept Logan at arm's length in the past because of Dad and I'm not going to do that anymore." She walked over to the dress to inspect it. "He'll understand, eventually. And I'll make sure Logan stays in protective custody until he cools down. Plus, it's like I told Logan—the only thing Dad told me that I absolutely couldn't do this summer was get pregnant. He was silent on the whole marriage thing." She looked up from the dress at Mady. "This is really pretty. The sheath part underneath the lace is so soft."

"It's silk," Mady informed her. "The lace is fitted directly over it in the bodice; it has a sweetheart neckline, an empire waist—perfect for shorties such as yourself—and the lace and silk are separate layers in the skirt for some swirly action. Since you like how it looks, let's see how it works on you."

Veronica grabbed the hanger and took the dress and her bag into Mady's bathroom to try on the dress with the strapless lace bandeau she'd brought along. After a couple of minutes, she came back into the bedroom. "I think this is actually working pretty well but I need one of you to zip me up to know for sure."

Geny was closest and zipped her up quickly. "It definitely fits well and that's a perfect bra for it."

Veronica spun in a circle to make the skirt flair up around her. "That's fun," she laughed and then stepped in front of Mady's full-length mirror. "Ooh, this is pretty."

Mady moved next to the mirror so she could see the dress from the front. "That does look nice. Did you put any socks in your bag?"

Veronica looked at her, confused for a moment, then said, "Oh, for the boots. No, actually I forgot a fresh pair."

"Okay, here." Mady dug around in her dresser drawer and came up with some short, thin socks. "Put those on and let's see if the boots are going to work."

Veronica flipped the skirt out as she sat on Mady's bed so she wouldn't sit directly on it while she pulled the socks and boots on. She then went back to the mirror for further evaluation.

"Well," she said with a slight Southern drawl, "this is a different look for me but I kinda like it." She twirled back to her audience for their opinion. "What do you guys think?"

"You look beautiful, Veronica," Geny said before heading for the door. "I'm going to get Mom so she can see you. Maybe that will chill her out."
Mady clapped excitedly when Veronica turned to show the look and she nodded along with Geny's comment. "She's right. You look gorgeous in that dress. The length looks good and the boots go great."

"Oh, Veronica, you look so pretty," Carol came into the room behind Geny. "That worked out fine, just like Mady said it would. I guess I really can calm down."

"So if everyone agrees this works, I'm getting back out of these clothes and hopefully getting a sandwich or something to eat? I'm starving."

"Actually," Mady glanced at her watch, "I'm expecting lunch to show up shortly."

Veronica rolled her eyes. "Let me guess...Logan."

Mady grinned and nodded. "He said he had to make sure you were well fed before the ceremony or he was afraid he'd have a wedding night like a praying mantis."

Carol looked shocked but Veronica burst out laughing. "Smart boy."

The doorbell rang then and Geny jumped off the bed again and ran for the door. Veronica ducked back into the bathroom to get out of the dress and boots, putting on the Inn robe that she had brought along with her. She went into the kitchen to find two large pizzas and orange soda.

"There's ice cream in the freezer too," Geny said. "I don't know how many people he thought were here. We've got enough food for an army."

Veronica laughed. "He's just making sure I'm covered. I have a rather healthy appetite."

Mady stepped next to Veronica and put her hand on her shoulder. "The first night they were here, Logan told Dad that watching her eat was a sight to behold. He sounded proud." She snagged a piece of Meat Lovers and headed for the dining room.

"Oh, this came with the food," Geny pulled an envelope off the counter and handed it to Veronica. She could see her name on the outside in Logan's loopy script. She flipped it around in her hands for a moment before sliding it into her robe pocket. She loaded her plate with both the Meat Lovers and the Hawaiian, snagged a can of soda, and followed Mady into the dining room.

"Aren't you going to read it?" Geny asked.

"I will but I'll wait til after lunch. He's a big smooshy sap. It will probably make me cry and I'm not a big fan of doing that in front of other people." She sat down to enjoy her pizza.

The four women had a fun lunch with Veronica learning more about the new friends who had shown them such a great time all week and were now going out of their way to make the day special. Several slices of pizza and scoops of ice cream later, Carol ushered the girls out to the sunroom where Veronica stretched out on a soft chaise lounge.

"So, did you ever wear that dress, Madelyne?" Carol queried.

"No, I bought it without trying it on and once I got it home, I realized it was too short for me."

"Okay, Veronica, so the dress is your 'new'."

"Shouldn't it be my 'borrowed'?"

"Oh no," Mady answered. "It doesn't fit any of us and it's going to be your wedding dress. It's yours
now. Same with those boots. There's no reason for us to keep them and there absolutely is reason for you to."

"Yes, definitely," agreed Carol. "I know Gen wore the boots a couple times; will they count as old?"

"I've already got my 'old'," Veronica broke in. She pulled her star necklace out from under the collar of her robe. "My best friend gave it to me before she died. That's my 'old'."

Carol looked a little teary-eyed and nodded. "That's a beautiful necklace. Do you happen to have earrings?"

"I didn't have any with me that really complemented the necklace so no."

Carol looked at Mady, who smiled and nodded as she stood up and headed out of the room. "We know the perfect thing," she called over her shoulder.

"And I know what to do about the blue," Geny said. "Can I see your ring, Veronica?" She lifted Veronica's offered hand to peer more closely at the ring. "Yeah, I've got this." She left the room just as Mady came back in.

"Here," Mady said with a smile. "What do you think about these? They'd have to be borrowed; Dad gave them to me when I turned eighteen." She held out a pair of drop earrings, each with a fine silver chain with a diamond encrusted star dangling at the bottom. The size and design of the stars were very similar to Lilly's necklace.

"I can't believe how much they look like my necklace!" Veronica marveled. "It's like they're from the same set."

"Crazy, huh?" Mady agreed as she leaned down, giving her mother a one-armed hug. "As soon as Mom and I saw your necklace, we knew these would match."

"And...drum roll please...your 'something blue'." Geny whirled a deep blue silk scarf in her hands before dropping it into her mother's lap. "For the flowers." Mady and Carol both made noises of agreement but Veronica was confused.

"What do you mean, for the flowers?"

Carol explained, "There will be a bouquet for each bride at the ceremony but they're all the same. Usually very pale blush roses with the stems bound with a white silk band. They've been doing that since before our original wedding. Some brides personalize their bouquets and one way to do that is to use ribbon or a silk scarf to wrap around the stems and give them a spot of color. Since your ring is blue, Gen's scarf can add that personal touch, if you like it."

"I do like it," Veronica answered with a grateful smile. "You guys are making this such a special day for me. I knew that it would be since I'm marrying Logan, but I hadn't really thought about it beyond the two of us. You're all being so wonderful, making this like a regular wedding day, with people around us helping us celebrate. I hadn't really expected that. Thank you so much." She stood and hugged Mady. "I'm so glad you guys picked us in the carnival."

Mady laughed as she hugged her back. "I am too. I have to say, I think my first time picking the couple to get arrested has been wildly successful." They grinned at each other before breaking apart.

"Okay, girls, get about your business, I want Veronica to have a little time for herself. I think a nap would be a good thing but I believe she has a letter to read first." Carol smiled as Veronica remembered the letter and drew it out of her pocket. Mady and Geny both agreed and left the room.
"I'd say you can relax for forty-five minutes to an hour and then it will be time to start getting ready. Do you need anything before I leave you to your own devices?"

"No, I've got everything I need. I really am grateful for how you've taken care of me today."

"Well, I felt a little responsible for you doing this with no family around and I wanted to be sure you didn't miss out by making this sudden decision to get married all the way across the country from your family." Carol looked at Veronica with a sympathetic face.

Veronica did the unthinkable then and, for the second time in as many minutes, hugged another person who had been a complete stranger only a couple of days earlier. "Please don't feel like that." She stepped out of the hug and sat back on the chaise, gesturing to Carol to sit with her. "Whether we're here or back at home, our family is only us and my dad. I do miss having him here and I'm gonna really miss him when it comes time to actually do this thing—but I think this is a good decision. I love my dad so much; it was him and me against the world for a long time. But the thing is," she paused, her hands twisting in her lap, "I love Logan too and I haven't always made him as much of a priority as I should. And sometimes, that was because of my dad. Deciding to get married now is making Logan my first priority. There shouldn't be any question about that any more. Not for Logan and not for my dad. I don't want to hurt Dad by doing this but I've hurt Logan a lot by not letting him know how important he really is. I don't want to make that mistake anymore."

"Well, your dad might not entirely agree with your choices but it sounds like you've put a lot of thought into your decision." Carol patted Veronica's hands gently. "Once he's calmed down after the initial surprise, your dad will come around."

"I hope so."

"He will. Parents don't just stop loving their kids because they don't completely agree with their choices."

Veronica raised her eyebrows in a show of skepticism but she realized that as far as her dad was concerned, that was true. "Thank you, Carol. You've been really good to me today."

"I'm very happy to be here for you." Carol squeezed Veronica's hand, then stood and walked to the door. "Read your letter. Get a quick nap if you can. You've got a big night ahead."

Veronica smiled and stretched out on the chaise again. She had initially felt a little childish being left to 'take a rest' but the excitement and emotion of the day was beginning to wear on her and lounging felt so nice. She held Logan's letter to her chest, closing her eyes to imagine him writing her a love letter. Her smile broadened and she carefully pulled the envelope open.

"Irv, these shirts all look wrong," Logan said, fretting in front of another rack of dress shirts, having already pawed through two others. "I don't know why but they all look weird."

"Count the pockets and you'll figure out why." Irv came up behind him and clapped a hand to his shoulder. "Personally, I agree with you on this but you're going to have to live with it. Western theme and all."

"Two pockets. They all have two breast pockets. Why? It doesn't look right."

"I don't know why. It's just how it is. They all fasten with snaps too but Veronica will probably appreciate that later. Just be glad I'm not insisting on a bolo tie."

Logan's grin at the mention of the snaps slid away with the mention of string ties, making Irv laugh.
loudly. "Drop the two pocket aversion you've got and pick a color, boy. I'm told the dress is cream or ivory or some such thing so just don't pick white. Choose another color and go try it on so we can get out of here. You still need boots."

Logan snatched three different colored shirts and went to try them on. A few minutes later, he was in a dressing room tucking in a dark green shirt when the curtain was snatched aside by Sam. Logan spun on his toes and made a face at him.

"Dude, you make my friend Dick seem refined. What do you want?"

"Just wanted to see how you're doing."

"Well, you tell me. How's this look?" He twirled again with his arms extended.

"Yeah, that works. Good cut on you. But Veronica's ring, wasn't it blue?"

"Yeah, there are blue stones in it. In the wedding rings too."

"So why not a blue shirt?"

Logan wrinkled his nose a little and his hand came up to rub the back of his neck. "Well, I don't know. I've never really worn much blue. My best friend always wore the blue; I'm more greens and earth tones."

"This guy Dick wears a lot of blue?"

"Oh no, he wears crude message tee shirts," Logan said with a chuckle. "No, I'm talking about my best friend from grade school and most of high school."

"And was this some kind of blood oath or something like that? He wears the blue and you're stuck with green?"

Logan laughed. "No, nothing like that."

"Then what's the problem? Do you think Veronica is going to get confused and think she's marrying your friend if you're standing down front in blue?"

Logan did his best to keep an amused face as his biggest nightmare, Veronica marrying Duncan, was forced to the front of his mind by Sam's innocent remark. "No, of course not. Weevil would probably say we had to dress differently for him to tell us apart but other than that one time, Veronica always knew the difference." He snickered at the memory of Veronica draping herself over him when he first moved into the Grand with Duncan. "And that was all about the argyle."

"She's hot for argyle? That's weird. And what's a Weevil?"

"Yes, that would be weird. And Weevil...just a guy I know. Okay, you convinced me. I'll try a blue."

Fifteen minutes later, he had a dark blue shirt being steamed to get rid of any wrinkles and Irv was shuttling him two doors down to buy boots. That was actually easier than shirts; the salesman fitted him, brought out a couple options, he walked around in both, and made a choice. By the time they finished, his shirt was ready and they went to grab lunch at Ledo Pizza.

"Does this place deliver?" Logan pulled his phone out of his pocket as he questioned his companions.
Irv answered, "Yes, but we're here...oh..." his voice trailed off as Logan raised his eyebrows and pointed at the phone he now held to his ear.

"Mady, hey, it's Logan. Do you guys need lunch still?" He paused, listening for her answer. "Yeah, okay, I'm getting pizza delivered to your house. Any special requests from the Cooper ladies?"

"All Meat," Sam threw in.

"Okay good, Veronica likes that too," he raised an eyebrow at Sam and gave him a thumbs up. "Yeah, I'm sure you guys can feed her but she's gotta be starving by now. You really don't understand how Veronica eats. I've gotta make sure she's not hungry or I may end up a cautionary tale, like a male Black Widow or Praying Mantis on their honeymoon." He heard snorts of laughter on both sides of the phone. "You laugh now but I'm just trying to stay alive here. Does Irv know your address?" Although this was addressed to the girl on the other side of the phone, the man standing in front of him nodded in response. "Okay then, pizza should be there soon. Don't tip, I'll take care of it here...no problem, you're welcome. Thanks for taking care of Veronica today. I really appreciate it...talk to you later." He thumbed the phone off and turned to Irv and Sam.

"So what do you guys want?" He ordered pizza for them and put in a delivery order as well. "Hey, is there an ice cream place around here?"

"Couple blocks down, Island Creamery," Sam answered.

Logan turned back to the pizza guy. "Will your driver deliver ice cream too?"

"Sure, if you can get it back here in time."

Logan swiveled back to Sam, pulling cash out of his wallet. "Dude, can you deal with this for me? Pick out a couple flavors that Mady and her family will like and get something really chocolatey too. Quarts or triple scoops of each."

"I'm getting something for me too," Sam warned.

"Sure, no problem," Logan said with a careless wave of his hand. He gestured back at Irv. "Irv too, if he wants something."

"No, I'm fine," Irv responded. "What are you going to be doing while your errand boy is gathering dessert?"

"I've got a letter to write." 

My dearest Veronica,

Strong start, wouldn't you say? Clearly, I'm not afraid of you making fun of me for my sentimental ways. And, since I've already gotten 'dearest' out of the way, let me follow with, you are making me the happiest man alive today.

Smooshy talk aside (or not, we'll see), I truly have been waiting for this day since that afternoon at the Camelot. I don't know what you did to me that day but I do know that you wrecked me for anyone else with a single kiss. We've had so many ups and downs since then; sometimes I feel like I'm on a roller coaster that occasionally leaves its riders dead in a heap on the ground. When we're apart, I feel like I'm struggling to get enough air, like every step is painful. I don't want to take those painful steps without you anymore. I never dreamed we would be here so soon but I could not be more excited. There is that fine undercurrent of fear of your dad too, but as you are all too aware,
I'm not really one to shy away from the scary act, consequences be damned. And this scary act, it's a no-brainer, since it gets me what my heart wants most in this world. Keith Mars may well shoot me on sight but I will die a happy man. I am, obviously, hoping you can convince him not to do that as I would like to be a happy man with you and our dozen kids for the next eighty years or so but I'll take whatever I can get.

Did I freak ya out there? With the dozen kids thing? Your fault—you brought it up first, telling me that grandkids were the way to your dad's forgiveness. This isn't a subject we've really talked about before but I will admit, it excites me. That by itself is a shock. I expected that I would never want to have kids in my life. Too much risk with Aaron's genes. But you know what? I'm not afraid of that anymore. Loving you, even when you drive me absolutely insane, has made me realize that I could never hurt our kids. Truly, who could make me crazier than you have in the last year? And never once have I wanted to hurt you. All I want to do is make sure you're safe and happy. I can't imagine anything that a child of ours would do that would make me feel anything different. And the thought of tiny little blonde girls to spoil and adore...I can't begin to express how that makes me feel. I'm good with tall, mouthy boys too; they need a lot of love and that's what we have, you and me, a lot of love.

I'm smooshy again, aren't I? I just can't help myself around you. And you know what, it doesn't bother me. All I want is you, Veronica. Thanks for wanting me back.

The pizza's ready and Sam's back with the ice cream so I've got to wrap this up. I'll be waiting for you at the end of the aisle. Waiting for the next step of our life to start. I love you,

Always,

Logan

"Geez, it's loud in here," Sam griped as he reached Logan's little corner of the grooms' room. He had gone out on a self-appointed reconnaissance mission to see how Veronica was faring in the countdown to the weddings. "At least it's a little quieter in the brides' room."

"Did they actually let you in?" Logan halted his nervous pacing but continued wringing his hands out of habit. He'd been fine through the afternoon with both Irv and Sam distracting him but shortly after Sam decided to go see how the women were doing, Irv had excused himself to speak to the other groom in their party, Bob, and Logan was left alone for probably the first time since Veronica had come out of the shower that morning. Without someone to help him occupy his thoughts, he was taking a mental 'Greatest Hits' tour of life with Veronica and that particular exercise had both pluses and minuses. He'd started out trying to occupy himself by reminiscing about their summer together but that led to earlier memories and not all of those were particularly happy. He was doing his best to keep a positive outlook as he waited, but he was relieved to see Sam turn up again to give him other things to think about.

"Nah, I couldn't get past the door. Mady came out to talk to me. Everything's fine over there, your girl showed, you can stop fretting like a little old lady."

Logan gave him a playful shove and twirled away with a grin. "So how much longer?"

"Almost time, Logan," Bob appeared next to Sam, with Irv immediately behind him. "Sam, you should go find a seat with Irv."

"I think Geny has a bunch of chairs staked out already. Let's go, Irv. Good luck guys." Sam shook Bob's hand and clapped his hands onto Logan's arms, giving him a friendly shake. "Don't worry,
buddy, she's clearly crazy about you."

"Thanks, man."

Irv had been talking quietly to Bob while Sam and Logan were talking. As Sam walked away, Irv moved from Bob and came over to put his arm over Logan's shoulders. "So. Are you ready for this?"

Logan ducked his head for a moment, and then looked up at Irv with a big smile. "Absolutely."

"I thought so. I'll leave any last minute words of wisdom for the happily married man over there," he gestured at Bob, who laughed. "I'll just say that it looks like you've got a great girl who loves you and we're all wishing the very best for you both."

"Thank you, Irv. You've been a good friend to us this week." He watched as Irv followed the rest of the "non-grooms" out of the room to be seated. Seven men were left. The wedding planner got the attention of the group and started giving instructions for the ceremony.

A few minutes later, Logan was slouching next to Bob at the front of the packed Main Hall in the Chincoteague Center. The grooms were all clustered together, waiting for their brides. The change in the music from soft, non-descript background music to the Wedding March made him straighten up and rock back on his heels, looking for the first bride into the hall. Bob chuckled softly and put a steadying hand on his back, causing Logan to glance at him and give a rueful smile. "A little anxious," he said in a low tone.

"Yeah, I figured that for myself," Bob smiled at him. "Just remember to breathe. I've watched two guys go down through the years. Deep breaths."

Logan nodded and drew in a long, steady breath. He spotted a brunette with a garland of tiny flowers on her head entering the hall and watched as one of the grooms stepped forward from the group to await her. Once she reached his side, they clasped hands and moved to the left side as discretely directed by the wedding planner. Logan concentrated on breathing as Bob had suggested and continued to rock on the heels of his new boots as he anxiously waited through the entrance of another brunette, a redhead, and a blonde much taller than the one he was waiting for. Finally, he saw Veronica at the entrance to the hall. He snapped to attention again as she walked toward him, eyes locked on his. Logan stepped forward slightly, as all the men before him had done, but it didn't feel like enough; he felt like he was being pulled toward her, like a satellite being dragged by gravity toward its planet. Apparently, the pull was even stronger than he realized because when she was about halfway to him, smiling brightly, he felt a hand clamp onto his shoulder. He glanced over and saw Bob grinning at him.

"She'll get here."

He ducked his head in embarrassment but raised his eyes to watch Veronica again. She was smirking at his eagerness but he couldn't begin to care. He was marrying Veronica Mars.

Irv poked the giggling Sam in the ribs with his elbow. The boy coughed out one more laugh and went silent. Irv understood his amusement but this doofus really needed to learn some self-control. On the other hand, watching Logan fairly wriggling with excitement was probably the cutest thing that perpetual bachelor Irv had seen in years. He had been certain that Logan was about to bolt down the aisle to Veronica before Bob had reached out and gently anchored the boy. Now Logan stood with a face-splitting grin, held in place by a supportive hand on his shoulder.

When Veronica was about five feet away, Bob lifted his hand and Logan immediately bounced out
to meet her. He stood for a moment smiling down on her before grabbing both her hands, catching the bouquet of roses wrapped in blue silk between them. Irv watched with an indulgent smile as Logan leaned down to kiss her forehead and then pulled her towards him as he walked backwards to the top of the aisle. After a couple of steps, he released one of her hands and spun to face forward before leading her carefully into place as directed by the wedding planner. Logan's seeming inability to walk in a straight line no longer surprised Irv; he'd seen some of that throughout the week and he'd been watching Logan careen from one place to another all afternoon, hopping and twirling through Chincoteague. From his position in the front row where Geny had staked out their seating, Irv continued to watch as Logan snuggled Veronica in close beside him, folding her hand into both of his, periodically lifting it to his lips. Veronica had returned her bouquet to her free hand with the flowers laid along her crooked arm. She appeared to be taking in all of the details surrounding her while Logan gazed down on her like there was no one else in the room.

Irv considered what he had learned the night before when completing the marriage license. Technically, he probably shouldn't have done so without birth certificates but he had felt reasonably confident that there was no attempt at identity theft or an illegal marriage taking place. He hadn't been expecting his routine identity search to garner so much information. The good news was that there appeared to be no chance that the couple before him were not who they claimed to be. They either were the real thing or they were clones of the people in the pictures that populated his online search. The bad news was that he now knew way more about them than he wanted to. He had been able to read the largely negative articles with the skeptical eye of someone who had spent time with them and enjoyed their company immensely. The revelations also made him watch their reactions in a new way. Bob had mentioned on the first night that the young couple was in Virginia for Veronica's FBI internship. That made a lot more sense once Irv learned that she'd been involved with solving multiple murders and a serial rape case by nineteen. It also made her alert observation while standing at her own wedding a little amusing. Logan's ugly history including a homicidal dad and a suicidal mom made his single-minded focus on Veronica so much more logical than it had appeared a day earlier. Irv had enjoyed Veronica right from the start and he liked Logan but had found his devotion to his girlfriend/fiancée to be a little over-the-top. Once he understood how alone Logan actually was, other than Veronica, Irv was better able to rationalize the young man's behavior. He was, however, trying to figure out how to give a little advice about not being too smothering. Irv had the impression that could be a hard issue for Veronica if Logan didn't get a handle on it.

Irv was distracted from his musings when he saw Bob step forward to wait patiently for Carol to join him. When she arrived at Bob's side, the wedding planner appeared to be directing them to the opposite side from where she had just sent Logan and Veronica but Bob shook his head at her and lead Carol to stand beside their young friends. The final groom stepped forward and while he waited for the arrival of his bride, Irv resumed his study of the couple he had grown fond of in the last few days. Logan leaned sideways to press a kiss to the top of Veronica's head and she looked up at him with a smile. Irv watched her mouth, "Be good," to Logan and laughed quietly as he lip-read the response. "Yes, ma'am." He watched them giggle softly with each other before the final couple moved into place and the officiant stepped into position to begin the ceremony.

"Friends, I welcome you here today on behalf of the seven couples before you. Whether you know one of these couples or all seven, your witness here today is appreciated and cherished by all of our participants." Veronica looked away from Logan momentarily to smile warmly back towards their new little gang of friends they'd met barely three days ago. She then glanced beyond Logan to where Bob and Carol stood next to them, exchanging smiles with them as well. She saw Logan doing the same thing before they turned back towards each other with their hands clasped together.

"We are gathered here today to celebrate one of life's great moments, the joining of two hearts. Or, in our case here today, two hearts, seven times over." The room filled with laughter at this line. "As we
witness the joining of their lives, know that for each of them, out of the routine of ordinary life, the extraordinary has happened. They met each other, fell in love, and are finalizing it with their wedding today. Romance is fun, but true love is something far more and it is their desire to love each other for life that is what we are celebrating here today.” Veronica felt Logan drop her left hand as he reached out with his right to softly smooth a tear away from her cheek before catching her hand in his again.

"A good marriage must be created. In marriage, the 'little' things are the big things. It is never being too old to hold hands. It is remembering to say 'I love you' at least once a day. It is never going to sleep angry. It is standing together and facing the world. It is speaking words of appreciation and demonstrating gratitude in thoughtful ways. It is having the capacity to forgive and forget." Veronica chuckled at this and her smile turned into a smirk for a minute as Logan rolled his eyes at her. "It is giving each other an atmosphere in which each can grow. It is a common search for the good and the beautiful. It is not only marrying the right person—it is being the right partner." Both their hands tightened on each other at that. "Now, if you're not there already, could you turn to face each other and join hands...I'm gonna need the grooms to repeat after me. But first, a word of advice. With so many of us here today, this is a little different from your average wedding when you're trying to help the poor saps sitting in the last row hear what's going on. These vows are for each other and as long as both of you hear them, we will accomplish what we are working towards today." The audience chuckled again.

"I, Logan Echolls, take you, Veronica Mars, to be my wife, my partner in life, and my one true love.

I will cherish our friendship and love you today, tomorrow, and forever.

I will trust you and honor you.

I will laugh with you and cry with you.

Through the best and the worst,

Through the difficult and the easy,

Whatever may come, I will always be there.

As I have given you my hand to hold,

So I give you my life to keep."

Although Logan was beaming at her through the entire recitation, tears had begun to stream down his face as soon as he said her name. She had gained some control of her tears when he had alerted her to them earlier by stroking them away but as she watched him cry, she began to do the same again.

"And now brides, if you could all repeat after me."

"I, Veronica Mars, take you, Logan Echolls, to be my husband, my partner in life, and my one true love.

I will cherish our friendship and love you today, tomorrow, and forever.

I will trust you," she spoke those words more slowly and deliberately than the previous vows, squeezing his hands more firmly while also giving them a little shake for further emphasis, "and honor you.
"I will laugh with you and cry with you." She reached up and stroked his tears that had started again at the last set of vows and he laughed a slightly embarrassed sounding, wet snort.

"Through the best and the worst,
Through the difficult and the easy,
Whatever may come, I will always be there.
As I have given you my hand to hold,
So I give you my life to keep."

The officiant spoke again. "Brides and grooms, I would ask that you always treat yourself and each other with respect, and remind yourselves often of what brought you together today. Give the highest priority to the tenderness, gentleness, and kindness that your marriage deserves. When frustration and difficulty assail your marriage, as they do to every relationship at one time or another, focus on what still seems right between you, not only the part that seems wrong. This way, when clouds of trouble hide the sun in your lives and you lose sight of it for a moment, you can remember that the sun is still there. And if each of you will take responsibility for the quality of your life together, it will be marked by abundance and happiness."

"Now grooms, do you take your bride to be your wife?" She knew the rumble around her was seven voices responding with "I do" but Veronica could only really hear Logan. "Do you promise to love, honor, cherish, and protect her, forsaking all others and holding only unto her forevermore?" She could feel the impact of his "I do" in her chest.

"And brides, do you take your groom to be your husband?" Veronica responded with "I do" at the prompt, hoping that Logan would be able to feel her response as strongly as she had felt his. "Do you promise to love, honor, cherish, and protect him, forsaking all others and holding only unto him forevermore?" She answered, "I do," again before whispering in a voice she was sure only Logan could hear, "Forevermore." He leaned down to press his forehead against hers and whispered back, "Forevermore."

They stood for a moment, staring into each other's eyes before the officiant's voice broke through again. "I believe each of you have a ring." The men all reached into breast pockets and the women into tiny bags woven into the bouquets. The bouquets were then all laid on the low tables that had been placed directly in front of the first row of seating. "Please hold them before you for a blessing." Fourteen hands extended toward him. "The ring is a symbol of the unbroken circle of love. Love freely given has no beginning and no end, no giver and no receiver for each is the giver and each is the receiver. May these rings always remind you of the vows you have taken. Now, grooms, if you will please..."

"With this ring, I take you as my wife, for as long as we both shall live." Veronica had moved the engagement ring to her right hand prior to the ceremony so her left hand was bare. Logan slid the wedding band onto her left ring finger and then raised her hand to his lips to kiss it. She lowered her hand to see channel set sapphires and diamonds, similar to the band Sam had brought to the brides' room earlier, only narrower.

"And ladies..."

"With this ring, I take you as my husband, for as long as we both shall live." Once she had placed the ring on Logan's finger, she laced their fingers together to see the rings side-by-side. With the wider band, there was more platinum surface to his ring but there could be no question that the
wedding bands were a pair. She lifted her eyes from their joined hands to Logan's face, matching his wide smile with her own.

"To make your relationship work will take love. This is the core of your marriage and why you are here today. It will also take trust, to know that in your hearts, you truly want what is best for each other. It will take dedication, to stay open to one another, and to learn and grow together. It will take faith, to go forward together, without knowing exactly what the future brings. And, it will take commitment, to hold true to the journey you have both pledged to today. May your marriage hold all of these in abundance.

"And now, by the power vested in me by the Commonwealth of Virginia, I now pronounce you, Husbands and Wives.

"Gentlemen, you may now kiss your bride." The words were still sounding in her ears when Logan reached for her, cupping her face in his hands and bringing their mouths together. Veronica returned his eager kiss, her hands resting at his hips, pulling him tight against her. After several moments of lips and tongues and teeth, she pulled back to smile up at him, cocking her head to the side.

"Feels like the first time," she said in a soft voice. He ducked down to her again, pressing a firm kiss to her lips and then further where her shoulder and neck met. Her eyes fluttered closed and she shivered at his touch but he quickly moved the next kiss to her forehead and then turned so they were side-by-side and facing back toward the aisle. Veronica smiled at the sight of Bob and Carol right next to them, still kissing enthusiastically. "I would bet money that you're going to hear from Sam about the old guy kissing his bride for longer than you kissed yours."

"I'm working up to it. When we've been married as long as they have, I'll have you up here for a half an hour." He leaned into her, kissing the crook of her neck again but this time firmly pressing his teeth against her skin. She whimpered and then shrugged her shoulder to dislodge him, glancing up at him with lustful eyes.

"I have no need to stand up here for a half an hour. I want to get back to the room."

He gave a sudden, loud bark of laughter and pulled her in tight to him before stepping closer to Bob and Carol who were no longer kissing but were still in a clinch. "Come on guys, you're in the middle so you're probably leading this parade out of here. Let's get this show on the road."

Bob laughed and gave him a teasing look. "Why? You got somewhere to be?" With an arm still around Carol, he pulled her with him to Logan and Veronica and pulled them into a four-way hug. "Congratulations, Mr. and Mrs. Echolls."

"The same to you, Mr. and Mrs. Cooper," Veronica said just as the officiant's voice broke through.

"If the Chief and his wife can lead the way, our couples can greet their well-wishers out on the terrace with cakes to be cut shortly."

"Ooh, cake," Veronica said in a gleeful voice and Logan laughed again.

"I thought you were so anxious to get me home."

"Not before the cake."

Bob grabbed Carol's hand and they started back down the aisle. Logan motioned the couple opposite them to follow and then he pulled Veronica to follow them. He wrapped his arm around her, pulling her tightly against him as they walked. "You know, that kiss didn't feel like the first time to me."
She looked up at him with surprise in her eyes. "Really? I thought it was as electric as our first kiss."

"Oh yeah, kissing you is generally like getting electrocuted. It's just that the first time, when it was over, I felt like my world was on its head. I had no idea what had just happened or what was supposed to happen next. It was days before I had a really rational thought. This time..." he smiled and kissed the top of her head. "This time, that kiss, husband and wife...I feel like my world is finally where it is supposed to be. Right side up again. The first time was awesome—I'm not gonna lie—but this time was so much better."

Chapter End Notes

Credit for the wedding vows to Alan Katz and Great Officiants, LLC.
"Are you going to carry me all the way through this place?"

"Why not? How many thresholds between the front door and our room? If I'm gonna carry you over each of them, I might as well just keep you in my arms. It's where I want you anyway" He snuggled her closer to him, nosing into her hair, as he headed toward the elevator.

"Congratulations you two!" One of the front desk clerks called out. Veronica gave her a wave as they passed the desk.

"Thank you." Veronica locked her arms around Logan's neck again, ducking in to kiss behind his ear. He reached the elevator and turned so he could reach the call button, which he pressed repeatedly. "In a hurry?" she murmured, biting his earlobe gently.

"Yeah, you're getting heavy."

Her loud harrumph made him snicker, and teasingly adjust her in his arms.

"That's just mean. You can put me down anytime. The carrying was your stupid idea anyway."

He leaned down and kissed her nose. "It was my very excellent idea. I may carry you over every threshold we ever cross. Puts you in the perfect position." He kissed away her pout but before he could go any further, the elevator dinged and the doors rumbled open. "Ah, another threshold, outstanding." He walked them into the elevator and turned to let her push the button for their floor.

"This carrying party may be over if you don't have easy access to your keycard," she said. "Mine is buried at the bottom of my overnight bag." She patted the strap on his shoulder.

"It's in my back pocket. I can't reach," he said, giving her a wicked grin and indicating behind him with a quick jerk of his head.

Her eyebrows rose at the challenge and she returned his smile. "Ooh, let's see if I can. This will be a test of your carrying skills." She kissed him once more, then lowered the arm draped along the back of his neck and leaned back to reach low around him. He shifted her to keep her balanced and watched with interest as more of her skin was exposed as she arched back but the front of her dress stayed where it was. She had to be oblivious to the show she was providing as she stretched around him and slid her hand into his back pocket, squeezing his ass as she did so. "Nothing there but you," she said as the elevator dinged again and the door slid open.

"Wrong pocket. Feel free to grope me on the other side but wait just a second. We've got another threshold." He moved out of the elevator and turned down the hall to their room.
She crooked her neck up, smirking at him. "No groping over thresholds? Is that some kind of rule I've never heard before?"

"I'd just rather not drop you there. Seems like bad luck."

She gave him another friendly squeeze and then stretched a little further around his back to his other pocket. "Aha." Her body contorted in his arms and the she was back to her original position with her arm resting around his shoulders, snuggled into his chest. With her hands crossed around his neck, she passed the card to her outside hand and waved it in front of him. "Now we won't have to consummate against the outside of our door."

He choked out a laugh. "Yeah, well, that's a relief. I know you were worried earlier in the week about getting us kicked out of here. That would probably do it." They reached their door and she moved to unlock the door but paused just short.

"Are you ready for this?" she asked, a crooked smile gracing her face. "I think this may be the most important threshold of the night."

He tightened his arms around her. "I really hope you already know just how long I've been ready for this," he said as he leaned down to kiss her. She returned his kisses eagerly, making him struggle to keep them upright as she simultaneously reached blindly for the door lock. The lock beeped and, at the click of the mechanism disengaging, Logan stepped closer to the door so she could turn the knob. They continued to kiss, tongues tracing over each other as he gently pressed against the door. As he walked them into the room, she combed her fingers into his hair, pulling his mouth more tightly against hers.

He pulled back slightly, breathing hard. She smiled at him and gave him a gentle kiss at the corner of his mouth. "I love you, Logan."

"And I love you." He moved in to kiss her again but she put a hand up against his chest.

"We're here. Drop the bag please." He let the bag slide off his shoulder and thump onto the floor. "Now, take me to bed or lose me forever."

"Top Gun on our wedding night, Veronica? No."

"Maybe not but I absolutely meant what I said. The bed, now please."

He gave a low laugh against her hair. "Well, since you asked so nicely." He carried her to the bed, kneeling on it so he could lay her down gently in the center. He stretched out on his side next to her with his arm bent to prop his head up on his hand, running his other hand through her hair and down her cheek. She kissed his fingers as they crossed her lips before he ran his hand back up to her ear and lifted the dangling star he found there.

"It matches your necklace." He fondled her earlobe and raised his head from his hand so he could reach to lift the star on her necklace.

"My borrowed and my old."

He nodded. "Borrowed from..."

"Mady."

"Of course. There's some symmetry for ya. We started this week with her borrowed ring and it lead us to these borrowed earrings." He dropped the stars and ran his fingers into her hair before leaning
down to kiss her throat. She sighed and rolled her head back giving him better access.

"So," he asked between kisses, "new and blue. Where are they?" The hand not in her hair stroked down her side, along the swell of her breast, down into the curve of her waist, and out past her hip. He dragged his fingers down the lace skirt until he reached her bare knee where he swirled his fingers absently.

"New was the dress. It was Mady's but she'd never worn it." She rocked her head back up and he pulled back, leaning his head on his hand again and moving his other hand back up to her face, where he smoothed her hair back behind her ear, smiling tenderly at her. "Well? Did you like it?" she asked. "The dress, I mean?"

He gave a short, embarrassed laugh. "Veronica, really? Did I like it? You have to ask?" He leaned down and kissed her forehead. "You were so beautiful tonight. It was all I could do to stand up there and wait for you."

She laughed. "I'd say the only reason you waited was because Bob held you in place."

He pressed his forehead against her temple. "He just reminded me to wait for you. I'll admit it—the sight of you made me a little eager—but really, is that any different than any other day?" She smiled and turned her head, kissing him. When they pulled apart, he asked again, "And the blue?"

"Oh, the scarf wrapped around the stems of the flowers—oh hey—my flowers." Veronica jerked upright before scooting away from Logan off the side of the bed. She went to the overnight bag Logan had dropped inside the door and moved it onto the loveseat. Poking out of the top was her bouquet. A few of the rosebuds were drooping already. Logan got up from the bed and walked over to her, unwilling to be apart. He ran his fingers along the silk scarf looped around the bouquet and then placed his hands on Veronica's waist.

"Do we need to get another vase from the front desk? They'll probably run one up for us if we call. Hopefully it won't take too long." His voice was a little wistful as his hands wandered around her hips and back.

"No, I have a better idea," she said, smiling up at him. "Once the roses' little necks start to sag, there really isn't any coming back from that. So—" she flipped the bouquet upside down "—I'll hang them up and let them dry." She turned to the closet and Logan followed along, still not willing to lose contact. She used the scarf to hang the flowers upside down on the closet bar and then turned in Logan's arms, laying her hands against his chest. "See, all done, no waiting for anyone to knock on the door and interrupt us." He lowered his head to kiss her and her arms stretched up to wrap around his neck. As the kisses grew heated, he lifted her to pull her in closer and her legs came up to lock around him. He stumbled away from the open closet to press her up against a wall. When they broke apart for air, she smiled lasciviously at him. "So, any more questions, Mr. Curious? Or have we completed the interview section of this program?"

He laughed and ducked to kiss her shoulder, dropping kisses along her collarbone, making her laugh before pressing his teeth into her neck. Her delighted giggles turned into a moan before she pulled away again. "Oh, wait, I guess I've got a question myself." She leaned back more firmly against the wall putting her hands on his chest. "This shirt." She ran her hands up the line of gleaming snaps. "Yeah, I thought so. These aren't buttons." She put her hands right above the uppermost closed snap and gave a tug, popping it open. She looked up at him with a smirk. "Mhmmm. That's what I thought." She leaned in again, kissing him as she gave a forceful tug on either side of his shirt, yanking it all the way open. She laughed and put her hands on his bare chest. "Can you imagine the mess that would have made with buttons? You might want to consider adopting the country-western look on a regular basis."
He rolled his eyes and shook his head before straightening up and walking them back to the bed. He sat on the edge with Veronica straddling his lap, knees on the bed and her feet still hanging back over the edge. She slid her hands down his chest and then ran her fingers along his abs.

"Actually, I do have one more subject I'd like to discuss," she said in a low voice, not meeting his eyes.

He quirked an eyebrow at her and scrunched down a little, trying to catch her gaze. "What, Veronica? Is everything okay?"

"Oh yeah, everything's great." She tilted her head, finally looking him in the eyes. "Really, really great." She caught his face in her hands and gave him a long, deep kiss. When she bit his bottom lip, he fell back onto the bed, pulling her with him so she was kneeling astride him. She kissed him for another minute and then pulled away to sit up, still straddling him. She shifted around a bit, fiddling her skirt around her, settling it in a circle around her. Logan lay still on the bed, watching her and whimpering occasionally as her movements ground her down against him but smiling up at her the entire time. When she finally stilled, he ran his hands up her thighs under her skirt.

"Are you done torturing me, Mrs. Echolls? Because you made it sound like you still want to talk and I'm pretty interested in getting to the consummating part of the evening, if you don't mind." He spread his fingers across her legs, his thumbs pressing into her inner thighs as he stroked up and down, moving a little higher up her leg with each pass. Her eyes fluttered shut and she rocked against the bulge in his pants, humming low in her throat. When he felt the smooth, silky feel of her panties under his fingertips, he slid his hands around her hips but her eyes popped open and she flattened her hands against his.

"Looogan, please, hang on a second, okay? I need to be able to think."

He laughed out loud and slid his hands back down to her knees. "Okay, baby, think." She closed her eyes again and took a deep breath, sliding her hands down to twine with his. After a moment, she opened her eyes and gave him an embarrassed smile. "Hi there." He smirked up at her.

"Hi."

He squeezed her hands and pulled one to his lips to kiss. "So, let's have this discussion. What's left to talk about tonight?"

She looked embarrassed again. "Well, obviously, no one here wants to get pregnant any time soon."

He felt his eyebrows shoot up in surprise but he kept his voice steady. "Umm, yeah, I think that's been pretty clearly established in prior conversations."

"And we've been really, really careful. Always with condoms even though I've been getting my birth control shots for well over a year. I've been getting my birth control shots for well over a year."

"And we've been really, really careful. Always with condoms even though I've been getting my birth control shots for well over a year." She pulled her hands out of his, twisting them nervously, but he reached for them again, folding them back into his and pulling them against his chest.

"Yes, I am aware of that."

She took a deep breath and began to speak in a rush. "Well, the shot, it's like, more than 99% reliable, you know, especially if you always get your shot on time, which I always, always do. And condoms, they're supposed to be 98% reliable so really, we've been using like 197% worth of birth control, which is a little bit of overkill when you think about it, and I was just thinking, since we're married now, maybe we can drop the condoms, maybe not always but, right now?"

She was such a cute shade of pink, looking at his chest so she didn't have to look him in the eye, that
he couldn't help laughing. He sat up and snuggled her in his arms. "I'm not totally sure but, Veronica, I don't think there's such a thing as 197% reliability. I do get your point though. And baby," he stroked her face and then pressed a finger under her chin to tip her face up so he could meet her eyes, "I'm never going to say no to that—what you're suggesting—as long as you're okay with it. As far as I'm concerned, if we're using 99% plus reliable birth control and we still get pregnant, that's the universe telling us it's time. Whenever that happens. I just want to be sure that you'll feel the same way, if, you know, that less than a percent thing were to actually happen."

Veronica looked away momentarily, smiled ruefully, and looked him straight in the eye. "I understand why you're worried that if the unexpected happens, I'll have a different reaction than what I'm saying now. But I think what you're saying makes sense about the universe sending us a message. As long as we take reasonable precautions, we can make the life we want together. Whatever that looks like."

He pulled her as close to him as he could. "Absolutely." He could feel that the idiotic grin was back on his face but there was nothing he could do about it. He had never been happier in his life. He rocked her in his arms while he thought about the life they were beginning together. Finally, Veronica started to squirm and he relaxed his grasp so she could pull back and stroke his face.

"So, everyone has asked their maximum number of questions for the evening and it seems that all our...logistical issues—" she smirked "—have been resolved." He smiled and nodded at her. "So, are you going to help me out of this dress or what?"

Early Saturday afternoon, Logan pulled the unused bikes out of the back of the Range Rover to return them to the Bike Depot. It was the first time either of them had been outside their room since he carried Veronica into it on Thursday night. Meals were delivered regularly of course—he had married Veronica Mars after all—but other than the room service attendants and the pizza delivery guy, they'd spent the last 36 hours in blissful seclusion. Now they were dragging themselves back into the world to join their friends for dinner, but first, Veronica wanted to spend some time in the village to pick up some thank you gifts.

"So did you get a lot of use of the bikes this week?" the attendant asked as Logan wheeled them up to the little hut. Logan laughed.

"Um, no, barely any at all. We rode them to the carnival on Tuesday when we arrived and they've been stashed in my car since then. We just got so busy. Maybe when we come back we'll make sure to be here for more time before or after the Pony Penning activities so we have some time to bike around the island." Logan smiled as he mentally planned their next vacation to Virginia.

"You really should; the bike paths through the wetlands are amazing." The attendant checked the bikes in and made some entries in the computer. "Okay, the bike returns are entered. The rental charges will show up on your hotel bill when you check out."

"Thanks, man," Logan said as he turned to go and bumped into Veronica coming up behind him. "Well, hello, my beautiful wife." He took her hands and leaned down to kiss her forehead. "How did you get out here without me to carry you across the thresholds? I thought you were going to wait for me in the room."

She smiled and stretched up, kissing him on the mouth. "Clearly the every threshold ever idea isn't viable. What am I supposed to do when you're not available? Just hang around until you show up? I'm sorry to mess up your latest insane plan but I missed you and couldn't wait for you to get back."

He laughed, delighted, but said in a teasing voice, "I've only been gone for fifteen minutes."
She pouted up at him and snuggled into his arms. "That's a long time."

"You're telling me. And don't think I've forgotten that you're going to leave me alone for five days tomorrow. I guess that right there makes the carrying plan unworkable. I'm gonna go into withdrawal. You'll at least have intern stuff to do. I'm gonna be all alone."

She turned away from him and they walked out towards the parking lot, his arm around her shoulders and hers around his waist. "I'm going to miss you too, even if I am doing intern stuff. I was thinking though, maybe instead of you dropping me off tomorrow night when we get back to town, if you don't mind being up and around really early, I could stay with you Sunday night and you could drop me off around 7:00 A.M. on Monday? Would you be okay with that?" She looked up at him, a hopeful smile on her lips.

"I would absolutely be ecstatic if we got to spend Sunday night together too. Then it'll only be four nights apart. I fully endorse this idea." He pulled her into him and kissed her again, more passionately this time. Her arms wrapped around his neck and they slowed to a stop in the middle of the path.

"Logan?" Veronica mumbled against his lips.

"Yes, dear?"

"This either needs to stop or we need to go back upstairs." She looked up at him and raised her eyebrows. "I'm good either way."

He groaned out loud and pulled her tight to his chest. "Oh, you wicked, wicked woman."

She giggled and ran her hands up his arms, over his shoulders and down his back. "You like me like this." She slid her hands into his back pockets and he groaned again.

"Yes, I do. But I'm going to be the responsible party here—please mark this day on your calendar—and move this party to the truck so we can go downtown and do the shopping you want to get done."

She laughed and pulled her hands out of his pockets, stepping back and crossing her arms over her chest. "I can't believe I'm the bad influence now."

"It had to happen sometime." He gave her a smug look and dropped his arm around her shoulders again. "Come on, you bad girl, let's get on the road."

"I need to find a dark blue scarf for Geny; I don't want to give back the one she let me use around the flowers."

"What if she already had multiple blue scarves and wants an orange one now? Call Mady and ask her first." Logan pulled a bright floral scarf out of the bin he was digging through and held it in front of him like he was checking to see if it matched his shirt.

Veronica threw up her hands and turned her back on him so he wouldn't see that she thought he was adorable. "Orange? Really?"

"It was just an example, Veronica. Here, I'll call Mady." Veronica glanced back to see him drop the floral scarf into the bin before pulling his phone out of his pocket. He flipped it open and pressed a couple buttons before resuming his digging through the scarves. "Mady, hey, how it going?" He pulled a solid green scarf out of the bin. "Yes," he said in a dry tone, "we have returned to the real
world." He threw the green scarf back and dug some more. "Yeah, very funny. We will be at Irv's by 5:30, don't worry." He turned to Veronica to wrap his latest find, a dark blue scarf, around her neck, kissing her on the nose as he did so. "Yeah, okay, that works. So, I called to see if your sister really liked that blue scarf she loaned to Veronica on Thursday." He moved further down the aisle, spinning with each step, Veronica trailing along behind him, charmed by his ebullience. "No, we didn't wreck it. Veronica's still got it wrapped around the flowers and they're hanging up to dry or something. She thought she would just replace it but I told her she should see if Geny really wanted another blue one or if she would prefer a different color." Veronica's eye was caught by a display case of jewelry and, when she paused to look more closely, Logan stopped and spun back towards her. "Okay, good, green? Dark or light...yeah, ask her, I'll wait." He moved back to Veronica and wrapped an arm around her waist, curling his body around hers. "Whatcha looking at, baby?"

"I found the star earrings," Veronica said, looking up and back at him.

"Ooh, really?" Logan peered over her shoulder to look. "Yeah, that's them, get the clerk, we're getting those. Hey Mady, what did she say?" He pulled away and moved back to the scarf bins while Veronica went up to the counter to speak to the clerk. While she asked the clerk about the earrings, she could still hear Logan negotiating with Mady over the phone over color choices. "Okay, I've got a kinda seafoam green, it's light green but just a tiny hint of blue to it, or one that's more like a sage...yeah, I think the sage too. Are you sure this isn't a problem?" The clerk went to the back and Veronica turned back to watch Logan again. He pulled a sage scarf out of the bin and tossed it over his shoulder. "Well then, we'll see you in a bit. Thanks for the help." He snapped the phone shut and went to Veronica. "Did you find a clerk to help you with the earrings?" He pulled the blue scarf he'd draped around her neck off her and threw it over his own shoulder with the green scarf, then snuggled into Veronica again.

"She went in the back to get a set so she could leave those in the display." She raised her eyebrows and nodded at the scarves on his shoulder. "Is the blue for you?"

"No, I figured we'd replace Geny’s blue anyway, plus get her another color she wanted. Do you see anything around here for Mady or Carol?"

"I actually have an idea for Mady. We were talking about art and she mentioned another store a little further down the block that has some cool glass artwork that she thought I would love because she does. I want to look there. But for Carol, would it be too weird if I wanted to get her that?" She turned toward the showcase built into the counter and pointed at a silver brooch with 'World's Best Mom' in script across the top with charms dangling below it, a heart, a flower, and a star, all inset with a reflective, multi-colored metal. "I mean, obviously, she's not my mom but she made me feel...just so taken care of while I was waiting for you. It's not like we've got any moms who are more deserving of that title, ya know?"

She felt Logan's arms wrap firmly around her. "Yes, I do know. And I think she will love that gift."

The clerk returned then with the earrings and Veronica pointed to the brooch. "I'm sorry to send you back there again but I need that too."

"Actually, you're getting that one. Those pieces are all one-of-a-kind. It's the anodized niobium in the insets. Every piece is an individual. But I'll get you a box." She disappeared again into the back.

"Well that's cool. I won't have to worry about her already having the same thing already. She may well have something similar but it should be a little bit different at least." Veronica twisted back to pull the scarves off of Logan's shoulder before piling them on the counter with the earring box. "What about Bob and Irv and Sam?"
"I don't know yet. We'll check out another couple of stores but don't you need to eat first? I can't believe you haven't been complaining about me starving you to death."

"I had just resigned myself to my fate now that you've got me legally tied to you and I can't get away to someone who remembers to feed me."

She squeaked as he unexpectedly spun her around to face him, one arm wrapping low around her hips, his opposite hand curving around her head. His lips crashed against hers. She was startled at first and couldn't fully respond, other than to open her mouth beneath his and let him have his way with her. As the element of surprise wore off, she started to lift her arms to circle his shoulders and pull him in more tightly to her, but he suddenly stopped kissing her, standing her up straight and stepping away with a wicked smirk. While she blinked at him in confusion, trying to figure out what had just happened, he ducked his head down to her again and whispered in her ear.

"If you can find someone who treats you better than I do, sweetheart, you should probably go with him." He reached out, grabbing her hips again and running his hands up and down her sides. He continued to give her that evil smile the entire time. When she had recovered sufficiently to speak, she decided to let him have this win without challenging him like she usually would.

"You're absolutely right, Logan," she said quietly to him. "I don't think such a man exists. You're the only one for me." And then he was kissing her again.

She broke away this time when she became aware of the sounds the clerk was making to try to discretely get their attention. Her hands were on his neck, pulling him down to her, but she pulled back and rose onto her toes so their connection was foreheads pressed together rather than lips. "I love you so much, Veronica." She smiled and then turned back to the counter.

"Sorry," she said quietly to the clerk who chuckled.

"It's no problem. Is there anything else you guys need?"

"Probably not but can you gift wrap?" Veronica asked.

"Sure, which items?"

Logan spoke up. "With the scarves, can you put them in one box and put the green one on the bottom and cover it with the blue?"

Veronica laughed and shook her head. "Aren't you the sneaky one?" She pushed the box with the brooch toward the clerk. "This one too please."

While they waited, she grabbed Logan's hand for a final stroll through the store. As they passed the bins of scarves again, she teased, "Are you sure you don't want that floral scarf you were modeling earlier? It went so nicely with your shirt."

He stopped and tugged her back towards him. "It isn't really my shirt that I want a scarf to complement." He knelt, pulling her down next to him, holding both her hands in one of his while digging around in the closest bin.

"What are you looking for?"

He glanced up at her with a lascivious grin. "Mady gave me an idea." He pulled her hands up to his lips and kissed both of them before wrapping a red silk scarf loosely around her wrists. Her eyebrows shot up and she snorted a laugh, laughing again when he responded with a pouty face.
"Mady gave you this idea? When exactly did this happen?"

"On the phone a few minutes ago, didn't you hear me? She thought we were replacing the scarf cuz we'd wrecked it having a little too much fun with it. So I thought, maybe, while we're in the market for scarves for other people..." He raised his eyebrows suggestively.

"Oh," she said in an intrigued voice, "that might be interesting." She looked down at her wrists. "And red silk is a lot like red satin." She pulled her wrists apart and held the scarf in her hand. "But I wonder..." She scooted closer to the bin and dug into it herself. "Aha. Let's get this one too." She extracted black silk and wrapped it around one of Logan's wrist, then tugged on the scarf's end so she could catch his other wrist as well. "I like you in black."

His eyes widened and he growled at her in the back of his throat. She chuckled and leaned forward to give him a quick kiss before standing up and pulling him to his feet. "Come on, you, let's get settled up here so you can feed me and then we can finish our shopping. We can play naughty scarf games later."

He kissed the tip of her nose. "Promise?"

She laughed again and nodded, before pulling him back to the counter so they could add their scarves to their pile of purchases.

"You know, Irv, I would never have guessed that you're such a great cook," Veronica enthused as she reached over to stab another piece of grilled meat off of Logan's plate. He rolled his eyes and shook his head but he was smiling the entire time so it was apparent he didn't mind. Veronica used her chunk of sourdough bread to push the last of the tomato relish from her own plate onto her fork to go with the stolen bite of beef.

"And why not, may I ask?" Irv said in an offended tone. "I'm a bachelor and some women like to eat. It never hurts to be able to feed them."

Logan made a scoffing noise. "Feed them or die," he said in a low tone and Veronica elbowed him in the side but couldn't respond because her mouth was full.

"Why not just take them out?" Sam asked. "This dinner seems like it was probably a lot of work. Take 'em out and let someone else do the work."

Bob chimed in, "That works if you're only planning to feed her every once in a while but unless you've gotten a much better job than I'm aware of, you wouldn't be able to take someone like Veronica out to dinner on a regular basis."

"Hey!" Veronica exclaimed and everyone at the table burst into laughter.

"No offense, darlin'," Irv said in a soothing voice, "it's just that you're a very impressive eater."

"I've got a fast metabolism."

"They're just jealous," Carol assured her. "We all wish we had your metabolism."

"Well, I'm just glad Mady's metabolism is more like a regular girl's," Sam said. Everyone's heads swiveled to look at him before turning to look at Mady, who was looking down at the table with her cheeks blushing red.

"Planning to feed Mady regularly, dude?" Logan asked, his amused smile deepening along with
Sam's rising flush.

"We went to dinner last night and we're seeing a movie tomorrow," Mady said, her tone slightly defensive. "Is that okay with everyone?" The rest of the group looked at each other with some surprise and confusion but all nodded.

Logan broke the stunned silence. "It's cool with me. I just wish I could have gotten Veronica to bet me about this when I first mentioned it. I'd be winning money right now."

"I told you that you were right later that exact same day," Veronica answered with a disapproving look.

"Oh, I absolutely remember that, my darling wifey." He leaned over to kiss the top of her head. "The days you tell me I'm right are all check-marked in red on my calendar." Veronica sneered at him but the rest of the table laughed. "And, if you will recall, you told me I was right earlier today also." He made a giant check-mark in the air with his hand, smirking at her the whole time.

"Keeping score is not a good technique in marriage," Bob said solemnly, which made everyone at the table laugh again.

Veronica shrugged. "That just might be a problem for us so I'm hoping that's more of a guideline than a rule."

After dinner, they all went to sit out on Irv's back deck and enjoy the early evening. He'd lit all the citronella torches before dinner so they could sit without risk of being carried off by mosquitoes. Logan carried out their bags of gifts. He'd selected boxes of cigars and an assortment of craft beers for Bob and Irv based on their cigar smoking in the lead up to the wedding on Thursday. They were both excited for the replenishment of their stocks. "We'll make sure we make these last until you're back in 2012 to get in on the July 26th vow renewal," Bob said.

"You'd better have a really good humidor if you want these to last for the next five years with the humidity around here," Logan answered skeptically.

"Irv does. We don't smoke these enough to go through them very quickly."

"The cases of beer, on the other hand," chimed in Carol, "will be gone in less than a month." Irv stood and leaned over to Bob to high-five him. Carol ignored them. "Do you guys think you'll come back and do the vow renewal in 2012? That's the next time July 26 falls onto the Thursday during Pony Penning."

Logan looked at Veronica and smiled. "I think we will," Veronica answered. "It's been a good tradition for you."

"The question is whether we'll be able to get back sooner or not," Logan interjected. "We're still kicking around what next summer might look like. We've got all your numbers and emails so if we're going to be heading out here again, we will definitely let you know. Plus, if "Rate My Pony" is still operational, we'll want to be event sponsors again."

Veronica leaned over to her bag of gifts and pulled out the box for Carol. "This one's for you. I hope you don't think this is weird." She handed the box across and then sat nervously drumming her fingers on Logan's knee. Carol opened the box and immediately put her hand to her mouth, her eyes filling with tears. Bob leaned into her to see what was in the box and smiled before wrapping his arm around Carol and pulling her head onto his shoulder.
"She likes it," he said with a smile.

"I wasn't sure," Veronica said, "but, you know we don't really have moms, and you've been so great this week, and I just wanted you to know..." Her words were cut off when Carol stood up and moved to pull Veronica up into a hug. After a moment, she pulled on Logan as well so she could hug them both. When she pulled away, she was beaming.

"Thank you both so much. But you know, don't you, that your babies are going to have to call me grandma now." Logan and Veronica both choked out surprised laughs.

"We would be thrilled to have babies calling you grandma," Logan answered. "But, grandmas who live on the other side of the country would have to come visit sometimes." He looked up at Bob to get his take on this turn of events but Bob was smiling and nodding.

"Absolutely," Carol said. "I've never been to California and that would be an excellent reason to make the trip."

"And this takes the pressure off us," Geny piped up. "You all deal with the babies and Mady and I are free to live our lives however we choose."

"Oh no you don't, young lady," Carol objected. "Babies all around. When the time is right." Everyone else started to laugh as Geny shook her head. Carol took her seat again next to Bob and Veronica pulled another box out of the bag and handed it to Geny.

"This isn't anywhere near as dramatic of a gift," she said, sounding apologetically.

"Trust me, that's fine," Geny said as she tore the wrapping paper off and pulled the lid off the box. "My scarf? You wrapped my own scarf?"

"It's not actually your blue scarf, it's a replacement. We hope that's okay," Logan said. He saw Mady start to speak and held up a hand at her. "Veronica still has yours tied around her bouquet." Mady raised her eyebrows skeptically, mouthing, 'Sure' at him. "But it's not just your scarf replacement; keep looking."

Geny pulled the blue scarf out and tossed it around her neck. "And a replacement is fine, by the way, I wasn't emotionally connected to that scarf, I just like the color once in a while." Under the blue scarf, she found a pair of silver wire flower earrings lying on top of the sage scarf. "Ooh, these are pretty." She held the earrings up to get a better look at the design before pulling the scarf out to admire the color.

"Your present's actually been wrapped twice. We had the scarves wrapped and then found the earrings later and Logan decided they all needed to be in the same box." Veronica rolled her eyes.

"Well I love the earrings and this new color of scarf. I wondered what Mady was talking about earlier when she was asking about what colors of scarves I had. I just thought she wanted to borrow one. Thanks guys."

Logan pulled the last box out of his bag. "Sam, man, this is about the least inspired gift ever but I had no idea what to get you. At least with girls, you can just pick something pretty and be done." Sam snorted a laugh and nodded. "So, I kinda cheated and went with something that I knew you were planning to get yourself." Sam furrowed his brow, looking like he was trying to remember what he had told Logan he was planning to get. He tore the paper free and lifted the box lid.

"Oh, that's right, when we were in the leather store getting your boots." Sam lifted a leather wallet out of the box. "I did tell you this was the one I thinking about getting. Thanks, Logan."
"Like I said, not overly inspired."

"Doesn't matter if it's something I like," Sam retorted and Irv nodded in agreement.

"Well, I hope Mady feels that way because if picking something you know the other person likes is uninspired, then I'm as uninspired as Logan." Veronica pulled her last box out to hand to Mady. "Careful, it's heavy."

"Don't sell yourself short, Sugarpuss, I always find you inspiring," Logan teased. Veronica was about to sit back down beside Logan but she gave him a cuff to the back of the head first. "Hey!"

"Oh, no way, not uninspired, these are gorgeous!" Mady broke in. She held up two blown glass spheres, flattened on the bottom so they would stand on their own. They were abstract swirls of red, orange, and black. Mady put them on the table next to her and pulled out another matching sphere. Side by side on the table, they were all slightly differently sizes with the largest being slightly larger than a typical Christmas ornament.

"They were like fire and they made me think of you," Veronica smiled. Mady jumped up to give Veronica a hug and thank her. "And, before I forget," Veronica handed another small box to Mady. "It's your earrings that I borrowed. Thanks for letting me wear them."

"I'm so glad they worked so perfectly. You know," she addressed Logan, "you might ask my dad where he got them and see if they still have any. It's been a few years but you never can tell."

"Actually," he answered, "we found them today."

Irv interrupted. "So folks, if all the gift-giving is done, we probably should feed Veronica her dessert," he smirked at her and she stuck her tongue out at him, "so these guys can get back. They've got several hours to drive tomorrow and then Veronica's back to being a Fed."

The group trailed in for apple crumble and ice cream. Irv kept dropping additional spoonfuls of the crumble into Veronica's bowl and she kept eating them with her eyes narrowed at him until Logan begged them to stop. With the dessert war concluded, everyone gathered for hugs and well wishes before they headed back to the Inn.

The next morning was hard. Veronica was in no hurry to leave their safe haven and it was apparent from how slowly he was moving that Logan was feeling the same way. They'd come for a fun vacation, which they absolutely had accomplished, but the realization that she was going back to the real world a married woman seemed surreal. Now that reality was starting to loom, Veronica kept waiting for the panic to set in and she was genuinely perplexed that she didn't feel like running away, or picking a fight, or whatever other bad behavior she would normally come up with when she felt too vulnerable. Instead, as she inventoried her emotions as she watched Logan moving around the suite, starting to pack before breakfast was delivered, all she could come up with were love and joy and hope, with the most unfamiliar feeling of all, peace, spread like an umbrella over everything else.

After breakfast, Veronica ran a bath in the whirlpool tub, wanting one last use since that was not an amenity available at the Affordable Suites Quantico. She leaned against the back of the tub with Logan reclined against her, his head laying back on her shoulder and her legs wrapped around him. Periodically, he tilted his head to kiss her neck or shoulder but mostly, he was still. She'd poured the rest of the bubble bath into the tub as it had filled and she was absently lifting handfuls of bubbles to stroke into his chest.

"Logan?" she asked quietly, not sure if he had drifted off to sleep.
"Veronica," he murmured and kissed her neck.

"I want one of these tubs."

"Okay."

"And I don't want to live at the Grand when we get back."

"Okay."

She looked down at his face, his eyes closed and a peaceful smile on his lips. "Are you awake?"

One eye opened. "I'm answering you, aren't I?"

"Barely."

"When we get back to Neptune, we need to find a house with a big whirlpool tub. Is that not what we just decided?" Both his eyes were closed again.

"I guess. It's more like I said that and you just agreed."

"Why would I disagree? I don't want us living in the Grand anymore than you do. We'll have to decide what we both want and then we'll get a realtor to find us some options to look at." He kissed her neck again. "Okay?"

"Okay." She poured more handfuls of bubbles onto his chest and ducked down to kiss his neck. "Logan?"

"Veronica." He sounded amused.

"I want a double-headed shower too." She stroked bubbles down his torso as far as she could reach, which was only to about the bottom of his ribcage.

He chuckled. "All right."

"And a pony."

He laughed outright at that. "I already got you a pony."

"Yeah, I know." She trailed her fingers back up to his chest, circling his nipples, and then dragging them back down. "I just figured while you're so agreeable I'd get that in there."

"Do you really want a place with stables and a paddock for horses?" His eyes were partially open, watching her with a sideways glance.

"Mmm, probably not. We're talking about traveling next summer and we're both gonna be busy with school over the next year. I don't see us having time for horses, or a for a place that big."

"You get staff for properties that large."

"I don't want that."

"I didn't think so. Amenities, yes; huge estate, no." He kissed her neck again and sat up, pulling his legs in, then turning to recline on the opposite end of the tub. He pulled Veronica towards him, leaving her lying face-to-face on him. "I'll do a little internet searching on my own this week but I don't want to contact anyone until we've gotten home and have had a chance to talk to your dad. I
wouldn't want some realtor to leak to the media that I'm in the market for a house. Your dad would freak."

"That makes sense. On that same note, I think I'll need to leave my rings with you when I go back to Quantico tomorrow." She nestled down into him, wrapping one arm up around his neck and laying her head on his shoulder, her face against his throat and her other arm curled up on his chest. He wrapped his arms around her, one high around her back and the other low on her hips, that hand resting on her ass.

"Yeah, I thought that too. I thought about getting you a chain to wear them on but they'd be too obvious. Everyone knows who you are there and for all I know, your dad has some FBI spies there watching out for you. It's too risky for you to have them unless we don't care about your dad being spoiled."

"Which we do."

"Yeah, we do. Maybe I'll take the bands out and get them engraved with the date or something while you're trapped at FBI Camp."

"You make it sound like Band Camp."

"There was this time..."

She nipped his neck. "I don't want to know."

"What? Veronica Mars doesn't want all my deep, dark secrets?"

"Veronica Mars-Echolls just wants to lay here quietly with her hot husband. So shut it." She felt him smile and kiss the top of her head. "Okay." His arms tightened around her and his hand squeezed her ass causing her to make a happy sighing noise against his neck.

"I never actually went to Band Camp," Logan said casually.

This time, her sigh was exasperated but she smiled at him as she pushed herself upright in his lap. "I know that, dumbass. What part of quietly is unclear to you?" He mimed zipping his lips and tossing away the key but she shook her head and pushed herself to a standing position. "Nope, too late. I'm getting in the shower." She clambered over the side of the tub and stepped away, patches of bubbles still covering her skin. As she walked away, she glanced over her shoulder and caught him ogling her. "You're welcome to join me but you have to find that key first. I may have a use for that mouth after all."
Chapter Notes

Spoiler alert: Way down in this chapter there's discussion of plot points of a play that's been a blockbuster on Broadway and elsewhere for 13 years so I hope that's not a problem for anyone.

Return to the end of the chapter for more notes.

"So, last chance. Ditch this gig and come home with me." Logan smoothed Veronica's hair away from her face and tucked the longest strands behind her ear before stepping closer to whisper, "I'll make it worth your while."

Veronica glanced at the gate into the Quantico grounds, then back at Logan's teasing face. "Stop trying to tempt me with your masculine wiles," she scolded. "This is hard enough."

"That's what I'm trying to tell you," he said in an exasperated voice.

"Nope, you're done. When you degenerate to Casablancas-level innuendo, I know it's time to go." She stretched up to kiss him. "Don't lose my rings." She rubbed his small finger where her rings rested at his first knuckle.

"Yes, dear. I will go straight home and put them back in the safe."

"Yours too?" she asked.

He considered for a moment. "I don't wanna. And who's going to see me anyway?"

"Depends where you go. Just when you let your guard down, that's when you'll end up somewhere someone knows you. And I thought you were going to get them engraved anyway." She peeked at the time on her phone and grimaced. "Ugh, I've got to go." She kissed him again and pushed away from her lean against the Range Rover. "It's going to be weird being apart after all this togetherness."

"And all this marital bliss. I'm thinking maybe you can get away for dinner on Wednesday? Then it's no more than a full day apart." He wrapped his arm around her shoulders and they headed for the pedestrian gate.

"That would be good but I think maybe I should bring Jeannie."

"Why? I mean, I like her well enough but you're the one I wanna see."

"Well, obviously I know that but if I don't bring her, you have to promise not to try to talk me into the back seat alongside the road."

He grinned. "Why in the world not?"

She shook her head and pointed to the Marine in the guardhouse at the gate. "He and his armed buddies patrol everywhere around here. If we pull off the road to get busy in your backseat, we are definitely getting busted. At gun-point. Not a good idea."
"We can just go back to the hotel."

"Oh, so no dinner, just a show." She raised her eyebrows at him disapprovingly.

"Like I'd ever try to get away with not feeding you. Whatever you want is fine with me. You can invite her but if you're gonna do that, you better tell her what we did last week. I'm not pretending when you're only giving me a couple of chaperoned hours."

They reached the gate and Veronica dug out her I.D. and gate credentials. "We'll talk about this tonight. You're not going anywhere today, are you?"

"Nope. Home and back to bed. I need a vacation to recover from our vacation." He gave an exaggerated yawn and stretch. The Marine guard checking Veronica's documents chuckled and shook his head.

"Oh, you poor baby. All right, kiss me and I'll talk to you tonight." Logan looked at the guard who raised his eyebrows.

"Don't mind me."

"See, he doesn't mind. I'm sure it won't be a problem if we just pull over..."

Veronica gasped and punched his shoulder, her face turning pink. The guard laughed out loud. "I wouldn't actually recommend that." The fact that he understood what Logan has been intimating made her hide her face in her hands. "That happens at least once a year. It causes quite a ruckus. Save yourself some embarrassment and think of another alternative."

Veronica made a face. "See, they do mind. Behave yourself." She laced her fingers through Logan's and led him to the gate. "I really do need to go. I'll talk to you tonight." She wrapped her arms around his neck and gave him a fierce hug that he returned. "I love you."

"I love you too, secret wife." He caught her chin in his hand and tilted her head so he could give her a long kiss. "Now, get going and learn a skill so you can support me in the manner to which I am accustomed."

She looked at him incredulously and then shrugged. "Pretty sure government work is not going to make that possible but I'll do my best."

"That's all I can ask for," he teased before kissing her forehead and stepping away. "I miss you already. Talk to you tonight." She gave him a sad look and then walked through the gate. When she was several feet away, she glanced over her shoulder to see him staring after her. She waved and then made a shooing motion with her hand. He pouted but turned away and walked to the car.

"Geez, Veronica, cutting it close, aren't we? I was starting to wonder if you really were coming back." Jeannie held out her arm for a quick side hug before Veronica dropped into the chair beside her. The morning classes were about to begin. The dawdling at the gate with Logan had come close to making her late.

"Oh, I just couldn't stay away," Veronica laughed. "Only four more weeks to soak up everything FBI."

"Well, you dodged a bullet," Jeannie said in a low voice. "We had a seminar Saturday, mandatory attendance—if you were here, of course—and it was BOR-RING."
Veronica looked at her sympathetically. "Ugh, sorry. If it makes you feel any better, I had a good enough Saturday to make up for all of you guys here having a bad Saturday."

Jeannie made a face. "And why, exactly, would that make me feel better?"

Veronica shrugged. "I dunno but it was a great day. And a really great week." The instructor entered the room and everyone started to quiet. "I'll tell you all about it later."

"Can't wait."

At the lunch break, Veronica started filling Jeannie in on the trip to Chincoteague. As a Virginia native, Jeannie had actually been to Pony Penning a couple of times when she was in elementary school.

"I can't believe you got to go out on one of the boats during the swim," Jeannie said. "I begged my dad to be able to do that for probably all of Fourth Grade."

"Yeah, Logan hadn't been able to get us on the boat on such short notice but hooking up with the fire department crew got us access to some stuff we wouldn't have done otherwise." She pulled out her phone and messed with it briefly. "And here's the pony we bought. She went back to the island to live but we got to name her. Lilly." Jeannie's eyebrows lifted at that and Veronica shrugged. "She liked it." She handed the phone towards Jeannie but then at the last minute pulled it back. "Page to the left only—that's where her pictures are." She mimed the motion and Jeannie took the phone with a suspicious look.

"If I didn't know better, I'd say there's naked pictures if I page to the right," Jeannie teased but she flicked through the pictures to the left only. It wasn't like she had a choice; Veronica was glued to her side and looked ready to snatch the phone from her if necessary.

They continued to talk about the prior week during dinner, also discussing what had gone on with the intern program. As they walked back to the dorm after dinner, Jeannie poked Veronica in the side.

"So are you telling me whatever you're still sitting on when we get back to the room or am I going to have to wonder forever? Or, actually, if it's just about naked pictures and fantastic sex, I don't really want to know. It's been a long, lonely summer."

Veronica shuddered. "Good, cuz that's not something I'm gonna talk about." She glanced around them. "So, Logan's coming to take me out to dinner on Wednesday. Do you want to go?"

"Ahh, Veronica, I don't think so. I always feel like such a third-wheel dragging you love birds down."

"No, don't feel like that. It'll be fun. It just needs to be dinner and then back here. If you don't go, I'm likely to agree to spend the night and that nearly made me late this morning. Plus..." she glanced around again, "if you come along, you'll get to see our wedding rings."

Jeannie stopped dead in her tracks. "Excuse me?"

"Pretty sure you heard me."

"Pretty sure I couldn't have." Jeannie finally moved, reaching out to grab Veronica's arm. "Are you serious?"

"Umm, yeah. Very. It was a very spur-of-the-moment thing—"
"Yeah, no shit."

"—but I'm glad we did it. It was a good thing for us. We're both really happy about it." Veronica raised her eyebrows at Jeannie's hand clutching her arm and Jeannie laughed and pulled back.

"Sorry. I just...wow. That was not news I expected. What did your dad say when you told him you were getting married? Did he freak out? He wasn't there, was he? Did Logan plan this and surprise you?"

They reached the dorm and Veronica's voice dropped to avoid being overheard. "My dad doesn't know and no one else can know until we get home and tell him. I don't see how I can keep this from you but it's not like you interact with my dad. This just has to stay between us. Okay?"

"Okay," Jeannie said in a surprised voice. "But I want a few more details once we're in the room and no one else is around. And then, my lips will be sealed." She mimed zipping her lip and throwing away the key which made Veronica burst out laughing and turn red. Jeannie looked at her questioningly and Veronica shook her head.

"Inside joke, don't worry about it."

"This is one of those things I told you I didn't want to hear about, isn't it?"

Veronica duplicated the zipping motion and continued to laugh.

Logan was a little disappointed when he pulled into the visitor parking on Wednesday and saw both Veronica and Jeannie sitting on the low stone wall right next to the guard house. They were laughing hysterically, clutching at each other, like they were trying to keep from falling off the wall. The object of their hilarity seemed to be the Marine standing in front of them. He was grinning down at them. Logan swung the truck into an open space and jumped out, hurrying to the girls.

"Logan, hi, we've been wait—" Veronica's greeting was cut off as Logan grabbed her off the wall and kissed her. Her legs wrapped around his waist and he twirled her up to the guard house and pressed her against the little building, still kissing her feverishly.

"Should I break that up?" the Marine asked from behind them.

"Nah, give 'em a minute," Jeannie answered. "They're like, all, in love and stuff."

"I guess," the guard said.

Veronica started laughing against Logan's mouth. "And stuff."

Logan pulled away and rested his forehead on Veronica's. "You like my stuff," he said in a low tone, hoping the other two couldn't hear him.

"Mmm, yes...That I do," Veronica said in a husky voice.

"So much so that she's going home with you tonight," Jeannie called, negating his hope of a private conversation but when he grasped what she'd just said, his interest in privacy became secondary.

"Ooh, you are?" Logan grinned down at Veronica.

"Yes," she began but Jeannie interrupted again.

"As long as you promise faithfully to get her back through that gate," she pointed over toward the
pedestrian gate, "by 7:15 AM at the very latest." He nodded happily but she wasn't done. "Through the gate, Logan. Separated from you and through the gate by 7:15 AM. Do we understand each other?"

Logan looked over his shoulder at Jeannie. "Okay, fine, geez. Who died and put you in charge of the world?"

"Your little woman there has authorized me to negotiate on her behalf. She didn't think she could be trusted on her own to make quality decisions where you were concerned."

He turned back to look at Veronica. "That's not exactly what I said."

"Close enough," Jeannie laughed. "And Lance Corporal Jackson here will be back on duty by then and he is authorized to shoot you if you don't get her inside that gate in a timely manner."

Veronica was shaking her head and laughing. "That isn't true." Logan shifted her so she was balanced on his hip and walked back to the wall where Jeannie continued to laugh.

"So does this mean that you're not coming to dinner with us?" Logan asked.

"Nope," Veronica answered. "She'll bring me out on Friday and we'll get dinner then. She has quite a few questions to ask. About our vacation." She looked at him meaningfully and he nodded. "But tonight, Jeannie's going to dinner with Lance Corporal Jackson here."

"Oh my, now that's an interesting turn of events." Logan straightened up to look the Marine in the eye. He knew his attempt at sternness was slightly compromised by Veronica clinging to him like a monkey but he put on as much of an authoritative face as he could muster. "So, what, may I ask, are your intentions towards our Ms. Morton?"

Veronica burst into laughter again and buried her face in Logan's neck. Jeannie gave an indignant huff and stood up to poke his arm. "You're not my dad, Logan."

"I believe he would authorize me to make these inquiries on his behalf." He nuzzled at Veronica's hair. "Don't you agree, Sugarpuss?"

"Oh no, I'm sooo not involved with this." She kissed his neck and then slid down to the ground. "Come on, I need my dinner before I die or, at the least, become extremely unpleasant." She grabbed Logan's hand and turned towards the Range Rover. "I will be through the gate by 7:15 AM. Nobody worry. Or try to shoot anyone else." She waved to Jeannie and the Marine. "Have fun at dinner."

"See ya, V. You too, Dad," Jeannie called as they walked away.

"Home before 11:00 PM, young lady," Logan shouted back to her as he opened Veronica's door. He lifted her in, hands lingering at her waist then smoothing down the sides of her legs as he kissed her. With a sigh, he backed away and closed her door before walking back around to the driver's side.

"So what were you and Jeannie cracking up about?" he asked as he climbed in, immediately turning to dig around in the center console.

"Huh? Oh, as you drove up? Jack was telling us about the people who've gotten nabbed parking off the roads around here."

"That again? How were those funny?"

"Oh, you'd be surprised how humorous naked people being held at gun point can be, at least, when it
isn't you and you know no one's actually ending up shot."

"And I thought he was Lance Corporal Jackson. Now you're calling him Jack? Is Jackson his first name or his last?" He straightened up from the console, producing Veronica's rings.

"Is this a good idea?" she asked but she held her left hand out to him and he slid first the wedding band and then the engagement ring onto her finger.

"It'll be fine. Stop worrying." He leaned over to give her a kiss. "I've missed you, Mrs. Echolls."

Veronica smiled and stroked his face. "I've missed you too." She kissed him again. "This is going to be a long four weeks."

"Yes, it is." Logan kissed her one more time and then turned on the truck. "So, what's Jeannie's date's name?"

Anxious to get back to the hotel for some quality alone time, Veronica had let Logan rush them through dinner. After 'reuniting', multiple times, Veronica made sure there was an alarm set and then snuggled into Logan to sleep. She had just drifted off when Logan's voice woke her again.

"Oh yeah, this weekend. DC. Unless you have other ideas."

She smiled sleepily. "No other plans; DC is fine. Any particular place you want to go?"

"Yep, you're going to love it. The International Spy Museum."

She sat straight up, excitement driving the sleep out of her head. "A museum of spy stuff? Like gadgets and presentations full of ideas for me?" She wriggled a little celebratory dance like a happy puppy. "Oh my god, that sounds awesome!"

"I expected that you would approve," he said in an amused voice. "Now lay back down and go to sleep or come over here and show me your appreciation. That little gyrating wiggle move would be much more productive over here."

She laughed and rolled over to stretch out on top of him. "You mean this gyrating wiggle move?"

Logan successfully got Veronica through the gate by 7:15 the next morning. He chatted briefly with Lance Corporal Jackson Riley and then headed over to the Stafford Farmers Market that they'd found on Logan's first weekend in Virginia. He'd fallen into a bit of a routine on the weeks he didn't go out exploring the Atlantic seaboard and was as shocked as anyone to find that he enjoyed wandering around the different booths talking to the vendors and bringing home the various wares they had to offer. No matter what else he purchased, he always brought home apples and he had decided when he was looking at homes for sale online that week that he wanted to grow his own apple trees. He planned to pull as much information about the care of his future trees as he could from the farmers at the market. Veronica was never much of a fruit or veggie kind of eater but he thought it might be fun to grow some other stuff too, even if it was only tomatoes. She was always good for a tomato on her burger or a BLT and what were tomatoes if not a primary component of Veronica's favorite type of food, Italian?

After a morning of farmers, he spent the afternoon at the mall, part of it buying lingerie and then a while in an arcade battling the locals for Mario Bros. supremacy.

On Friday, he slept late in preparation for a weekend with Veronica and then spent the afternoon
cruising the internet for houses in the general vicinity of Hearst, starting a list of possibilities for when they got home.

Veronica and Jeannie came by to collect him for dinner just after 6:00 PM and they settled in at The Globe and Laurel. Dinner went long as first Logan shared the contents of a package he'd received from Carol that morning containing their wedding photos and then Jeannie forced all the non-explicit details about their week from them. During Veronica's description of Logan quivering at the end of the aisle, Jeannie burst into laughter.

"I wish I could have seen that," she said, wrapping her arm around Logan and pulling his head down onto her shoulder so she could pat his head. "Poor little lovesick woobie."

He struggled out of her grasp with a huff. "I'm hot for my wife, okay? So sue me. And I wasn't quivering; she's exaggerating."

"Oh sweetie, you quiver when she walks away to go to the bathroom. You're so far gone for her that it's...it's... I'm not even sure there's an adequate word for what it is. But I'm not insulting you, dumbass—I'm actually jealous. I hope I meet someone someday who turns into a lovesick woobie for me." She thumped him in the head and leaned across the table to offer a high-five to Veronica who had been watching silently with a happy smile on her face. "You're a very lucky girl, Veronica, I hope you know that."

"I do," Veronica responded, reaching out and pinching Logan's cheek. "He's a keeper."

He shook his head at her with a smile before turning back to Jeannie. "You're kinda acting like the big sister I never knew I wanted."

Veronica tilted her head, obviously confused. "You have a big sister already."

"Ah, okay—now that actually makes sense," Veronica laughed.

"Well, guys, as happy as I am to be Logan's preferred big sis, I've still got a drive ahead of me to my folks'. And, let's be real, it's been two whole days, I'm sure lil' bro here wants to get you home."

Jeannie tried to duplicate Veronica's earlier cheek pinch but Logan easily dodged her. "He's starting to quiver again."

"Nuh-uh, no more of that," he scolded. "You've heard how I feel about my actual sister, don't push your luck."

He gave her a gentle shove out of the circular booth and grabbed Veronica around the waist to pull her after him as he slid out behind Jeannie.

Logan trailed behind the girls as they exited the restaurant, carrying a Bailey's mousse pie for the weekend while vaguely listening to them debating a case they'd heard about in their classes in the last week. He stretched out in the back of Jeannie's car so they could keep talking as she drove them back to the hotel.

"Make sure you check for the 'Women in Espionage' exhibit," Jeannie recommended. "It's like, created with you in mind. I hope they still have it."

"I think they do," Logan said, "I was checking online and they mentioned it on their website."

Jeannie turned into the hotel parking lot and pulled up to the staircase leading up to their room.
"Well, have fun, guys. Try not to buy out the whole gift shop, V. Thanks for dinner, Logan."

He was out of the car but turned back to lean in Veronica's still open door. "You are very welcome. Thanks for bringing me my wife." He tried to pull Veronica closer with an arm at her waist but she plucked his hand off her hip and placed it carefully on the bottom of the pie box that he had balanced on one hand.

"Both hands on my pie, buddy."

He rolled his eyes and smirked at Jeannie. "Priorities."

She laughed. "I guess you can see where you rate. But if it makes you feel any better," she paused and looked at him seriously, "at least it's really good pie."

Logan opened his eyes from a dream of Veronica calling his name and found her standing naked and glistening next to him. He sat up to pull her to him but she backed away and in his still mostly dreaming state, he followed her up and out of bed. The chill of the air-conditioned room made him stop, confused as to what he was doing up, but she reached for his hand and he happily let her lead him wherever she was going. Partway down the hall, he realized she wasn't naked but was instead wrapped in a towel. It wasn't until she tried to pull him into the brightly lit and steamy bathroom that he actually realized he wasn't still dreaming. He stopped again, shaking his head to clear it.

"Veronica? What are we doing up in the middle of the night?"

She laughed and gave him another tug, finally getting him all the way into the bathroom. "It's not the middle of the night, goofball. It's morning."

"It's too dark to be morning." He lifted her onto the counter and snuggled up against her, dipping his head down to kiss her shoulder which was still wet from her shower, explaining the glistening look he had been starting to think he had imagined earlier.

"No, it's not. An early start means we're there when the Spy Museum opens. I want to see everything. So you need to get in the shower."

He grumbled against her neck and ran his hands up her sides. "We're not in that big of a hurry, are we?" He went to work on the spot where her neck and shoulder met that usually got him whatever he wanted from her but she squirmed and rolled her shoulders to dislodge him.

"Uh uh, get in the shower. You will not distract me this morning."

He stood up to look her in the eyes—"Are you sure?"—and started to pull at her towel.

She smiled at him and he thought he'd won but her words shut him down. "No way, mister." She gave him a gentle push and hopped off the counter. She moved over to the shower and leaned in to turn on the water. She messed with the taps briefly and then turned back to him. "Get in the shower, Logan."

"You won't join me?"

"Obviously I've already been in the shower this morning." She shook her head and her wet hair threw droplets of water onto him.

"You're not going to dissolve if you take another one."
"No, I won't, but I want us to be out of here within the hour and if I get in there with you, that will not happen."

He pouted at her and stooped to lay his head on her shoulder, looking up with what he hoped were pleading eyes, trying his best Roger Rabbit imitation. "Puh-puh-puh-puhplease!"

She laughed and shook her head, pushing him off her. "I'm too short to be Jessica Rabbit. Get in the shower, Logan." She turned him toward the shower and gave him another gentle push. He gave a heavy defeated sigh and finally stepped in.

"Married barely a week and you already don't care about my NEEDS, Veronica!"

She laughed harder. "Your NEEDS have been very well met in the last twelve hours. You need to stop exaggerating or I'm never going to believe anything you say." He ducked his head under the stream of water as she poked her head into the shower. "I'm going to get dressed. Don't dawdle."

"Yes, ma'am. I live to serve."

"Good thing."

Veronica's insistence on an early start meant they were waiting at the door at 9:00 AM when the museum opened. Logan had purchased memberships for them online earlier in the week to make sure they would have priority access to everything and that turned out to be a good idea since the museum was crowded with the end of the summer crowd. He started out sticking close to Veronica through each exhibit but after about a half hour of that he kissed her and declared he was going to move at his own pace. He backtracked to find her a few times but then just moved through to the obligatory gift shop at the end. He picked out a book of biographies of WWII spies and then worked his way back to Veronica who wasn't much farther through the maze of exhibits than she had been when he saw her last. She was talking to a good-looking older man and Logan felt the strong urge to mark his territory. He settled for sliding his arm around her waist and kissing the top of her head.

"Sugarpuss? Has someone glued your feet to the floor? I'm pretty sure this is where I left you forty-five minutes ago."

Veronica and the silver-haired gentleman both laughed. "I met the Executive Director of the museum. Peter, this is my husband, Logan. Peter's been telling me tales of his time in the CIA."

"Well, only some tales." The man smiled in much too friendly of a way for Logan's comfort. "Most things I still can't discuss. Or I'd have to kill you." He and Veronica both laughed again and Logan chuckled to play along.

"The CIA sounds much more fun than the FBI has been so far," Veronica said.

"Yes, that B in their name, Bureau means they're Bureaucrats. Not as much of that boring stuff with us."

Logan kept the smile pasted on his face and went for a distraction. "Are you ready for a lunch break, V? It's nearly 11:30 AM. There's a Hard Rock around the corner. We can come back once you've eaten."

"Ooh, lunch does sound good. We should be able to come back in later if we leave since we got the membership, right?" She had started out looking at Logan as she spoke but ended up looking for confirmation from the museum's director.
"Oh absolutely, it's a good idea to go before noon and hopefully beat some of the crowd," he answered. He smiled and held his hand out to Logan to shake. "It was nice to meet you both. Maybe we'll see each other later."

Veronica regaled Logan with Peter's CIA stories as he led her around the corner to the Hard Rock Cafe. They did get seated fairly promptly but it was about an hour and a half before they got back so she could continue to slowly work her way through every exhibit in excruciating detail. She suggested that Logan might want to walk across to the Smithsonian American Art Museum so he wouldn't be bored waiting for her but he was absolutely not leaving her alone with a man with twenty years of 'clandestine service' wandering around, no matter how much older he was. Instead he maintained he wanted to read his new book and he planted himself on a bench in each gallery as she moved purposefully through the museum, both reading and watching her as she studied everything.

She timed her tour perfectly, finally reaching the gift shop at 6:55 PM, five minutes before closing. She had panicked an hour earlier when she realized that she only had sixty minutes and two more galleries to see before she made it to the gift shop but Logan only laughed at her.

"It's a for profit enterprise, Veronica. Get through the museum and the gift shop will stay open until we're done spending money."

Around 10:00 PM, Logan followed Veronica wearily up the stairs to their room. She was still bouncing like a ping pong ball. They'd only spent a half hour in the gift shop and then they grabbed a quick dinner before heading for the subway back to their car and the drive home. Logan literally crashed almost immediately, intending to collapse on the bed only briefly but accidentally falling asleep. He awoke a couple hours later, disoriented for the second time that day, with no Veronica beside him.

He struggled upright and shed his shoes, then wandered out to check on Veronica. She was engrossed in one of the several books they had purchased. He stumbled to the fridge and took a long swig of orange juice straight from the container.

"Hey, baby, good nap?"

He snagged an apple and walked to the couch where she sat, picking her up and sitting down where she'd been with her in his lap.

"Pretty good, I guess. I feel like I slept like the dead." He kissed the back of her neck and then took a bite out of his apple. "Whatcha reading?"

She held up her book, 'Master of Disguise: My Secret Life in the CIA'. "The author and his wife are both former CIA and they're on the Board of Directors of the museum. The book's pretty interesting."

"So does the CIA do college internships?"

She laughed. "Somehow I doubt it. And this is interesting but you can stop worrying. I don't really think I'll be signing up to be a secret agent."

Logan tightened his arms around her and took a deep breath before turning the book so they could both see the cover. "'Master of Disguise'? That sounds just like something you'd love." She shrugged and closed the book, stretching to drop it on the table next to the couch. She twisted in his arms and tucked her arms around him.
"I do enjoy a good disguise, but love? There's definitely stuff out there I love more." She kissed the hollow of his throat, trailing a line of kisses up and behind his ear. She giggled as he dropped his head back against the couch and growled in the back of his throat. She lifted her hand and caressed his cheek. "I hope," she said, "that in the last couple of months I've gotten a better idea of what my priorities actually are." She straightened up and he could feel her eyes on him.

Logan still had his head back and his eyes closed but he smirked and raised his eyebrows, trying to provoke her into continuing her thoughts. The pause lengthened and he was about to ask her what she meant when she spoke again.

"I'm not saying I'm going to just be satisfied to be a spoiled 09er wife, letting my rich husband take care of me. I still need to make something of my life—make a difference in the world—but I had been trying to do that at the expense of everyone I cared about. I'm not willing to do that anymore. There can be a balance between what's important to me and what's important to the people I love. Deliberately putting myself in danger—especially when there's another way—that disrespects people who care about me, like you and my dad. Sometimes, stuff's going to happen, but running headlong into those situations? I don't plan to do that anymore...at least not without some serious thought about how I can get what I need another way." She rested her head on his chest and he raised his hand to comb his fingers into her hair, cradling her head to him. "I don't think I need the CIA to get what I need."

He smiled and nodded. "I just don't want you to give up things that you'll regret later."

"I don't plan to." She kissed his chest and sat up. "If we don't go to bed now, I will regret that later. Come on, sleepyhead." She rose from the couch and turned to pull him after her.

"I'm pretty comfy here," he teased, taking the final bites of his apple.

"Come on, I will also regret if I leave you out here while I go to bed." She grabbed his hand and tugged him to his feet. This time, he came willingly.

Sunday was a lazy day. They both slept late and when they did finally wake up, they still stayed in bed. It was shortly after noon when Veronica's stomach drove them out of the bedroom.

Over bacon and tomato sandwiches, Logan suggested their last big excursion for the summer. "I was thinking we could fly to New York next Friday night. Maybe see a show? Hit some of the touristy stuff we missed last summer?"

Veronica's face lit up. "That would be great! Ooh, we could see 'Phantom of the Opera'. Or 'Wicked'!"

"I'd prefer 'Wicked'. I've seen Phantom and I'm not a fan." She looked at him quizzically.

"Why not? It's supposed to be great and the Phantom seems like your kind of guy."

He looked at her and shook his head. "But he doesn't get the girl. The nice guy gets her."

Her eyes widened. "Well, to be fair, the Phantom does kill several people." He nodded and shrugged.

"Although—we think the Wicked Witch of the West is basically homicidal too and 'Wicked' is supposedly about how that's all wrong. Maybe that was true of the Phantom also," Logan said, contemplating the plight of the misunderstood bad guy.
"Could be. Either way, I'm good with 'Wicked' if that's what you'd prefer. And maybe we can take the ferry out to the Statue of Liberty? We didn't get to do that last year."

They spent the rest of the day snuggled together on the couch, Veronica reading her spy books while Logan booked their trip. He also booked himself a room in Virginia Beach for a night the week after next so he could go to Opening Day of the East Coast Surfing Championships. It was scheduled during Veronica's last week of her internship. He was only going to drive down for a day so he'd be back and ready to leave when she was officially released. They only had about ten days between the end of the internship and the start of the new school year and they didn't want to rush which meant they would need to get on the road right away.

It was a quiet, peaceful day, nowhere to be and no obligations. Veronica looked up as she finished her second book of the day and was surprised to find it was late afternoon. She was curled in the corner of the couch with Logan sprawled out over it, asleep, his head in her lap and his legs hanging over the opposite arm of the couch. His arms were wrapped around her waist as he clutched her like a pillow. She smiled down at him, dropped her book on the table, and started to comb her fingers through his hair. After a few minutes, he began to stir, mumbling and snuggling closer to her. She watched him resist waking for another couple of minutes and then moved one hand from his hair down to his neck with gentle tickling movements. He squirmed but still seemed out of it until he suddenly sat upright with an indignant, "Hey!" He then sat, blinking, as he tried to wake up fully. She laughed and pulled him back down so he was reclining again but with his head resting on her shoulder.

"I was dreaming a squirrel was attacking me," he mumbled. She laughed again. "It was really cute and friendly at first but then it kept trying to bite my ears." His hand went reflexively to the ear that wasn't pressed against her chest. She covered his hand with her own and kissed the top of his head.

"Aww, it's okay, Pookie, I'm right here to keep you safe."

He pulled his hand out from under hers and traced a finger down her throat, over the neckline of her tank top and down between her breasts before resting across her stomach. "It feels like you were the boss of the squirrel. It was just doing your evil bidding. I don't remember actually seeing you in the dream but it feels like you were the mastermind."

She chuckled. "You're not going to hold me responsible for your crazy dreams, are you? I would never have a squirrel bite your ears."

"You'd do that yourself, right?" He shifted enough to bite her earlobe gently.

"Yes, you're exactly right. I'll be doing all my own biting of your body parts. No biting will be outsourced."

He snorted against her neck and she giggled at the sensation. "Same here, baby," he said in a teasing voice, "no one else can bite you but me." He latched his teeth against the pulse point in her neck. At the same time, the hand on her stomach moved to the hem of the tank and slid under and up to caress her skin. "What's this? No bra?"

"We haven't gone anywhere today; why would I put on a bra?"

"Don't misunderstand—I'm not complaining." He pressed a nipple between his thumb and forefinger. "Add pinching to the list of non-outsourced activities," he added as he rolled her nipple between his fingers and she arched toward him. "Oh! Except for that 'pinch to grow an inch' thing. You do have a birthday coming up and I wouldn't withhold that lone remaining hope that you might
"What?" She pinched him in the side in a much less friendly manner than his had been and he jerked away trying to escape the grasp of her fingers, giggling as he did so. She gave him another quick pinch since he was still lying in her arms and then poked him. "That was mean! I thought you liked me petite."

"I absolutely do. I'm messing with you. Which I know that you know." He slid his hand to her other breast, rolling that nipple gently. "Okay, so no outsourced birthday pinching and definitely no spanking either." He tucked his head back down into the crook of her neck, kissing her while increasing the pressure from his fingers. She arched towards him again and for several minutes the only sounds were his mouth moving against her skin or her whimpers. His hand trailed down from her breast across her stomach and down the sleep shorts she'd thrown on when they got out of bed. He skimmed his fingers against her core and her whimpering increased to a moan.

"Alrighty then. That's my cue." He pushed himself up to a kneeling position and then stood up. "I'm gonna need more room to work." She laughed up at him as he reached down to pick her up and throw her over his shoulder.

"You know I'm going to need food soon, right?" She was still laughing as she hung upside down across his back.

"Don't worry. It's in my best interests to keep your strength up. But I'm willing to bet you've got a little pep left in ya still."

"Yay team!"

They were getting better about getting Veronica back to Quantico in time for her morning classes so she stayed at the hotel Sunday night and Logan dragged himself out of bed to meet Jeannie's delivery requirements. The week went by slowly, even with Logan coming in twice that week to take both Veronica and Jeannie to dinner. When Friday finally came, Logan picked up Veronica when she was released for the day and they drove to the regional airport again for an hour-long commuter flight to New York City. They checked into The Manhattan at Times Square and were out late enjoying the bright lights of the big city. On Saturday morning, they took a ferry to Liberty Island, playing tourist until they had to head back to dress for 'Wicked' at the Gershwin Theatre, a couple blocks from their hotel.

When the lights came up for intermission, Veronica remained seated, her head tipped down and away from Logan so he wouldn't see that her eyes were filled with tears.

"Veronica?" Logan shifted the hand he was clasping tightly to his opposite hand and slid his arm around her shoulders, pulling her toward him enough to kiss the top of her head. "Feeling a kinship with the Wicked Witch of the West?"

She looked up at him, startled, blinking furiously. "Why do you say that?"

He laughed and kissed the top of her head again. "Well, although this isn't all I noticed, at the very least, you both had a blonde force of nature for a best friend."

She snorted out a laugh. "I know, right? I could really feel for Elphie during that song: 'Popular'. That could have been Lilly's theme song. I don't remember Galinda saying the word 'fabulous' though; Lilly would have worked that word in somewhere."
"Yes, she would have." He tightened his arm around her and laid his cheek against her head. "Do you want something to drink or a snack? Bathroom break? Stretch your legs?"

She laughed and leaned into him. "Yes, to all of the above." She rose from her seat and pulled him up into her, wrapping her arms around his waist and laying her head against his chest. "Thanks for thinking of this. Once again, you've planned a great trip."

"Perhaps I have a new calling."

"No way. Part of it is you being on the trip too and I am not sharing you." She tipped her head up for a kiss, and then led him towards the stairs.

A couple hours later, they were walking hand-in-hand down the street towards their hotel. "I loved it. I'm never going to be able to watch the Wizard of Oz the same way again." Veronica spun to face him, grabbing both of his hands in hers and walking backwards in front of him. "Elphie was awesome. No matter how much they tried to tear her down, she kept on doing what she knew was right."

"Yeah. She reminds me of someone I know." Her brow wrinkled at that but he pulled her in closer and leaned down to kiss her. She spun back to walk forwards again, pulling his arm around her shoulders and wrapping her arms around him, cuddling into his side.

"She ended up with her true love too, even though she thought Galinda was the one Fiyero loved...and when she saved him by turning him into the Scarecrow..." She sighed heavily and squeezed her arms more tightly around him. "I just loved it. I could go again tomorrow."

"Sorry, love, we'll be on a plane during the matinee tomorrow." He kissed the top of her head.

"Okay, then, next time. Or next time the traveling show comes to California." She looked up at him. "You'll take me again, right?"

"Of course. As often as you want." They were in front of their hotel again and the doorman opened the doors for them.

"Welcome back to The Manhattan. Have you had an enjoyable evening?"

"Absolutely, thank you," Logan answered. Veronica's wide smile confirmed her agreement. They entered the lobby and headed for the elevators when Logan stopped suddenly. "Do you need something to eat before we head up?"

"I could eat but I'm not starving."

"But will you be starving before breakfast? Especially if I keep you up for a while yet?" He looked down at her with his most lascivious smile.

"Well when you put it that way, yes, I want a late night snack before you take me upstairs and ravish me." She spun to face him again and lead him towards the lounge.

Half an hour later, they were sitting in a booth with Veronica's legs stretched across Logan's as he fed her mozzarella sticks. "So you'll spend Sunday night with me, right?"

She smiled indulgently. "Yes, as long as I'm through the gate by 7:15, blah blah blah, you know the drill."
"Yeah, or Jeannie's Marine shoots me. I remember." He rolled his eyes.

"I won't let Jack hurt you," she said, raising her arm to flex her bicep before they both laughed.

"Okay, so you're staying Sunday night and I'll come to take you for birthday dinner on Tuesday. Will you spend Tuesday night too?"

"Sure. I think that Jeannie and a few other interns wanted to get together for my birthday. Maybe we'll meet you somewhere and then I'll go home with you?" Logan dipped the last mozzarella stick in the marinara sauce and held it out for her. She took a bite and he popped the last bit into his own mouth.

"That's fine. I've got you for the rest of my life. I can't begrudge the little people their limited time with you," he said magnanimously.

She shook her head and reached for her soda. "I'm sure the little people are grateful." She took a quick drink. "And then our last weekend in Virginia? Any ideas?"

"Maybe one more trip into DC? Ride the trolley around and hop off everywhere we want a final look? No pressure, just casual, to tide us over until we get back here again."

"That sounds good." She sucked up the last of her soda. "Are you ready to go upstairs? I think I'm adequately nourished for whatever you want to do." Their eyes locked.

"Ooh, whatever I want to do?" He grinned and ran a finger from her calf, up over her knee, and up her leg, sneaking under the hem of her skirt as he did so.

"Well—within reason," she answered, stopping his progress by putting her own hand on top of his.

"Okay, that works." He grabbed the tab and signed it quickly. "I've noticed that reason has a tendency to vary depending on how heated things are getting so come on, let's go get heated." He slid out of the booth and out from under her legs as he went. He tried pulling on her ankles to drag her out after him but her skirt immediately started to ride up and she shook her legs out of his grasp.

"Logan, stop." She swung her legs to the floor and scooted out after him. She took his offered hand to pull her to her feet and they walked out of the lounge and across the lobby to the elevators.

"Logan?"

"Veronica?" His voice was teasing and he tugged her closer so he could wrap his arm around her waist and stroke her hip. She curled in against him, tilting her head into his side and laying her hand on his chest.

"Do you worry at all—about how it's gonna be when we go back?" The hand that had been stroking circles against her hip suddenly stilled.

"Well, I haven't been. Should I?"

"No! That's not what I mean. I just—sometimes I worry—and I wondered if you did too." They'd reached the elevators and they both fell silent, preferring not to have this conversation in a tiny box containing strangers. They reached their floor and only they stepped out but they were still silent as they walked toward the room. Once they were inside, Logan plucked Veronica's evening bag off her shoulder to drop it on the dresser and swung her up into his arms in a bridal carry, moving over to the sofa where he sat with her in his lap.

"Okay, Bobcat, tell me what's got you down all of a sudden."
She looked up at him, feeling guilty. "I'm sorry, we've had such a great night, I don't mean to get..." She paused, now frustrated as she struggled for the right word.

"Sad? Mad? Freaked out? Depressed? Afraid? Don't worry about the name of your feeling. Tell me how it started." He tucked her hair behind her ear and cuddled her closer.

"Well, okay, I'll try. On the walk back, I was talking about Elphaba always trying to do the right thing, and from what you said, it sounded like you thought the same thing about me."

"Yes, that's pretty much what I was saying. Does that upset you?"

"I just don't think it is true. I mean, I've always thought I was doing the right thing but truthfully, there've been so many times that my choices were not the best and sometimes, they were the worst. I jump to conclusions, frequently the wrong ones." She wrinkled her nose, feeling guilty again and he chuckled and kissed her temple.

"I'm feeling fairly confident you won't try to get me arrested again."

"Me too but that's not the extent of my bad choices. I'm selfish and willful and sometimes I won't listen to anyone. I've been on my best behavior all summer but what if I get back to Neptune and start acting like that again? I don't want to hurt you or anyone else I love and I'm so afraid I'm going to drive you away again."

His voice was muffled as he pressed his face into her hair. "Veronica, do you really think you're the only one with the potential to blow it? I worry about the same thing on a regular basis and let's be real—I've got way more of a history of bad behavior than you do."

She gave a snort of laughter. "Your past bad behavior has just tended to be more flamboyant than mine."

"Maybe that's true," he admitted. "But for the sake of not spending the rest of the night arguing about who wins the stupid mistakes contest, can we just agree we've both done things we aren't too proud of?" He straightened up and rocked her back against the arm of the sofa, looking at her hopefully.

"Yes, we can agree on that," she smiled, reaching up to stroke his cheek. "I'm sorry. I got all emotional over the play and let my worries get the better of me." She leaned forward to kiss his cheek. "I don't want you thinking I spend all my time worrying about this stuff, or doubting us. I love you, Logan, and I know you love me."

"Yes, I do and I always will. I wasn't kidding when I said that you'd spoiled me for anyone else on that first day at the Camelot." His hand lifted, on its way for a nervous run through his hair but she reached up to catch it in hers. They smiled at each other as she laced her fingers in his. "So, are you okay?"

"Yeah, minor freak-out averted. Thanks for talking me down."

"I don't think there's anything wrong with us thinking about how we've messed things up in the past; that should help keep us from doing it again. We just can't get down and wallow in it. The riskiest thing for us is forgetting how we've gotten better and falling into old, bad patterns. Remember, so we don't repeat past mistakes, but keep moving forward together."

She sat up so she was leaning into his chest again. "When did you get so smart?" She turned her head so she could kiss his neck and he shivered at the contact.

"I don't know. I'm as shocked as you when I know the right thing to say." His head tipped back as
she continued to kiss him and she put her hands on his shoulders to pull herself closer to him, twisting with the intent of straddling his lap until it became apparent that her skirt was too narrow to do so without it getting hiked up to her hips.

"Argh, dammit" she growled, frustrated. She'd ended up kneeling next to him instead of over him. He laughed and kissed her scowling lips.

"Come on." He pushed up off the sofa and caught her around the waist, pulling her up with him and walking to the bed. He set her on her feet and unzipped the slim skirt. "Is this one of your suit skirts?" He pushed the skirt down and she shimmied out of it, dropping it at her feet so she could step out of it.

"Yeah, when I was packing at the beginning of the summer, I didn't exactly anticipate a night on Broadway so it was a skirt from one of my suits or being totally under-dressed."

"I like you under-dressed. Arms up." He skinned her out of her silk shell.

"Under-dressed, not undressed, funny guy. I meant something like shorts or jeans." She batted at his roaming hands and reached up to unbutton his shirt.

"You could have worn the dress you wore for the wedding." He shrugged out of his shirt, then picked her up again and tossed her onto the bed.

She bounced when she hit the mattress. "I'm not wearing my wedding dress just to go out on a date."

He toed out of his shoes and took off his pants, before throwing himself across the bed, making her bounce again. "Is it still a date when you're already married?"

"While I was getting ready for the wedding, Carol told me that you have to make time to have date nights. It keeps the relationship fresh." She crawled over to him and pushed him flat on his back so she could straddle his hips.

"Well, they've been married longer than anyone else I know so I'm happy to take her advice." He laid his hands on her knees. "So now that you've shown that skirt who's boss and you've asserted your dominance over me," he spread his hands with a flourish that emphasized his near-nakedness spread under her, "what's your plan for the rest of the night?"

"I thought you had the plan. If I recall, you said something about 'whatever I want to do'. And you said it like you actually knew what that meant," she said, tracing the planes of his chest and abs with her fingers.

"I figured I'd play it by ear." He wriggled a little under her. "You're tickling me."

"Oh really?" She grinned and stroked down his chest more firmly before suddenly digging her fingers into his sides, tickling him furiously. She seemed to catch him off guard, judging by the shriek that burst from him. She had only a few seconds of the upper hand before his thrashing around threw her off balance and he grabbed her around the waist and flipped them so she was pinned under him.

"It figures that you'd use your dominance for evil," he said in a disapproving voice as he pressed her against the mattress.

"Whereas you'll be a benevolent dictator and bring only happiness and pleasure to your subjects?" She peeked up at him hopefully and rocked her hips up against his. He ducked his head and gave her
a smacking kiss on her shoulder before shifting to one side, running a finger slowly from her throat, between her breasts and down her torso. A low moan slipped from her as he stroked her skin and he smiled.

"Well, my loyal subject, I believe you know my general leadership philosophy: ask not what Logan can do for you but what you can do for Logan." She grinned at the memory, then twisted a leg with his to tilt them onto his back again. His hands tangled into her hair as she slowly kissed her way down his body. "Yeah, see," he managed to say in a strangled voice, "that's exactly what I'm talking about."

Chapter End Notes

As with pretty much every other place that Logan and Veronica have gone all summer, The International Spy Museum is really there (with a Hard Rock around the corner for your dining pleasure) and the man Veronica met really is their Executive Director. If you're into these things, you can go online and see if Logan had reason to feel the need to mark his territory with the former spy. The book that Veronica is reading after they get home is written by Tony Mendez, the operative depicted by Ben Affleck in 'Argo', who, along with his wife, can also be found on the Leadership page of the Museum's website as they continue to be on the Board of Directors.
"Jeannie, wait up!"

Jeannie had just snuck out of the pizza parlor to her car to get the birthday gift she'd been hiding from Veronica for a week. Most of the interns were already inside, celebrating Veronica's twentieth birthday. Logan had ordered enough pizza for an army and everyone was having a very loud, good time, and the party kept getting larger as more groups entered the restaurant and got swept into their fun.

"Hey, Joey, I was starting to think you weren't going to make it," Jeannie said as she stopped and turned to see another of the interns jogging up behind her.

"Nah, I had a project to finish up so I couldn't get out right away. Hey," he caught up to Jeannie and put his hand on her arm, "there were some people looking for Veronica."

Jeannie stopped and turned to face the young man. "Who?"

"I don't know. It was a man and a woman. The woman was definitely an agent; she had her badge on her belt, tall, like Amazon tall, and blonde. The man was even taller but he didn't have a badge. African-American, very intimidating. They were asking for Veronica but she'd already taken off and everyone still there knew you guys were heading out for the party right away. The woman looked irritated when they told her they'd missed Veronica. The man just...looked...he was a total stone face. Seriously...I'd be scared to meet that guy in a dark alley."

Jeannie turned to head back into the restaurant, a smirk on her face. Joey was one of the computer geeks in the program; she was pretty sure he would be scared to meet anyone in an alley, even a well-lit one. "Well, I'll let V know that her presence may be summoned in the morning. Thanks for passing on the news. Now, come on in and get some pizza."

A blonde Amazon agent and a tall stone-faced black man. Veronica knew people meeting both of those descriptions and she saw no good reason why they would be looking for her, especially together. Jeannie had pulled her aside before leaving the party to let her know what she could expect the next day and the news was rather alarming. Jeannie had noticed her reaction and tried to wrangle more information out of her but Veronica could stone-wall with the best. After the first flinch, when she heard the description of the people looking for her, Jeannie got nothing more out of her. Jeannie offered to take her back to the base right then, rather than having Logan take her back in the morning, but Veronica was unwilling to spoil his night and assured Jeannie she'd be back on schedule in the morning.

"I wish you'd tell me what's got you spooked, Veronica," Jeannie said in a low, concerned voice.

"It's nothing. Don't worry about it. I'm sure it's just my awesomeness being recognized by the Powers that Be. Maybe they're going to offer me a job." Veronica couldn't imagine a scenario where Agent Morris and Clarence Wiedman looking for her would be nothing but she'd been using 'never let 'em see you sweat' as a personal motto for far too long to give it up for this situation.

"Okay, if you say so," Jeannie was obviously not convinced. "Hey, I'm going to go thank Logan for the party and say good—"
"Do NOT mention this to him," Veronica said in a hard voice. She saw Jeannie take a step back and regretted her harsh tone.

"Secrets? So soon, Mrs. Echolls?" Jeannie was speaking quietly but her emphasis on this version of Veronica's name was clear.

"Look, I just don't want him getting worried like you are. If there's something to tell, I'll tell." Jeannie stiffened at that line and Veronica quickly corrected herself. "I mean...when there's something to tell, I'll tell. I'm not trying to keep things from Logan, Jeannie. I just don't want him worrying about nothing."

"Keep telling yourself that. Look, I'll do what you want but let me go on the record: I think you're making a mistake. You got married to share your burdens, not to shut each other out." Jeannie looked and sounded so concerned that Veronica nearly agreed to do what she wanted but when she glanced over her shoulder to Logan, laughing with one of the interns, her resolve to protect him from whatever was coming her way hardened.

"Been married a long time, Jeannie?" she said in a sarcastic voice.

"Obviously not but I've got plenty of examples in my life. My parents are still married, my grandparents are still married, and my best friend's parents are still married and one thing I can say they all consistently do is be honest with each other. You're going on what? Three weeks? And you're already lying to him? Bad idea."

"Maybe so, but it's my decision. Now please keep your insider knowledge to yourself when you go tell Logan good-night. I'll see you in the morning." Her tone softened for a moment. "I know you just want what's best for us and I appreciate that. I'm really glad we've gotten to be friends this summer. But trust me. I can handle this and Logan won't have to worry about anything." She laid her hand on Jeannie's arm and gave her a pleading look. "I know what I'm doing."

"I hope so, V." She leaned down, giving Veronica a quick hug. "I hope you've had a happy birthday. See ya in the morning." She gave Veronica one more concerned look and then headed over to Logan. Veronica watched closely as they hugged and said goodbye. As Jeannie walked out to the parking lot, Logan turned in a circle, looking through the restaurant. When he spotted Veronica, he grinned and headed over to her.

"And here's my beautiful birthday girl," he said before catching her waist and twirling her around. He nuzzled into her neck and the fear that had been sitting in her stomach since Jeannie had passed on Joey's information faded away. "So," he said, settling her on the bench in front of her cake plate, "Sam and Mady called a while ago. Expect some bad singing on your voice mail."

Veronica laughed. "It joins voice mails containing the baritone stylings of Cliff McCormack and two other mixed results duets, one from my dad and Alicia and the other from—and you have to know I'm holding you responsible for this—Mac and Dick."

Logan threw his head back, laughing. "Not my fault; Mac's a big girl. And maybe she's just hanging out there. I told her to use my room whenever she wanted."

"You better hope that's true, Echolls."

"So the mixed results? I've heard Dick sing. At least when he's drunk, he sounds pretty good."

"Well, I'm going out on a limb here and guessing that he was drunk then cuz he did sound good.
Mac though," Veronica shook her head at the memory. "Music is not her calling. Now Alicia, she has a voice like an angel. I hope they've gotten back together. Dad hasn't said a word about her all summer so I about fell down when I heard her on the message."

"So maybe when the time comes to confess our secret you can leverage his to get out of the doghouse." He ducked down to nose into her neck, kissing behind her ear. She hummed in satisfaction and rocked her head slightly away from him to give him better access to her neck but continued to eat her cake.

"I'm not sure it's gonna work that way but we can hope. Actually, the best thing that could happen is them running off to Vegas and getting married themselves. If I'm going to hope for pipe dreams, that's the one that'll get me the best traction." She scraped up the last of her frosting and held it up to him but he shook his head.

"Happy with what I've got right here," he mumbled against her skin.

"That works out fine for me on all fronts," she grinned as she popped the fork in her own mouth. "So is everybody gone?"

He chuckled and sat upright to look at her. "Pretty much. Still a few of the geeks in the arcade room but I'm pretty sure they've all got rides back. The rest of the cake's already in the car; are you ready to come home with me and get the rest of your birthday present?"

"The rest of my birthday present? What else did you do? You threw me an actual party—pizza and cake and ice cream and balloons and pretty much everyone I know in this part of Virginia, plus these gorgeous earrings. I do not need anything else." She laughed low in her throat as he traced a gentle finger around her ear and nuded the diamond drop earring softly.

"I saw the earrings when I was dropping off our rings for engraving. I thought you'd like them." He returned to her neck, sucking gently on her pulse point.

"I do but I'm probably going to have to consent to that bodyguard you tried putting on me last year if you keep buying me pricey jewelry." She spun on the bench so she was leaning back against his chest, laying her head on his shoulder, and he moved back in immediately. Her eyes fluttered shut and she sighed in satisfaction but after a minute, she turned her head to give him a quick kiss, then stood up, pulling him up behind her. "Come on, loverboy, in case you've forgotten, we're still in public." She gave his hand a tug. "Let's get out of here. I don't know what other birthday present you've got hiding back at the hotel but I do know what I HOPE you've got for me."

He tucked up behind her, arms wrapped around her waist as they headed toward the door. He leaned his head against hers and whispered in her ear, "I've always got that for you. And, truthfully, that is mostly what the rest of your present is anyway."

She gave a fake gasp of disappointment. "Oh! False advertising! I can't believe you were trying to lure me in with talk of actual presents."

"Well, there's kinda more presents." He pulled the pizza parlor door open and ushered her out. "I took a few of the pictures from the wedding to be framed and I got them back today. They're not really what I would call birthday presents but it's your birthday and you haven't seen them so..." he trailed off as he opened the truck and lifted her into the seat.

"Oh, that's great. I can't wait to see them." She pulled him in for a quick kiss and then looked at him with a smile. "What do you think it's going to mean on the day that you actually let me climb into this vehicle on my own? Is that how I'll know the honeymoon's over?" She smirked and deliberately
reached for her seatbelt but he frowned at her, took it out of her hand, and buckled her in.

"It's more likely that it means I've wiped out on a massive wave and have been ordered not to lift and you've threatened to tase me if I don't follow the doctor's orders." He leaned back in to kiss her on the forehead.

"Wait—I can tase you? No one told me that."

"If that's how you prefer to use 'all of this'," he waved a suggestive hand down his body and she laughed loudly, "then I won't stop you but I'm confident there is a better option."

"Oh, me too. I can tase anyone but I've got more particular uses for 'all of this', as you put it." She grabbed his shirt and pulled him back down to her for a very aggressive kiss. After a moment, Logan jerked away from her, panting.

"Hey—what happened to 'we're still in public'? Unless you want to end up in the backseat, you've gotta stop that." She gave him an innocent look and he shook his head. "Nuh uh, don't give me those 'who me?' eyes." He backed away from her and closed her door. In a moment, he was in his seat, heading for home.

Logan pulled the truck into the little parking lot at Quantico and reached around the steering wheel with his left hand to put the truck in park and kill the engine. Surprisingly, Veronica had drifted back to sleep on the ride in, clutching his right hand in both of hers across the console. It made for challenging driving but as long as he wasn't going to crash, he didn't want to let go. Now parked, he turned toward her to watch her face.

She had been restless all night, waking him at least three times that he could remember. Cuddling her against his chest and shushing her had settled her down quickly but it had been weeks since she'd had a noticeable nightmare when they were together and he was a little concerned. Their lives had seemed almost charmed lately so he couldn't understand what was disturbing her sleep. She was sleepier than usual when she got up in the morning but when he asked her if she was feeling okay, she had seemed sincere when she said she was fine. Yeah, he was a little suspicious about her answer but he decided to take her at her word for the time being. He lifted her hands to his lips and kissed them gently before extricating his hand and leaning over to softly stroke her face.

"Veronica, baby, wake up. We've only got a few minutes before the wrath of Jeannie descends."

She murmured in response and slowly opened her eyes. "I fell asleep," she said in a wondering voice.

He smiled and nodded, smoothing her hair away from her face. "Yeah, I noticed. Are you sure you're feeling okay? It's not really like you to nod off in such a short period."

She blinked several times rapidly, appearing to be trying to clear her head. "No really, I'm fine. I'm just sleepy this morning after my big birthday blowout." She smiled up at him. "I haven't had a birthday party in years. Thanks for setting that up."

"Jeannie helped too. It just would have been the three of us if she hadn't gotten the word out to the other interns." He released her seatbelt and straightened back up, turning to open his door so he could hop out. He came around to her door and opened it for her. "Come along, missy, you know the drill."

Veronica slid out into his arms. "I'm glad this is done next week. I'm gonna miss Jeannie when we go home but this early morning junk is getting old."
Logan laughed as they walked towards the gate. "Yeah, getting up early to surf is one thing. Doing it to go to work, or to drive your wife to work, is much less fun."

"I bet you'll have to get up early on this little camping trip Sam invited you to last night. And if you don't like the drive, we can stop the mid-week sleepovers."

"Oh no," Logan said, grinning down at her. "That is so not the point. I'll get up early if it means I get more time with you. I'd just rather if we could stay in bed instead." He crooked his neck over to kiss the top of her head.

"You know, there is such a thing as early morning classes that mean you have to get out of bed too," Veronica said, shaking her head at him.

"Only if you're dumb enough to sign up for 'em," he answered. She snorted in response just as they reached the guardhouse.

"Hey, Jack, we missed you last night," Veronica said as she pulled out her gate pass.

"Yeah, I got pulled into a detail yesterday afternoon and didn't get released until early evening. Sorry I missed your birthday. Did you guys have fun?"

"Yeah, we did. Did Jeannie bring you cake?" Logan asked.

"She did, thanks." Jack processed her pass and handed it back. "You'd better get inside." He smirked at Logan. "I'm not really in the mood to enforce Jeannie's rules."

"Thanks, man, I appreciate it." Logan draped his arm across Veronica's shoulders and they walked to the gate. "So, do you really think I should do this trip with Sam? I won't be back before Saturday at the earliest; it cuts into our last DC trip."

"Logan, we've been into DC how many times already this summer? And when will you have another chance to go whitewater rafting on the Shenandoah River? If Jeannie's sticking around for the weekend, maybe I'll just stay on base and if she's going home, I'll get her to dump me off at the hotel Friday. That way you can stay longer if you want and maybe Sam will stick around and go to the surfing thing with you next week. It's kinda on his way home."

"That's an interesting thought but I hate being away from you so long. There's probably no cell reception out in the wilderness either. I'm gonna have Veronica withdrawal."

"It'll build character. You should do this. You told him you would and you're gonna have a blast." She stopped just outside the gate and turned to him. "Now kiss me to get me through my Logan withdrawal until whenever I see you next. It might be a whole week so make it good."

He grinned and leaned down to kiss her. Once the need for oxygen became too great, they broke the kiss but remained with their foreheads resting together, smiling and breathing hard.

"Love you, Veronica."

"I love you, Logan."

Veronica sat in the classroom, her nerves back at full strength. She'd gone straight from leaving Logan at the gate to the education center, anxious to find out what was going on but there was no sign of Agent Morris or Clarence Wiedman. She settled down into her regular seat and waited.
"Morning, V." Jeannie dropped into the chair beside her. "Your boy's doing quite the job of getting you here on time if you're beating me into the classroom."

"Someone motivated him with the threat of violence," Veronica answered in a dry voice.

"Yeah, like he really thinks I've convinced a Marine to shoot him," Jeannie scoffed. "It's more that he knows if you kept squeaking in at the last minute, you'd spend fewer nights with him and that's the one thing he doesn't want happening."

Veronica looked at her thoughtfully. "You know, that makes sense."

Jeannie laughed out loud. "You haven't been thinking he really took me seriously?"

"Well...no...but I guess I never thought much about why he got so compliant. We just joke about it."

"He's just doing what he knows you want. That's kinda what he does. So, anything new since last night?"

"No, of course not. It's gonna turn out to be nothing, I told you already." Veronica turned to face the table, carefully lacing her fingers together and resting her clasped hands on top. "So Logan's off on an adventure this morning. One of the people we met on Chincoteague, Sam, invited him to go camping out in Shenandoah National Park. They're going rafting."

"Hey, that'll be fun. But is he coming back Friday? It would be better if they had longer."

"He won't be back before Saturday and maybe not until he's back from Virginia Beach on Wednesday so either I stay here until he's back or you drop me off. What have you got going for the weekend?"

"I dunno, I guess we can play that by ear. Maybe we'll find something fun to do on your last weekend here." The instructor walked in then and Jeannie turned away from Veronica to face the front of the room.

Veronica pulled her phone out of her bag discreetly and sent a quick text to Logan's phone.

Jeannie and I are gonna party like rock stars this weekend—you and Sam should have the maximum allowable fun as well. Just let me know when you expect to be back so I know when I need to call out the search dogs. Love U.

She hit send, knowing the message wouldn't actually go until the phone was out of the blocked area but wanting to have it ready to go. She slid the phone back into her bag and settled in to try to learn something instead of worrying.

Three and a half hours later, class time was coming to a conclusion for the day. Jeannie had been sending her worried looks all morning and that was working Veronica's nerves more than anything else. When the door finally opened and a tall blonde woman stepped through, it was practically a relief.

"Morris! What a surprise." The agent instructing their group for the last two weeks, Simmons, greeted the newcomer. "I didn't ever expect to see you in a classroom setting. Did you finally bag your limit on bad guys and get kicked out of field work?" The instructor's tone was teasing and as the two women met midway through the room, they shared a brief, friendly hug.

"You know I never shot anyone who didn't really deserve it, Simmons," Morris said with a grin. Veronica was floored by the display of humor from someone she would have sworn had none.
"Class, let me introduce one of my academy classmates, Senior Special Agent Constance Morris. Last I heard, Morris was stationed out of California, making quite a name for herself so I have no idea what she's doing here, deigning to set foot in a classroom. Morris, we've got a few minutes left before lunch, do you have any time to give the interns a little field perspective?"

"Well, there's not much really to say; it's a tough job, make sure it's really what you want. Not all cases are a success and those can drive you crazy." She glanced at Veronica for the first time and Veronica felt a chill run down her spine before Morris spoke again. "But sometimes even the ones you thought were lost causes come together and that's what got me here today."

*What the hell does that mean?* Veronica didn't have to wait long for an answer.

"I'm actually here to collect one of your interns. Mars?" She locked eyes with Veronica. The rest of the room's occupants turned to gape at her.

"Agent Morris. Good to see you again. Do I need to call Mr. McCormack?"

"Who? Oh, was that your ambulance chaser attorney? Nah, you should be safe without representation." The smirk on her face was setting Veronica on edge. "I'm sure he's got plenty to do back home with your penny ante sheriff."

Veronica tried to shock that smirk off Morris' smug face. "Yeah, well, we had to get a new penny but, to be honest, he's still pretty ante. Lamb got himself nailed in the head by a meth head with a baseball bat. He's dead."

To the other woman's credit, she did lose the smirk. "Oh, that's tragic. I hate to hear of any law enforcement officer losing their life in the line of duty. Even a terrible one."

Veronica shrugged. "I could say that it's too bad he didn't ask the Wizard for a harder head but that would probably be excessively cold-blooded." She raised her eyebrows and stood up, gathering her belongings. "So I'm coming with you now?"

"Yes, if you have no objections and Agent Simmons can release you." She was entirely too agreeable for Veronica's taste.

"It's fine with me; it's nearly time for us to end for the day anyway," answered the instructor.

"Okay then," said Veronica, "I'll come with you but it's my lunch time and I'm expected at my work assignment at 1:00 PM. I'm pretty sure it's a violation of the Geneva Convention if you make me miss my lunch." The rest of the room laughed uncomfortably; from the looks on their faces, it was clear they were confused about the vaguely antagonistic banter between the girl most of them had been celebrating with the night before and the agent.

"Oh, not to worry, you'll get fed and you're excused from your work assignment for at least the rest of the week and you won't be back here either. You've got another assignment." At that, Veronica met Jeannie's eyes for the first time during the interaction. Jeannie looked absolutely freaked out but Veronica just smiled at her.

"Be cool, Soda Pop," she said in a very low tone and smiled reassuringly.

"In fact," Morris continued, "do you have a roommate who can maybe pack you a bag? You're going to be out of touch for a few days."

"Morris, if you don't mind, I'm going to go ahead and release the rest of the class and let them go get lunch. Veronica's roommate is here; she can find out what you want packed for her." Agent
Simmons looked as mystified by the strange interaction as the interns.

"Yeah, that's fine, no point in taking everyone's time," replied Morris, and at that, the other interns stood as one to head away from the uncomfortable conversation. Jeannie, on the other hand, clutched Veronica's arm.

"What is going on?" She hissed.

"No idea," Veronica answered, "but when you get back to the room, get any pictures of Logan I've got up and hide them in your stuff. I don't want them even thinking of him again." The room was emptying rapidly and Veronica's voice was getting quieter as the background noise diminished. "Don't call him. I don't know what's happening yet and he doesn't need to worry. She's making it sound like nothing but I can't tell."

Jeannie was obviously apprehensive. "What about your dad? You can't deal with this on your own."

"I did last time. Seriously, don't worry so much." Jeannie huffed in irritation but she came willingly as Veronica pulled her upright and dragged her to where Morris stood. "What should Jeannie pack for me, Agent Morris?"

"Just casual clothes. I've got a surrendered fugitive who needs an FBI guardian to hang out with him for the next week or so but since he's about to have all the charges dropped against him, I don't need to waste a real agent on the job. And then I find out, I've got Veronica Mars on the property. So I figured, I'll make up for accusing her of felony kidnapping two years ago and reunite her with her boyfriend."

Jeannie dropped into the nearest chair, afraid that she might otherwise fall down. She had no idea what was going on but she was pretty sure she didn't like it. Reuniting Veronica with her boyfriend? Jeannie was pretty sure that Veronica's husband might have something to say about that and truthfully, so did she. She turned back toward Veronica and the agent, finally registering that they were still talking. She knew she'd missed part of the conversation and struggled to figure out what exactly they were talking about.

"...frequently delusional. Maybe this is one of those times," Veronica said, shaking her head.

Agent Morris gave her a skeptical look. "Well, you're going to get the chance to ask him about it very soon. They're in one of the family dorms on the other side of the base."

Jeannie watched as Veronica smiled for the first time since the conversation turned to reunions. "Is Lilly here too?"

"As a matter of fact, she is. And they're waiting for you. We tried to catch up to you yesterday but you'd headed out too soon. There's even a birthday cake waiting for you. At least there was earlier. He was doing his best to keep the baby out of it."

"Duncan seriously has a cake waiting for me?" Veronica seemed to have a wistful look on her face that Jeannie didn't like.

"He does. Are you ready?" At this, Jeannie jumped up.

"No, you can't go, V." Both women turned to look at her then and they seemed surprised as if they'd just remembered she was still there. "Can we talk for a minute please?"

"Of course," the agent said. "And then, if you could bring Ms. Mars' bag back with you to your
afternoon assignment, I'll have it picked up and delivered. Also, I'm going to have to have you take her cell phone and any other electronics she may be carrying. They are not permitted in the area where she'll be staying."

"All right, let me just have a minute to give my stuff to Jeannie and make sure she knows where everything I need is," Veronica said. The agent walked over to speak to her old classmate, leaving Veronica and Jeannie alone momentarily.

"Boyfriend?" It was the first thing Jeannie could think to say.

Veronica shook her head dismissively and spoke in a very low voice. "Old news. Ex-boyfriend. And his kid with another woman. If you're still trying to look out for your 'lil bro', don't worry. Duncan is not a threat to Logan. But he could be one to me and I need to find out what is going on here. Morris seems completely over everything that happened a couple of years ago—which I would never have expected." She pulled her phone out of her bag and handed it to Jeannie. "I've already texted Logan about you and me hanging out for the weekend. Not sure any more that that will be happening but either way, it keeps him away for longer. I do not want him getting caught up in this. Remember what I said about the pictures. Don't forget."

Jeannie was shaking her head all through Veronica's instructions. "Are you sure you don't want me to call either your dad or Logan? This seems risky to me. You don't know what's going on."

"Neither do you. There's a lot of backstory here you don't have but I can handle it. Just pack up some comfortable clothes for me and my bathroom stuff. I'll be back in touch as soon as possible." She gave Jeannie a quick hug. "Seriously. Don't look so freaked out. Morris is totally a different person today than she was a year and a half ago. I'm guessing that Duncan and his family were able to spin something to get himself out of trouble and I need to find out what it was."

"Veronica, you're being way too casual about this," Jeannie said, aggravated.

"I'm really not but I don't want her to know that. Come on. Work with me."

"Ms. Mars," Agent Morris called from across the room. "Are you ready?"

Veronica squeezed Jeannie's arm reassuringly and answered, "Definitely. Lead the way." She smiled once more at Jeannie and then followed the agent out of the room.

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Logan was leaning against the Range Rover, enjoying the breeze that kept the day from being completely stifling when a huge green Suburban pulled up in front of him. The SUV was barely stopped when Sam came flying out of it. "Logan, man, how ya doing?" He clapped Logan on the shoulder and grinned at him. "Looks like married life's agreeing with you."

"It certainly is, my friend." Logan returned Sam's hug and then stepped back. "Thanks for inviting me along. I've never gone white water rafting before."

"No? Well, you're gonna have a blast." Several other young men got out of the vehicle at a more leisurely pace and joined them. "You remember Gil and Spencer, right? And this is John, Kyle, and Steve."

Logan greeted the ones he knew with the back clapping they seemed so fond of and shook hands with the others. "Geez, how many people can you get in that beast?"

"Ten, if they're friendly but eight sit pretty comfortably," the driver, Steve, said.
"But I'm riding with you since you're insisting on bringing your own wheels," said Sam.

"I just don't want to wreck anyone's good time if I need to take off before the rest of you are ready to leave," Logan said apologetically.

"Yeah, we get it. Hot new wife to get back to," Gil teased.

"Exactly. And don't let me catch you even thinking about Veronica," Logan said in a vaguely threatening voice that was belied by his giant grin. The guys who had met Veronica just laughed at him.

"Why even bother," said Spencer, "she barely registers anyone else even being alive if they're standing next to you, lover boy."

"Good, as long as we're all on the same page."

After a few more minutes of discussion about their route and timetable, both Sam and Gil moved into Logan's vehicle and they continued their drive to Shenandoah National Forest. Just before noon, the little caravan stopped for lunch. Midway through his cheeseburger, Logan felt his phone buzz as Veronica's earlier text rolled in.

"So guys, how long were you planning to stay out here?"

"She's not recalling you already, is she?" Spencer asked sarcastically. 

"No, no, actually the opposite. She's encouraging me to stay the whole weekend." Logan looked up from his phone and made a face. "Not sure how I feel about this."

Sam laughed loudly and clapped his hands once, then rubbed them together like an evil mastermind. "Dude! Think of it as the bachelor party you never got to have. We've got beer and several days of rafting to look forward to. Text her back, tell her you'll be back on Monday."

Logan looked at him skeptically. "Nothing crazy, right?"

"No, nothing crazy," said Steve. "We've got beer but the main point to this trip is rafting and camping. Don't let him freak you out with talk of bachelor parties." He shook his head at Sam with a grimace on his face and then looked at Logan again with a grin. "My girlfriend is as likely as your wife to cause me damage if she hears about something she doesn't like."

A harsh laugh exploded out of Logan. "Oh no, you have no idea; Veronica is uniquely skilled in making evildoers pay." He continued to chuckle as he thought about all the ways she'd struck back at his bad behavior in the past. "Strangely, it's one of my favorite things about her but I do my best these days to avoid actions that could deliberately provoke her."

"We all do that with our girlfriends if we want them to keep being our girlfriends," said Kyle sagely. "And since dumbass Sam seems to have an actual girlfriend these days, he'd better figure that out soon."

Logan turned to Sam with a grin. "Mady? Is it Mady?"

Sam turned red and nodded. Gil snickered at his reaction. "Yeah, the island Lothario seems to have been tamed finally. He actually had to ask her if he could go on this trip."

Sam started to sputter in protest. "No, I didn't have to, I just checked to make sure we didn't have other plans. It seemed like the right thing to do."
Gil scoffed and muttered, "Pussy-whipped," and both Kyle and Steve leaned in to punch him, one from each side.

"Hey," Gil said indignantly. "That's not cool."

Sam laughed. "It sounds like my dumbass title is being passed to Gil until he actually finds a girl worth being whipped about."

Kyle lifted his glass. "To our worthy girls."

Sam raised his beer bottle to bump Kyle's glass. "May they continue to whip us as long as possible."

Steve and Logan looked at each other in astonishment and then started to laugh as they lifted their beverages to join the toast. "Sam, buddy, that just doesn't sound right," Steve said.

"But we agree with the general sentiment, if not your actual sexual preferences," Logan said with a grin.


Steve interrupted, still laughing, "No, we don't wanna know; everyone's got a few kinks." The entire table burst into laughter.

A few hours later, the group was settling into their campsites. Two large tents had been raised and a campfire had been laid in the fire pit for lighting later in the evening. Camping and rafting gear was spread everywhere as they prepared for an early start in the morning and for dinner a little later.

Before they left after lunch, Logan had texted confirmation to Veronica that he would stay out for the whole weekend and once he was back, he would only be at the hotel long enough to clean up and pack for his Virginia Beach overnight trip.

_I'll be back from Virginia Beach on Wednesday night and even if you can't come back to the hotel with me, I will be in the parking lot to see you. If we're parked next to Jack's guardhouse, surely he won't drag us out at gun point. :) Love ya baby._

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Jeannie frantically pulled Veronica's pictures off her bulletin board and threw them in the bottom drawer of her own desk before digging Veronica's overnight bag out of her closet and beginning to pack it with casual clothes. She added some loose items to the smaller bag that Veronica used to carry her toiletries back and forth between their dorm room and the communal bathroom. She was taking a final look around when she heard Veronica's phone buzz from atop her desk where Jeannie had dropped it. She read Logan's text and debated with herself whether she should tell him what was going on or not. Finally, she decided to do what Veronica wanted her to, hoping they wouldn't all regret that later. She wrote a note to Veronica and tucked it into the toiletries bag, hoping no one else would read it or, if they did, that they wouldn't know what she was talking about.

_V,

My brother's camping all weekend; is planning to come around on Wednesday to visit. I didn't talk to him; hope that's the right choice. Let me know if you need anything or need me to make any calls._

_See you soon,_

_J_
Veronica followed Agent Morris out of the education center to a golf cart parked nearby.

"Nice wheels," she said sarcastically.

Morris gave her an actual smile. "It's quite a hike to where we're going. This may not be the kind of car you'll be driving once you're all home and back in the Kane mansion but it will get us where we need to go."

Veronica climbed into the cart and looked around for something to hold onto. The Kanes had actually had a golf cart at the Napa estate and the one time she'd been allowed to go there with Lilly, they'd spent most of the week bombing all around the grounds with Lilly behind the wheel and Veronica clinging onto anything she could for dear life. Duncan and Logan tried riding on the open seat on the back once but after Lilly managed to throw both of them off the back and bump one wheel over Duncan's leg, they never attempted that again. Veronica smiled as she let herself get caught up in that memory but she needed more information and Morris was her only option right now.

"Why do you seem so certain that Duncan and I are just going to pick up where we left off? I'm sure you recall that we broke up before he ran away with his love child with someone else. And I've had boyfriends since he left. I haven't just been pining away for him."

Morris gave her a sharp look. "Do you have a boyfriend now?"

"Boyfriend? No. Just don't ask me about husbands. "Well, no, I actually don't but that still doesn't mean I'm going to just jump back into something with Duncan." She clung to her seat as they made a quick left turn. "Has he said that we're still together? Because we're not."

"No, not in so many words. But when I mentioned that you were here—" Morris paused and glanced at Veronica "—I'm sure you realize I'm not the romantic gossip type."

Veronica chuckled. "Yeah, I hadn't really pictured you that way."

"But he definitely gave the impression that he expected you would pick up where you left off."

Morris paused again. "Between you and me, his dad doesn't seem too thrilled about that. That kinda surprised me, since he's got your mother hanging off him every time I see him."

"What?!" Veronica shouted.

"They're not staying in these family quarters, are they? Because if they are, I want out of this assignment now."

"Look, you really are the FBI representative in the living quarters since he's considered so low risk. I wasn't joking when I said I thought I was doing you a favor. You don't have to do this if you would
rather not. You were requested by the family but you're not obligated."

Veronica sat for a minute, considering her options. Unless Morris was really snowing her, it seemed like she was out from under suspicion in Duncan's escape.

*If that's true, should I just say no? But is that going piss him off and make him turn on me? And what does he really think is happening between us? We broke up for real. Well, I did. And then I kissed him goodbye like it was staged and I let him tell me he loved me. It seemed easier that way back then. Ugh, maybe he does think we would be together again if we could. True love stories never have endings. Oh yikes. And what the hell is this thing with Jake and Lianne? Married?*

"Mars. Do you want to go in or not?"

Jerked out of her inner monologue, Veronica nodded. "Yeah, I'll go."

They entered the dorm and checked in with the front desk guards. Marines, just like the outside gates. Morris led her to the elevator and they went up to the fifth floor with the agent explaining the protocol.

"There are two apartments on this floor but the other one is empty. You won't be able to leave the building without a Marine guard but they won't hover. There's a playground in the back for the baby; a guard will always be available to take you guys out there. That's not a problem, they just have to stay within sight of you. Duncan knows all of this already."

"How long are they staying here?"

"About the middle of next week. Don't worry, you'll be able to make your flight to go home but you will be missing out on the end of the internship. If the deal gets finalized soon enough, hopefully you'll be able to make it to the closing banquet." Morris grinned at her. "Maybe you won't need your crappy little coach flight home. Maybe the family jet will take you back."

"I'm not part of that family," Veronica said.

"We'll see," Morris said with a smirk. "We'll see." She stopped in front of a door and rapped twice, then used her ID badge to beep the door open.

"Mr. Kane, it's Agent Morris and—"

Suddenly, Duncan was there, standing in front of Veronica, beaming. He wrapped his arms around her, lifting her off her feet as he kissed the top and side of her head repeatedly. "Veronica! I can't believe you're here." He set her down and moved a hand to the back of her head, tilting her back enough to cover her mouth with his. She gasped and started to pull away but he didn't seem to notice, pulling her in close again, continuing to kiss her.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, I know this probably isn’t a nice place to stop but it is the natural break. We will pick up exactly where we left off next week. Just let me assure everyone, I am never going to choose DuVe.

To help tide you over until next week, I’m also posting Chapter 4 of Managing Jake which, as it turns out, is in the same universe as this story and explains what Duncan’s
been up to since he left Neptune. It should help put some things into perspective.
"Duncan, what the hell? Get offa me." Veronica shoved him away more forcefully, jumping back at the same time. Duncan looked at her in shock.

"Veronica? What's wrong with you?"

She turned away from him to Agent Morris. "I think I made a mistake. This was a bad idea."

"Veronica, what are you talking about?" Duncan came up behind her and grabbed her arm, trying to pull her back toward him. At that, Agent Morris stepped between them, allowing Veronica to move away.

"Mr. Kane, I believe Ms. Mars does not want you manhandling her." She looked down at Veronica, who was massaging her arm where Duncan's fingers had dug into her. "I'll take you back."

Veronica nodded and moved behind Morris towards the door. Duncan leapt in that direction, practically throwing himself between Veronica and the exit.

"No! Wait! I'm sorry, I just got carried away. It's been so long. Please don't go. Please."

Veronica stood still for a minute, looking at his pleading face. She was so torn. She really was happy at the idea that Duncan could get his life back but she did not want it to be at the expense of the life she and Logan were building. "Look, Duncan, I'm happy to see you but we are not together. If you can't understand that, I'm leaving."

"No, no, I'm sorry, I understand. It's too soon. We need to talk." Duncan had his hands raised in appeasement. Veronica was not satisfied with that answer; it wasn't too soon, it was actually too late for them. She did feel that he was more in control of himself and her need to find out what was going on, and to make sure she was out of the legal quagmire she'd put herself in by helping Duncan in the first place, won out.

"Okay, I'll stay. For now." She turned back to Agent Morris who still appeared to be on high alert. "Is there some way I can contact you, if I need anything?"

Morris gestured toward a wide doorway that appeared to go into a kitchen area. "Actually, let me give you a tour of the apartment."

Duncan took a step towards them with an irritated look on his face. "I can show her around, Agent Morris. You don't need to waste your time."

"Well, Mr. Kane, Ms. Mars is here acting on behalf of the Federal Bureau of Investigation but since she is only an intern, it is my responsibility to make sure she knows what's what around here. So, if you would excuse us for a bit..." Her voice trailed off and she motioned Veronica ahead of her. Veronica peeked back over her shoulder and was amused to see Duncan's disgruntled face. Apparently a year and a half on the run had not been enough to burn the sense of entitlement out of him.

"There's a land line here and in each of the bedrooms but they won't call unapproved numbers off the base," Morris said as they entered the kitchen. "My cell number is on this sheet of numbers. There's a
number for security at the gate and you press zero for the front desk. Call if you need anything." She paused and gave Veronica a hard look. "This isn't exactly a typical intern activity and truthfully, you wouldn't even be here if the Kanes didn't have friends in some pretty high places. You're sure you want to stay?"

Veronica spoke in a low voice, not wanting to be overheard. "Yeah, I don't think he's going to be a problem. He's not a fan of confrontation so I doubt he'll try anything like that again." She glanced back through the doorway and saw Duncan gazing out one of the windows. *Probably trying to figure out what went wrong.* She lowered her voice a little more. "He'll probably get whiny but I started putting up with that when we were ten. I'm impervious."

Morris snorted out a laugh. "Well, you can't say I didn't warn you that he thought you were just waiting for his triumphant return."

"Nope, for someone who doesn't believe in romantic gossip, you certainly turned out to be a reliable source."

"I'm a professional investigator for the U.S. Government, Mars. What did you expect?" Morris smirked at her and Veronica was again astonished by the appearance of a sense of humor.

"I guess I didn't really think about it. So, anything else to show me? I am glad to see the kitchen—I'm starving—but I'm sure there's more to this place." Veronica turned around in the tiny kitchen space, spotting a box of cookies and snagging a couple.

Morris shook her head and chuckled. "There's plenty of food in the kitchen. You won't have to live on cookies."

"I'm good with cookies, at least for now. Why don't you finish showing me around."

"There's just the bedrooms and bathroom," Morris said, leading her down a short hallway. "Bedroom on this side, one on the other, bathroom at the end of the hall." She motioned at each door. "I think Duncan's in one bedroom and the baby's in the other, napping in there right now probably. You're going to have to work out the sleeping arrangements." She smirked and raised an eyebrow.

"Is she in a crib? Can't that just get wheeled into Duncan's room?"

"Nope, she's in the bed. She apparently outgrew the crib a few months ago. Someone had brought a crib in before they arrived and when she saw it, she had a fit."

Veronica grimaced. "Well, one of them will be sleeping on the couch before I share with Duncan. If we can't work this out to my satisfaction, I'm calling you to come get me."

Morris scoffed and headed back down the hall towards the front of the unit. "I'm not your gofer, Mars."

"And, oh yeah, when are you bringing my bag?" Veronica asked with a grin. The agent growled in frustration and Veronica laughed as they walked into the front room.

"I'm going to head out now. *Someone* will be back later with your bag, Mars." She slammed the door behind her.

"So, I see you're still making friends with everyone you encounter, Veronica," Duncan said in a dry voice.
"Hey, she's a heckuva lot nicer than she was eighteen months ago when she was grilling me about where you'd vanished off too with Lilly. She couldn't believe that I hadn't helped you. So," she looked at Duncan with her head tilted and her eyebrows raised, "are you going to tell me how you got away and where you've been all this time?"

Duncan gave her a confused look. "Veronica?"

She threw up her hands at how oblivious he still was and looked around the room. There were no obvious cameras in the corners but she was sure there had to be listening devices throughout the rooms. She walked around the room, picking up a vase and peering at it, on the bottom and down inside it. She didn't really expect an obvious bug; this was the FBI after all, not Vinnie Van Lowe. That thought gave her an idea and she looked around for any pens.

"Veronica? What are you—"

"Sorry, I was just looking around," she said, raising a finger to her lips and then cupping her hand around her ear.

He looked at her with a scornful face. "I'm sure there's no—"

She pointed at him violently, mouthing "no" at him. Aloud, she said, "Maybe we'll talk about that later. Right now, I need some lunch and I want to hear about Lilly. Is she napping?"

Duncan's face smoothed and he smiled for the first time since she'd pushed him off her. "Yeah, she's probably still asleep. Her schedule's messed up with the time zone changes. I think we'll be seeing her soon though." He walked toward the kitchen and Veronica followed. "Want a sandwich? Maybe grilled cheese?"

Veronica looked at him, amused. "You can make grilled cheese sandwiches now?"

"I've been on the run with my daughter for going on two years. Do you think I've had a housekeeper with me all this time?"

She laughed nervously. "I guess not." Duncan stepped into the tiny kitchen space and she sat up at the island counter facing him. "So? Tell me about her."

"Lilly? Oh, she's great. She's not a baby anymore; she's a teeny-tiny person. She climbs everything and knows exactly what she wants and doesn't want." Duncan looked up from his sandwich making with a grin on his face. "I swear I tried to keep her pink and frilly. I thought she'd be all girly...like Meg. But once she got old enough to have a preference, which was right around nine months, she'd just take off anything she didn't like as soon as I set her down. She couldn't even walk but I'd dress her up, put her down on a blanket and she'd roll away and try to get out of anything pink. She got better at it as she got more mobile, crawling and then that sorta-walking thing where she couldn't go anywhere unless she was holding onto something. Dropping pink clothes as she went. She couldn't get everything off, of course, sometimes I struggle to get her clothes off, but then she'd just scream. That was a fun phase, let me tell you."

Veronica laughed, both at the picture Duncan was painting and of the look on Duncan's face as he talked about his little girl. He seemed more animated than she could remember seeing him, probably ever. "So if she doesn't like pink, what does she like?"

Duncan flipped the grilled cheese sandwiches, then looked up at Veronica. "Okay, this isn't my fault."

She crinkled her eyebrows together in suspicion. "What's not your fault?"
"I tried a bunch of different colors, different pastels, and then bolder colors. Finally, I just took her to Target and let her pick."

Veronica rolled her eyes. "Hold on, give me a minute. I'm trying to picture you at a Target." She pressed her hands to her eyes, scrunching up her face like she was thinking really hard. "Okay...almost got it...almost there...phew." She blew out a heavy breath and moved her hands so she could look up at him again. "Nope. I just can't see it."

"Oh ha ha. You're hilarious." Duncan picked up a piece of cheese and threw it at her. She snatched it off the counter and popped it in her mouth. "So anyway. I took her to Target and let her pick. And you know what she chose?"

"Combat boots and mini-skirts?"

"You're wrong but on the right track. She doesn't want to dress like her mom or her Aunt Veronica and no father in his right mind would let his toddler dress like her Aunt Lilly." He pulled the frying pan off the heat and slid the sandwiches onto a plate, setting down the pan and pulling out his wallet. He dug a photo out and looked at it with a smile on his face.

"If she's dressed like Celeste I'm leaving," Veronica said.

"Nope." He handed over the picture and she burst into laughter.

"Oh no, how did this happen?" The photo showed an adorable little blonde girl, with wild curls, wearing orange leggings and a green shirt. "Of all the fashion icons she could channel, how did she land on Uncle Logan?"

"Don't you think I want to know that too?" Duncan asked, laughing as he handed her a plate. "If it weren't Meg's daughter we're talking about, I'd suspect there was a Logan rooster in my henhouse."

Veronica stopped laughing abruptly and made an irritated face at him. "Logan wouldn't have screwed your girlfriend. Don't even joke like that."

"Oh really. What do you call what he was doing with you?"

Veronica had picked up her sandwich to take a bite but instead she hurled it at him. It struck him in the chest and dropped back onto the stovetop. "We had been broken up for more than a year before Logan and I started dating. And even then, although you didn't deserve it, we tried to preserve your precious feelings and not tell anyone until you got dragged back from your field trip to Cuba. And what did you do? Dumped your very nice, pregnant girlfriend, so you could stalk me. While I was with Logan. So if anyone's been a rooster in someone else's henhouse, it's you, not Logan." She jumped off her stool and walked back to the front room.

"Veronica, where are you going?" Duncan followed but didn't grab at her like he'd done after she had first arrived.

"I'm outta here. I'm not going to listen to your inflammatory revisionist history." She reached for her bag to get her phone, then realized she didn't have it. "Shit." She walked back toward the kitchen counter where the phone and the list of numbers were sitting.

"Veronica, I'm sorry, I didn't mean it the way it came out. Please don't go."

She whirled on him. "How many times are we going to have this same exchange? I'm perfectly happy finishing out my internship with the rest of the class and leaving you here with a real agent babysitting you. I was basically summoned and I've been here what? An hour? And you've made me
want to storm out twice already? I will give this one more try out of respect for Lilly, MY Lilly, not your kid with Meg, and if you blow it again, I will leave." She stood in front of him, still shaking with anger. "Do we understand each other?"

"Yeah," Duncan said in a resigned voice. "I apparently had a completely different idea of how this was going to go. I have to stop assuming and think before I just do or say anything." He shrugged his shoulders. "Why don't we just get caught up on the last year and a half and take it from there?"

Veronica took a deep breath and nodded. "That sounds good." She turned to walk back to the kitchen. "I'm eating your grilled cheese. You get the one that hit you."

They ate their sandwiches and made fairly casual small talk. When their lunch was finished, they moved back out to the living room and Veronica settled into an arm chair while Duncan sat on the couch. She filled him in on some of the events since he left town, skipping over the more personal aspects of some of those events, and Duncan talked about his life in Australia. He was talking about Lilly learning to swim in the ocean when they heard a thump and running footsteps coming toward them.

"Daddee? Where are you?" Veronica twisted around to look behind her and suddenly a tiny blonde girl appeared in the doorway between the kitchen and the living room. She stopped for a minute and then grinned and ran for the couch, throwing herself into Duncan's arms.

"I find you," she said, kneeling in his lap and bracing her hands on his shoulders so she could look him directly in the face.

"Yes, you did, Lilbit. Good job. Did you have a good sleep?" He leaned forward and kissed her forehead. As he pulled back, she leaned forward and kissed his forehead.

"Yes, but I hungwy now. Eat bre'fast?"

"It's actually lunchtime, missy. Do you want a grilled cheese?" Veronica could only see the side of her face but she could see Lilly's little nose scrunch up.

"Bor-ing," she said in a sing-song voice. Veronica burst into laughter and the little girl's head snapped around, noticing Veronica for the first time. She shifted in Duncan's lap, snuggling up against him. "Who that?"

"Lilly, meet your Aunt Veronica."

The little girl's head tipped to one side as she studied Veronica. Suddenly, she pushed herself off of Duncan's lap and ran out of the room.

"Did I scare her?" Veronica asked.

"I don't think so," Duncan responded with a smile. "I think she'll be right back."

Sure enough, the pounding footsteps started again, heading back toward them.

"Somehow I'd imagined the pitter-patter of little feet to be a slightly more delicate sound," Veronica said.

Duncan laughed. "It's one of those society-wide lies that get told so people continue to perpetuate the species." Lilly returned as he spoke, climbing back up into his lap, holding a few framed pictures. She held one of the pictures up to Duncan.
"This Aunt V'ronca." It wasn't a question.

"Yes, that is Aunt Veronica," he assured her. She pointed to another of the pictures.

"And this?"

"Yep."

Lilly turned to study Veronica, as if she couldn't really believe the stranger in her living room was the person in the photo.

"May I see your pictures?" Veronica asked and, after a slight hesitation, Lilly slid off of Duncan's lap and walked over to Veronica. She held out the pictures to Veronica and leaned against the chair.

There were three frames. Veronica spread them out across her legs and the arm of the chair, smiling at the images. Lilly jabbed a finger at one of the pictures. "That's you." It was the picture of the Fab4 from that last Homecoming, Veronica and Lilly pressed against each other and the boys both wrapped around them.

"That is me. Do you know everyone else?"

The little girl moved her finger to identify the other faces. "That Daddy. And that Auntie Lilly. She has my name."

Duncan laughed from the couch. "You have her name, pumpkin."

Lilly scowled at him and Veronica laughed. Lilly looked up at her. "Is mine."

"Maybe you can share it," Veronica suggested and Lilly nodded, then moved onto the next face in the photo.

"That my Unca Logan." Veronica smiled at the laughing face and resisted the urge to trace her own finger across it. Lilly, meanwhile, had shifted to the next frame. "You and Auntie Lilly." It was a picture of the two of them, dressed in matching bikinis, resting on floats in the Echolls' pool.

"Did your Daddy tell you what happened right after he took this picture?" Veronica asked. Lilly looked at her with big brown eyes and shook her head. "We were just relaxing and minding our own business, drinking our sodas," she pointed to the glasses in the armrest holders, "and your Daddy and your Uncle Logan cannonballed into the pool and knocked us off our floats." Lilly burst into peals of laughter and Veronica gave an exaggerated huff of irritation. "You don't think that was mean?"

Lilly shook her head, still giggling. "Funny."

"Well I guess I know to watch out for you when we go swimming," Veronica said. "So, what else do you have?"

Lilly scrambled up onto the arm of the chair to point at the last frame. "You and Daddy." It was from senior year, in the suite at the Grand during one of the parties Duncan sometimes threw. Veronica was looking off beyond the photographer with the fake smile she wore through so much of that year and Duncan's arm was around her shoulders as he smiled into the camera. Veronica knew what she was looking at the moment that picture was taken. Logan—pulling some nameless girl into his room. She could still remember the jealous rage that had burned in her at that moment although she'd never called it that back then. She had always called it disgust but she knew better now.

"I have more. Come see?" Lilly asked.
"Sure," she answered as she stacked the frames and rose from the chair. Lilly grabbed her hand not holding the photos and ran toward the bedroom, forcing Veronica to trot along behind. She heard Duncan laughing from behind them.

Lilly tugged her into a bedroom and Veronica was pleased to find that it was set up a lot like her room with Jeannie, with a pair of twin beds. Lilly dropped Veronica's hand and began to scramble through a box, pulling out random pictures. She explained who each person was. Daddy and Uncle Logan—from when they were about ten, dressed in the uniform of the boarding school where they'd first met. Grandma Celeste and Grandpa—oh, Veronica could not wait to see Celeste's reaction to being called Grandma.

"This my Mommy," Lilly said, interrupting Veronica's thoughts about Celeste. She held up the picture to Veronica. "You know my Mommy?" Veronica dropped down onto the floor next to Lilly and took the offered picture.

"Yes, Lilly, I did know your Mommy. She was the nicest girl in our school." The little girl climbed into her lap then and Veronica was surprised to find she didn't mind.

"She had my middle name, Megan."

Veronica smiled, remembering the earlier exchange about ownership of her first name. She noticed Duncan standing in the doorway and when she glanced up at his face, he was beaming at the sight of her cuddled up with his daughter. Uh oh. Don't want to encourage any misleading ideas. "So, Lilly, don't you need some lunch?"

"Yes! I starving."

Veronica put the photos back in the box and set Lilly on her feet, then pushed herself up from the floor. "Alrighty then, let's go find you some lunch." The little girl grabbed her hand and dragged her back out of the room. "Are you sure about that grilled cheese, Lilly?" Veronica asked. "Your Dad made me one a little while ago and it was pretty tasty."

"It bounced pretty good too," Duncan said. "And only left a small grease stain." Veronica snorted a laugh and lifted Lilly onto one of the stools before climbing onto one herself.

"No grilled cheese. Fish sticks, Daddy," Lilly said. Duncan shrugged and turned to the freezer.

An hour later, they were all out at the playground. Lilly was in the toddler swing shrieking, "Higher," as Duncan pushed her. Veronica was in the regular swing next to her, mostly just sitting with her legs dangling.

"Daddy, push Aunt V'ronca too," Lilly yelled.

"Yes, ma'am," Duncan answered. He stepped behind Veronica and grabbed the sides of her swing to pull her back, then let her go. Before long, Lilly and Veronica were swinging in time, Duncan pushing them both occasionally to keep them even. After the swings, they all played on the slide with Duncan and Veronica taking turns sliding with Lilly so she wouldn't tumble over the side. When they'd worn her out, they laid a blanket out in the grass and stretched out on it, Lilly promptly dropping into sleep.

"Okay, now," Veronica said once Lilly's breathing had evened out and she knew the little girl was asleep, "this is the best place to talk freely although we're still taking a chance here. What is your explanation for how you got away?"

"Do you really think someone's listening?" Duncan asked.
"It astonishes me that you don't think that. Hasn't Clarence warned you to watch what you say? I can't believe he isn't concerned." Veronica had had enough encounters with Clarence Wiedman to know the man was as deeply suspicious as she was. "Where is he anyway? I was told he was with Agent Morris yesterday when she came to get me. Today she was alone."

"He's our primary negotiator with the FBI and the Justice Department. He used to be FBI, you know, so he's still got some contacts." Veronica had not realized Clarence was former FBI but she wasn't surprised. "I think he and my dad are wrapping up my deal."

"So—what's the story?"

"I got help getting into Mexico from some associates of Cormac Fitzpatrick. He's dead so there shouldn't be any backlash. I had access to bank accounts that my parents didn't know I had. Once in Mexico, I worked my way across Central America, headed for Europe, and ended up in Australia where I've been for the last year." Duncan stopped and looked down at Lilly, reaching out to stroke her curls. "CW has gotten enough evidence against the Mannings that the FBI is essentially dropping the charges against me. They're calling it custodial interference at this point, rather than kidnapping, because I've been able to prove paternity, and the Mannings are losing custody of Grace so the idea that they should have had custody of Lilly has been pretty much eliminated. There will be a fine and, in probably the next week, Lilly and I will be free to go home."

Veronica flopped back onto the blanket. "Wow. That's some story. What started the ball rolling on getting you home?"

"Actually, you and Logan."

Veronica bolted upright again. "What does that mean?"

"Your little escapades with the Russian mob dude last Spring. CW got in touch with me—"

"He's known how to reach you?"

"Yeah, I—um...got in touch with him about six months after we took off. He hooked me up with some funds, unbeknownst to Mom and Dad, and helped us stay off the radar." Duncan stretched out on the blanket next to Lilly. "We didn't tell the FBI that part, obviously, and I don't think Dad knows either. He was pretty out of it when CW brought him to see me in Australia but he got his act together really quickly after that. And, I don't know if you know this or not but he and your mom...they..."

"I heard they finally formalized the Prom King and Queen thing. I don't really care about that. I'm still trying to understand what you meant about me and Logan getting you to come home." Veronica was staying as cool as she could but she was truly desperate at that point to know what Duncan meant. Does he know we're together again?"

"Well, CW called me and told me what was going on. That Dad was trying to get your dad prosecuted for destroying evidence, or you for breaking and entering, and that one of his Castle guys was probably going to be gunning for Logan. CW knew I would want to try to do something so we arranged for me to meet with Dad and talk him down. It worked and it got us talking about what needed to be done to fix my situation so we could come home. He was pretty much in love with Lilly at first sight so he would have done just about anything to fix this for us."

Veronica looked at him curiously. I don't think he knows about us. Surely, he would have mentioned it by now. "Did you talk to him before or after I did?"
He looked up at her. "I didn't know you had talked to him."

"I bet it was after. I was feeling pretty good about the talk we had but in retrospect, that was more from talking to Clarence afterwards than from the conversation with your dad. He was still hating on me pretty bad; I was just hoping that my appeal to him as Lilly's dad would get somewhere. I bet that's when Clarence went to you. If that's what happened, I guess I owe Clarence now."

"When did you get all chummy with my dad's head of security?" Duncan asked.

"We've worked on some projects together," Veronica answered vaguely. "Chummy is somewhat of an overstatement."

Duncan gave her an irritated look. "Wow. That's about as non-specific of an answer as you could give."

Veronica threw the same look right back. "It's none of your business, Duncan. Don't worry about it."

"Geez, Veronica, when did you get so prickly? I'm just trying to have a conversation with you."

"December 7, 2003. I'd already lost my soft underbelly but that was the day I had to really grow my own body armor." She jumped up from the blanket and walked back over to the swings, hoping he'd stay with the sleeping Lilly. They were practically alone in the space, except for the Marine guard watching them from across the park, and the swings weren't far from the grassy area so she knew he might follow, but, to her relief, he stayed on the blanket and left her alone. She regretted her outburst already. She was not going to talk about that night with Duncan. He was convinced that they'd had consensual, although inebriated, sex and she was never going to tell him about Beaver. That was knowledge that no one other than Logan would ever have.

Satisfied that she had some time to herself, she pumped her legs to increase her swinging height, then closed her eyes and leaned back, letting the air rush over her as she let her mind wander to Logan and what he might be doing right then. Her thoughts jumped to what they were going to do when they were back in Neptune. She skipped right over the part where they had to break the news to her dad—she was trying to cheer herself up after all—and smiled as she imagined house hunting and lunches in the Food Court at Hearst and waking up every day with Logan.

"Sam, man, we should do this next summer too and bring the girls," Logan said, stretching out across a large boulder next to Sam, soaking in the sun. The whole group had been in the water since pretty early in the morning and had pulled the rafts ashore to eat lunch. They'd rafted the prior day also and no one was in a big rush to get going again when there were sun-baked boulders for laying in the sun.

"Is Veronica going to do this FBI thing again next year?" Sam asked. His wet tee-shirt had come off as soon as they'd beached and it was already dry and tucked under Sam's head as he lay splayed out on his stomach, taking up as much space across the rock as possible.

"It's not really sounding like it. She's kinda bored and we've been talking about road trips for next summer instead. I would think that would include some time at Chincoteague again. Maybe come for Pony Penning again so she can see her pony and maybe a few days more so we can bike the island and do all the other things we didn't have time to do this trip." Logan rolled from his stomach to his back and laid his damp shirt over his face to block the glare from the sun directly overhead. His voice was a little muffled from the shirt as he continued. "And, we could throw in some time to come out here for camping and rafting. Veronica would have a blast. Do you think Mady would have fun?"
"She definitely would—she's come out here quite a few times. Of course, we're brand new to this relationship thing...who knows if we'll even be talking by this time next year."

"There's some positive thinking for ya," Logan laughed. "Even if the romantic piece doesn't work out, you guys have been friends for a long time, haven't you?"

"Yeah, pretty much since kindergarten."

"So even if it turns out you aren't destined to be a couple, that doesn't mean you stop being her friend. That's just stupid." Logan lifted the shirt from his face so he could look at Sam. "Don't put too much pressure on yourself, or on her. Just see where it goes."

"Geez, listen to you. You'd think you were subbing for 'Dear Abby' or something." Sam raised himself up on his elbows to glare at Logan. "You got married at nineteen. That does not make you a relationship expert all of a sudden."

Logan burst into laughter and dropped the shirt again. "No, it certainly does not. I'm just a romantic sap who wants everyone to be as happy as I am."

"Well, that isn't a bad thing," Sam answered.

"Come on, you guys," bellowed Steve from the riverbank. "Let's hit the water again."

"Urgh," Logan grumbled as he rolled over to stand up. "Okay, he's not coming next year. He's a slave driver."

"So's Mady. When she makes a schedule, you stick to it," Sam said, as they began to pick their way down from their resting spot.

"So, it'll be your job—provided you're still together like that of course—to keep her too distracted to make a schedule in the first place," Logan said. He hopped off the last rock and headed for the rafts.

"That does make sense," Sam said. "You might have a future in this relationship biz after all."

Veronica woke up to Lilly's elbow digging into her ribs. On the first night, Duncan had tried to convince Lilly to come in and sleep in the second bed in his room but she had been insistent that she had a room and Veronica was going to be sharing with her. Veronica was fine with that; although Duncan had not tried to make any kind of overly personal overtures since their little blow-up in the park on their first day, she felt more secure with Lilly sleeping in the room with her. She felt reasonably confident that Duncan wouldn't sneak into a room that she was sharing with his toddler daughter and try to make any kind of ill-conceived 'move' on her. However, she discovered immediately that Duncan wasn't the only Kane who wanted in her bed in the middle of the night.

She woke up on that first morning at about 3:00 AM when Lilly climbed in and snuggled up against her, not saying a word before she was snoring lightly again. Veronica gazed down on the little blonde head nestled under her arm and smiled. Despite who her father was, this little girl was definitely inspiring maternal instincts Veronica had never expected to have. The same thing had happened on the subsequent nights and by Saturday night, although Lilly had been sound asleep when Veronica came in to go to bed, she was only in bed for about an hour when Lilly invaded her space. What she was finding was that the longer Lilly slept, the more space she took up. Now, early Sunday morning, Lilly was apparently trying to fill the entire bed, in spite of Veronica already inhabiting a portion.

Veronica tried to re-arrange Lilly next to her, making soothing sounds as she did so, and she thought
she'd been successful at first, until Lilly rolled the other way, and jabbed her bony knees into Veronica's hip. Veronica struggled with her for several minutes until she finally woke up enough to realize that there was another bed and if Lilly was determined to occupy this one, she could move to the other. That worked for a while; the sunrise was just starting to peek into the room when she felt Lilly climb back into her original bed.

"Oh kid, if you're ever gonna come spend the night with us, we're definitely going to need a California King."

Since the odds of getting back to sleep seemed slim this late in the game, Veronica rolled out of bed and went in to take a quick shower. Once she was dressed, she headed in to the kitchen to fix breakfast for the three of them. She'd just popped a pound of bacon into the oven to bake when she heard the front door of the unit open and then close. She came out from around the island and headed into the front room, jerking to a stop at the sight of Clarence Wiedman peering down into the top of one of the side table lamps.

"Looking for something, Clarence?" Veronica said in an overly friendly tone. She was pleased to see the man give a little jerk of surprise at the sound of her voice.

"Ms. Mars. I didn't expect anyone would be up so early on a Sunday morning." As usual, the man's voice was cool and unruffled. As usual, Veronica matched his tone exactly.

"Yeah, that's what it looked like to me. But here I am, up bright and early. The littlest Miss Kane woke me up so I thought I'd make us some breakfast. Would you like to join us?"

Clarence looked at her speculatively. "I wouldn't want to interrupt any family time."

She raised her eyebrows at him and tipped her head, an amused smile spreading across her face. "If anyone is interrupting family time, it would be me, and I was invited, so you, practically a Kane yourself, are certainly welcome. I've got bacon cooking and I'll cook the scrambled eggs once that's ready. We'll also have toast and if you're nice, I bet Lilly will share some of her vegemite. Nobody else will eat it."

Clarence chuckled as they walked into the kitchen. "No, I can't say that's a taste I've ever acquired."

He sat up at the counter and Veronica pulled the carton of eggs out of the fridge.

"Two or three?" she asked.

"Three if you've got enough." She tipped the carton up to show him five eggs, and then cracked three of them into the bowl with the others she had already scrambled.

"We are going to need more before tomorrow morning though. I'm gonna need you to get right on that." She raised an eyebrow at him as she beat the eggs and he rolled his eyes at her.

"The FBI uses a delivery service. Put together a list and I'll make sure they get it."

"Okay, so," she lowered her voice slightly. "Were you checking your own additions to the decor out there or were you looking for stuff placed by the management?"

Clarence looked down for a moment and then looked up at her, shaking his head slightly with a wry smile on his face. "Are you sure you don't have any remaining interest in young Mr. Kane? My life would be so much easier if he had you with him on a permanent basis."

She snorted out a laugh, then clapped her hand over her mouth before speaking in a lower volume. "Nope. Sorry to not make your life easier at the expense of my own, but that's not going to happen. I
do know what you mean though. Mr. Innocent thought I was nuts when I tried to get him to NOT talk about certain things inside. I would have thought that eighteen months on the run would make him a little more cautious. You seriously need to explain some of the hard facts of life."

He shook his head. "Unfortunately, that's not my job. I'm supposed to try to keep messes from happening and clean them up if they do but I don't get to ruffle anyone's feathers. I've been hoping for a while that you'd be the one to explain those hard facts but I guess that's not going to happen."

"Hey, it's not my fault, I've tried. He just doesn't listen. He's not a fan of that aspect of my personality." She peeked into the oven then pulled out the bacon to turn it over. "What do you know about that anyway?"

"About what?"

"How did you put it? 'Any remaining interest'? What's that supposed to mean?" She looked at him accusingly.

"I have spoken to Agent Morris since you arrived. She filled me in on the little scene when she brought you in. Of course, she has no idea about you and Mr. Echolls—"

Veronica dropped the pan of bacon onto the counter and her voice was practically a hiss. "What do you know about that?"

He gave her an amused look and paused before responding. "Well, I know that congratulations are in order."

Veronica froze, unable to breathe for a moment. "Clarence, who else knows that?" She could hear the pleading tone to her voice and hated it but there was too much at stake to play games.

He looked at her, considering, and then seemed to relent. "No one. I found out by accident. I thought that your father might not know yet and it wasn't my place to tell anyone else first."

The breath she was holding exploded out of her and she whirled away to lean against the refrigerator. After a minute to regulate her breathing, she looked back up at him. "I appreciate that more than you know." She let out a heavy sigh. "You're right about my dad. We got a little carried away and I don't want anyone else to know before we tell him. Thank you for keeping the news to yourself. And, I'm pretty sure I owe you my thanks for pulling Duncan into the situation with Gory and Dad's arrest. I thought I'd convinced Jake myself but after talking to Duncan, I think you took my pleas for help to the next level and involved Duncan."

Clarence nodded. "Yes, I did. I didn't see the situation correcting itself without some additional help and I did hope this would be the opportunity to resolve the other matter of bringing our fugitives home again."

"So, I did you a favor then, hmm? I'd feel better about our quid pro quo if there was some benefit to your side from all of this," Veronica said with a grin.

"I think we can consider our quid to be pro quo at this point," Clarence answered and Veronica nodded.

Twenty minutes later, all four of them sat down to eat breakfast. Lilly did try to get everyone to spread vegemite on their toast but none of them would take her up on it. Clarence advised that he thought that the negotiations would be completed later that afternoon and it was likely that there would be a meeting the following day with all of the parties to finalize the deal. He took the shopping list that Duncan and Veronica compiled and promised to return later, hopefully with news
of a resolution. Duncan then took Lilly in to take a bath and get dressed before he finished getting ready himself.

They spent the morning at the playground and Veronica took the opportunity to lay out on a blanket to read while Duncan and Lilly went in to make lunch. Clarence turned up by mid-afternoon and Duncan went back inside to get an update on the status of the negotiations. Veronica and Lilly played on the slide and the swings and Veronica gave Lilly piggy-back rides all around the grassy area until she collapsed in a heap with Lilly climbing on her, both of them laughing. They were lying on the blanket napping when Duncan came back out of the unit.

Veronica felt the shifting of the blanket and then a hand on her head. She jerked her eyes open to find Duncan lying beside she and Lilly, a hand stroking her hair. "Duncan, stop," she said in a low voice.

He did as she asked, sitting up beside her and reaching to run his hand over Lilly's curls. "I've got my deal," he said quietly.

She sat up, smiling, and gave him a very quick hug, before pulling away again. "That's great. I am so happy this is working out so you can bring Lilly home."

"Yeah, me too," he said, his voice subdued.

"Duncan, did it not go like you hoped? They're not requiring any jail time, are they?"

"Oh no. There's a fine and there will be some review by Child Protective Services for about six months. They'll come in every month or so and as long as Lilly's environment looks appropriate and she's happy and healthy, everything will be over."

Veronica looked up at him, perplexed. "So what's with the emo act? You're acting like someone ran over your dog. I would think you'd be thrilled to get your life back."

"If I was getting my life back, I would be thrilled. But a big part of it is going to be missing and I don't understand why." He grabbed her hand and pulled it against his chest. "Veronica, why don't you want to be with me anymore? Our break-up was staged and you know I still love you. I want us to be a family. Lilly already loves you and I can tell you love her. You're so great with her. In a few years, no one will even remember she's not your daughter. Anyone who saw you together now and didn't know better would think that she was. Why are you fighting me on this? Why won't you be with us?" He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it as she sat, looking at him in shock. As his lips touched her hand, she pulled it back from him like he'd burned her.

"Duncan, come on. It's been almost two years. And we may have staged the break-up as part of you leaving but really, we weren't some perfect, fated couple, even then. We were both trying to get back something we lost when Lilly died and we just couldn't. You didn't want who I had turned into; you just wanted that time in our life back. I did too, that's why I went along. But it wasn't working and it wouldn't work now."

"Veronica, that isn't—"

"You need to listen. We haven't talked much about this but do you know what I did last year? I solved a serial rape case. I found a murderer. Actually, with Clarence's help, I found another murderer. I'm here right now because I'm in an FBI intern program. Presumably, that's because I might want to be an FBI agent. Going undercover on cases. Probably traveling to a lot of different places. Even if I don't go FBI, I'll probably still want to work with my dad as a private investigator. I know that is not what you want in a mother for Lilly. If you will just be honest, you know that too."
Duncan's eyes remained cast down at Lilly as she spoke and Veronica reached out and rested a finger under his chin, pressing up so he would look at her. "I have something else to tell you but you have to promise not to freak out."

"The love of my life is telling me she doesn't love me. If I want to freak out, I will."

Okay, well then, we're not talking about Logan quite yet. "Duncan, come on. You've had two girlfriends in your whole life. I am not the same girl that you fell in love with when we were fifteen. The girl I am now does not work in your life. Really let yourself think about what you want and what I am. They're not the same. Not at all. I absolutely want to still be in your life. I hope we'll always be part of each other's lives. But we do not make sense as a couple anymore. You have to see it."

Duncan stood up. "Will you stay with Lilly? I need a little time by myself."

"Sure. I'm happy to stay with her." Veronica watched as he trudged away. This should be a happy day and instead he was mourning for a life that never existed. She felt both frustrated and sad but there wasn't anything she could do to fix things for him. He had to figure out reality for himself.

Once he was gone, she stretched out beside Lilly, stroking her curls and thinking about everything that had happened in the last several days. Duncan was right about one thing. She had fallen in love with this little girl and her heart ached for her growing up without a mom. Despite Lianne's alcoholism and ultimate abandonment, she'd always seemed like a good mom when Veronica was little. She was saddened that Lilly wouldn't even have that. She thought that if it wasn't for Logan, she might even have tried to make a go of it with Duncan for Lilly's sake, although she knew it would be a disaster.

"Aunt V'ronca?" Lilly's sleepy voice broke through her thoughts.

"Yeah, baby girl?"

"Where Daddy?" she asked, cuddling up against Veronica.

"I think he's back at the apartment. Are you ready to go back and see him?"

Lilly nodded. "Mmmhmm."

"Okay, let's pick up our stuff and get back." They stood up and Veronica folded the blanket and dropped it into the bag of supplies, slinging it over her shoulder.

"Piggy ride?" Lilly inquired and Veronica laughed.

"It's a piggy-back ride, sweetie, and yeah, hop up on the bench and I'll piggy-back you." Lilly whooped and ran over to the bench, climbing up to wait for Veronica.

At 1:00 PM on Monday afternoon, Veronica accompanied Duncan and Lilly to one of the office buildings for the signing of Duncan's deal. Veronica sat to Duncan's right, pushed back slightly from the table with Lilly on her lap while Duncan went over the details of the deal with Agent Morris and the lead attorney from the Justice Department. Jake and Lianne sat along the wall, Jake watching Duncan's every move and Lianne watching Veronica. Veronica was deliberately ignoring both of them, focusing on Lilly instead. Several other people lined the walls also, including Celeste who was on the opposite side of the room from her ex-husband and his new wife. She alternated between beaming at Duncan and glowering at Veronica, Lianne, and Jake. About halfway through the giant pile of paperwork, Lilly started to fuss and Veronica turned her so they were facing each other and
they quietly played patty-cake and a toddler version of rock-paper-scissors where Lilly won every
time.

Once the paperwork was completed, Duncan shook hands with Agent Morris and the attorney, then
turned to Veronica, leaning in to hug both her and Lilly at once. "Well, that's done. It's time to go
home." Veronica pulled back and Lilly climbed from her arms to Duncan's. Veronica stood and
stepped back as Jake and Celeste both descended on their son and granddaughter, apparently
agreeable to being in proximity to each other in their race to be the first to hug their long-missing son
and granddaughter. Celeste seemed to be the winner as she pulled Lilly out of Duncan's arms.

"Veronica?" She turned to find Lianne standing nervously beside her. "How are you?"

"I'm fine. I hear congratulations are in order," Veronica said in a cold voice.

"Oh, thank you. It was rather sudden but we're—"

"I really don't need the details," she said and walked towards the door.

"Auntie V'ronca," Lilly yelled, squirming free from Celeste and running after her. "Wait for me." 
Veronica laughed and picked up the little girl.

"It's okay, sweetie, I was just going to wait outside. Go back and see your grandma. I won't leave
without you."

Lilly put her hands on Veronica's cheeks and tugged her head down so she could kiss her forehead.
"Okay. You wait."

Veronica put her down and watched as she walked slowly back to Celeste. When she glanced up at
the older woman, she was struck by an even more baleful glare than usual from Duncan's mother.
She smiled sweetly and stepped into the hallway, sinking onto a bench to wait.

Although the paperwork was signed, there was still filing to be done with the court so Duncan,
Veronica, and Lilly all went back to the apartment for another couple of days. On Wednesday
morning, Duncan made breakfast and they all sat down together to try to explain to Lilly why Auntie
Veronica was not going home with them. After a lot of tears, mostly from Lilly, they agreed that
once they were all back in Neptune, they would visit as often as possible. Duncan and Lilly were
going to the Napa house with Celeste for a few weeks and after that, Duncan planned to find a place
in Neptune. There was no way that Veronica was going back to Jake's new estate with Lianne living
there so she hoped that she and Logan would be able to get a place fairly quickly once they made it
back to town. She couldn't wait for Logan to meet Lilly and vice-versa. She felt confident that Uncle
Logan would become Lilly's favorite pretty quickly. He was much too good with the ladies for the
second Lilly Kane to resist him.

When Duncan took Lilly into the bedroom to put her down for her late morning nap, Veronica
decided she had to have a hard conversation with him before they went their separate ways. When he
came back into the living room, she swallowed hard and dove right in. "Duncan, I need to let you
know something before you go home."

Duncan grinned at her. "You changed your mind and you'll come home with us?"

She snorted and rolled her eyes. "No. That's not it." She looked away from him for a moment then
back with a more serious look on her face. "I haven't been completely forthcoming about
something."
"Why do I think I'm not going to like whatever you have to say?"

"Well, I'm hoping that once you've had a little time to think about it, you'll be okay with it. I've gotten pretty attached to that little girl of yours and I really do want us to be friends."

He looked resigned. "You're with someone."

She huffed in surprise. "Wow. You're good. I am."

"Is it serious?"

She nodded. "Yeah, it is."

"Anyone I know?" She looked away, then back as she nodded again. His eyebrows crinkled together as he tried to understand her reaction and then suddenly shot up. "Oh shit, it's Logan!"

She choked out a laugh. "I guess that makes it clear how you feel about it."

"I feel like you stole my best friend and my girlfriend away from me all at once."

"That's probably fair but I hope you can get past that. I want us all to be friends again. I want Lilly to have a chance to get to know her Uncle Logan. No matter what, the three of us have been important in each other's lives for a long time and I'd like it if we could get that back."

"With me on the outside," Duncan said, his voice bitter.

"Romantically, yes, but not outside of the three of us. Four of us if you count your daughter. And I want to count her. I want to be in her life. I want her in our lives. But I know this isn't going to be easy for you for a while, which is why I'm telling you this now. You're going to be in Napa for a couple weeks at least. I'm hoping that while you're there, you can start working on getting used to the idea so when you guys are back in Neptune, we can try to make this work." She looked at him, hoping he could tell how important this was to her. "Can you at least try?"

Duncan stood up. "I'm going to my room. Lilly is going to want to say good-bye so please don't leave yet." He turned and walked out of the room.

Veronica sighed. That went well.

At 3:00 PM, Veronica piggy-backed Lilly back to the apartment. They'd been on the swings for at least an hour after Veronica made lunch for them both. Duncan had not come out of his bedroom. Clarence had come by the playground about a half hour earlier to let them know that the Kanes would be leaving the grounds by 3:15.

"Auntie V'ronca, why won't you come with us?"

"You're going to go visit your Grandma Celeste and I've got to stay here for a couple more days and then I have to go to school. But once you come back home from Grandma Celeste's, you can come visit me at my house. Maybe we can take my dog to the beach. You're going to love him. He's big but he's really nice."

"Can I have a dog?"

Veronica chuckled. "You'll have to talk to your daddy about that, sweetie."

"He'll say yes," Lilly said confidently.
"You're probably right." They reached the apartment and went in. Their suitcases were all piled onto a luggage cart just inside the door and voices could be heard coming from the kitchen. Veronica set Lilly down and the little girl ran into the kitchen.

"Daddy, I need a dog."

Veronica burst into laughter as she walked into the kitchen. "This is not my fault." Clarence and Agent Morris were sitting at the counter and Duncan was packing a cooler with snacks for the trip. All three were looking at the little girl bouncing on her toes.

"We'll see, Lilbit. Once we're home from Grandma Celeste's and we figure out where we're going to live. Then we'll talk about it. Okay?"

"Okay." Lilly turned to hug Veronica's legs. "I'm getting a dog." Everyone burst into laughter.

"She's got your number, Kane," Agent Morris said dryly.

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Clarence had taken the bags down to his cart and Morris had Veronica's single bag. Veronica had ducked back into the bedroom to make sure she hadn't missed anything when Duncan appeared in the doorway. "Veronica?"

She looked up from the dresser drawers. "Hey, Duncan. I was just making sure we didn't miss anything."

"Yeah, I just swept my room and the bathroom. I think we're clear." He cleared his throat and tucked his hands into his pockets. "Look, I've been thinking about what you told me this morning. I'm not gonna lie; it was hard to hear. I've been thinking it was going to be you and me and Lilly for the last year and a half but I know that what you've said makes sense. And, if I can, I want to get Logan back in my life and I don't want to lose you entirely, even if we're not going to be what I had hoped. So, when we're back, let's get dinner and start working this out. It's gonna be a little weird for a while but I think we'll be able to figure it out."

Veronica smiled. "I'm really glad you feel that way. We'll just take it slow." She walked to the door and gave him a careful, one-armed hug before heading for the front door. "Come on, Donut. Let's get you home."

"Do not let my daughter hear you call me that," Duncan said in a stern voice.

"And now I've got some leverage," Veronica laughed as they walked out of the apartment, a sense of hope that they could make their friendship work filling her with happiness.

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Chapter End Notes

Okay, so are we feeling a little better about Duncan?
Chapter 16

It was nearly 4:00 PM on Monday afternoon when Logan drove far enough out of the wilderness to get cell service back. "Hang on, Sam, I've finally got bars, I'm calling Veronica." Logan pushed her name in his phone and was surprised when the call went straight to voicemail.

"Babe! I'm back in the land of cell towers and couldn't wait to call you. Why's your phone off? I knew I'd get voicemail since you should still be at work but you don't usually have the phone off. Anyway, we'll be back in Quantico about 8:00 PM and I could definitely be talked into a drive-by in the parking lot if you can make it. Give me a call when you can and we'll work out the details. I miss you like crazy. Love you."

Logan thumbed the phone off and dropped it into the center console. "You're a sap, dude," Sam teased. "I haven't had to call Mady since I left town."

"That's your problem, man. I'm not going to apologize for missing my wife."

"You never do. I'm used to it."

"Jeannie! Hey! What's up with my favorite big sis?"

"Logan, hi, how are you? Are you back from camping?" Jeannie had seen Logan's name pop up on her phone and took a deep breath, preparing for the conversation.

"Yeah, we got back tonight and I've left like four messages for Veronica but I can't seem to catch her. I was starting to get worried." Jeannie heard loud laughter in the background and some scuffling.

"Logan? What's going on?"

"My idiot friend here thinks he can shame me about worrying about Veronica. He doesn't seem to understand that it can't be done." She heard a smack and another voice say, "Ow, geez." "So, is her phone dead? Can I talk to her please?"

"Umm, actually, no, she isn't here. And her phone is just turned off. It was easier that way."

"What do you mean—where is she? She's okay, right?"

"Yeah, sure. She just got pulled into some special project a few days ago and she couldn't take her phone. She's still on the grounds but she's out of touch right now." There was silence on the other end for a moment. "Logan? Are you still there?"

"Yeah, I'm here. Is that normal? She'd said she could get retained over a weekend for a class or something but she never mentioned anything like this before."

"Well, it is a little unusual but there's nothing to worry about. I'm hoping she'll be back here by the time you're back on Wednesday." No lies, every word she said was true. She hoped.

"Hmm, okay, if you say so. I'm kinda bummed though. I was hoping for at least a few minutes. Hey, Sam and I are going to go out and get dinner; do you want to come with?"

There were not many things that sounded less appealing than looking Logan in the face while she
continued to assert that everything was normal. She didn't have any reason to think anything was wrong; she just didn't know for sure. Veronica hadn't been able to make any kind of contact since she'd walked away with Agent Morris several days earlier. Jeannie had encountered the agent once more when she came to collect Veronica's bag and she'd realized in that visit that she apparently did not have much of a poker face.

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"Were you able to bring Mars' bag?"

Jeannie looked up to find the agent who had led Veronica away standing over her. She reached under her desk, pulling Veronica's bag out and handing it over with a sigh.

"Oh, now I get it," Morris said smugly. "You've got something going on with her."

Jeannie's mouth fell open in surprise. "What are you talking about?"

The older woman dropped into the desk next to Jeannie, vacant in Veronica's absence. "You were pretty distressed earlier and you still are now, plus Mars made a point of saying she wasn't just waiting around for Kane to come home but then she denied having a boyfriend. So, between your reactions and what she's said I thought maybe..."

Jeannie snorted out a laugh, the lightest moment she'd had since this woman walked into their classroom. "No, no, we're just friends. Definitely not anything romantic going on."

Morris looked contemplative for a moment, then shrugged. "Okay, whatever. But, whatever's got you worried that she's going to fall back into old patterns with Kane, you can relax. He's gonna have to try a lot harder if he wants to get anywhere. She definitely put him in his place pretty much as soon as she got in the door. I'd bet he's not done trying though." Morris stood up and gestured toward Veronica's bag. "Is that everything?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, I'll make sure it gets to her. Thanks for the help."

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Jeannie had been pleased with the agent's statement about Veronica putting this old boyfriend in his place but she was less thrilled with the prediction that he was going to keep trying. She understood why Veronica wasn't admitting to the relationship with Logan; she was still trying to keep him from being dragged into whatever this mess was. She just wished the mess would get cleaned up and go away.

Logan's voice broke through her thoughts. "Jeannie? Have you eaten?"

"Oh, sorry, Logan. Yeah, I had dinner in the cafeteria a couple of hours ago. Thanks though. Maybe we can plan for breakfast on Saturday morning before you guys get going home?"

"That's kinda what I had in mind too. Plus, I'll probably see you Wednesday. If you come down to the parking lot with Veronica, you can distract Jack while I shanghai her to the backseat of the Range Rover and have my way with her." There was another explosion of laughter in the background and more scuffling sounds.

"No, I don't want to hear about it. Lalalalala," Jeannie teased, although truthfully, that was exactly what she hoped would happen on Wednesday. "I'll come down with her and talk to Jack but if you
two disappear, I am not going to think about it."

Logan laughed and Jeannie let herself relax a little. She was overreacting to the unknown. That had to be it.

"I'll have her call you as soon as she can. I promise."

Tuesday morning, Sam and Logan woke early for the drive to Virginia Beach. Logan was excited to spend some time around all these people who loved to surf as much as he did. The initial rounds of surfing wouldn't start until the next day so Logan would be able to get some time in the water after he and Sam arrived. He then planned to be heading for home by 3:00 PM on Wednesday to get back early enough to spend some time with Veronica that night. Sam hadn't expressed any desire to try surfing but he was plenty interested in the party atmosphere.

After getting settled into their hotel, they spent the afternoon down along the boardwalk where the celebration was already in full swing even though the competitive surfing had not yet begun. There was plenty of surfing going on though and Logan rented a board for a couple hours to get one more chance for Atlantic surfing before heading home.

Logan trotted out of the surf and jogged up to where Sam was sitting on the beach. "That was great. You should give it a try. Take a lesson." He flopped down on the towel next to Sam.

"Nah, too many people around to watch me crash and burn, or maybe crash and drown is the better way to put that." Sam laughed and poked Logan's shoulder. "You were doing great though. Too bad you need to get back; if you guys weren't rushing back in a couple of days, you could have signed up to compete in the amateur championships."

"Ehh, I'm not much into competition. I just love to be out there. When we're back next year, I'll have to get you out on a board." Logan stretched out on his back, letting the sun warm his skin. "Someplace with fewer people so you don't have to be embarrassed when you fall off a dozen times before you manage to stand up."

"We'll see. So, once you're dry again, what should we do next? Carnival? Or down through the vendors? I want to watch that guy who does the speed painting with spray paint again. That was pretty awesome."

"Yeah, it was. I've seen that before in Vegas. It is amazing to watch." Logan rolled over onto his stomach. "Give me about ten minutes and then we'll cruise the vendors and find something to eat."

They were out late so it was close to 10:30 AM on Wednesday before they managed to make it downstairs for breakfast. Logan was more awake than Sam and had showered and cleaned up before they went downstairs so once they were finished eating, Sam headed back up to get ready for the day. Logan lingered at their table, nursing his coffee. He had signed the check and was almost ready to follow Sam upstairs when he heard his name.

"Logan? Is that you?"

He turned toward the voice and was startled to find Jake Kane standing next to his table.

"What are you doing here?" they both said in unison, then broke into nervous laughter.

It had been a couple of years since Logan had seen Jake. Veronica had said that Jake looked pretty ragged when she saw him in May but this man looked like the Jake Kane of Logan's childhood
memories. Friendly and confident, happy and calm. Maybe a little thinner and greyer than Logan remembered but nothing unreasonable. When they were young, Jake had seemed like the ideal dad to him. He seemed to care about his kids and their friends; he didn't hover but did actually seem to give a damn. Most importantly, Logan never saw any evidence that he would fly off the handle and break your nose with little to no provocation. With that as his bar for judging a good parent from bad, it was clear that Logan's standard was pretty low back then. It had made it easy to idolize Jake. Once the truth came out about Aaron and Lilly, Jake didn't really speak to him again but Logan couldn't blame him. He tried to distance himself from anything that reminded him of Aaron also.

Jake's voice snapped Logan out of his unwelcome thoughts of Aaron. "I'm just here doing a little sight-seeing. I just got re-married recently and my wife was born out here so we're taking a little time to see some places she lived a long time ago."

"Wow, congratulations. Do you want to sit down? I was just about to head back upstairs. I'm here for the surfing championships."

The older man sat down on the other side of the booth. "Are you competing?"

Logan laughed. "Oh no, I'm just checking it out. I was out here this summer and when I heard about the event, I thought it would be cool to see. I'm not going to be here for long."

"So did you get out of Neptune to avoid Gorya? I'm pretty sure he wouldn't have bothered you. I spoke to his father and he assured me that Gorya wouldn't be any trouble for you or for Veronica."

Logan raised his eyebrows in surprise, then gave a half smile and nodded. "So she did get to you, huh? Well, thank you, for intervening. I wasn't that concerned but Veronica was."

"She was right to be concerned but, no, I'm a little embarrassed to say that she really didn't get to me. Not when she came at me head-on." Jake pinched the bridge of his nose between his fingers.

"Huh. She seemed to think she'd gotten through to you," Logan said. This conversation was weird and getting weirder.

"Well, she must have had some idea that I might not have been convinced, or maybe she was just hedging her bets when she called Duncan to talk to me too."

Okay, not just weird, surreal. "I don't think so. Veronica doesn't know where Duncan is or how to reach him. Believe me, I've asked plenty of times."

Jake laughed. "She's a sneaky little thing. I'm really not sure Duncan knows what he's getting himself into this time."

That screeching, needle across the record thing that movies used to express something huge and shocking was apparently a real thing because Logan heard it, loud and clear. "I don't know what you mean, Jake," he said in the calmest voice he could muster.

"Well, I'm not sure if I should be talking about this but it's going to be public knowledge in a few days and, even with the trouble with your dad, you've been Duncan's best friend since—well—as long as I can remember. I need you to sit on this information until the news is out, please. Can you promise me that?"

"Sure," Logan said automatically.

"Well, the day after Veronica came to me and, truthfully, after I blew her off, I got a call to fly to Australia for a business meeting. At least, that's what I was told. When I got to the meeting, it was
Duncan who had set it up. He'd heard about the trouble with Gorya and wanted me to try to fix things. I have to assume he heard from Veronica."

Logan took a deep breath. "But he could have heard from another source. It didn't have to be that Veronica knew how to reach him." Because that would mean that she's lied to me for the last year that she hasn't been in touch with him.

"No, you're right, it could have been from someone else. I just don't know who that would be. Other than you, Veronica's the only person I can think of who could have known."

"No, I haven't known where he is. He didn't even say good-bye to me before he took off." Logan rubbed at the back of his neck. "So, Duncan lures you to Australia to get you to help me with my little problem. Then what happened?"

"Well, I made some calls and took care of your 'little problem', as you say, and then Duncan took me home with him to meet my granddaughter." Jake's face lit up. "She is so precious, just the cutest little thing, really smart, just adorable. She's got blonde curls and brown eyes. Very opinionated for such a little thing. I spent a couple of days with them and once I met her I knew I had to find a way to get them home."

Logan's breath caught. Duncan coming home was pretty much his biggest fear. Veronica had left him for Duncan once before; he had no reason to think she wouldn't do it again. As happy as they had been in the last few months, Duncan had always been her first choice.

"So, as it happens," Jake continued blithely, unaware of Logan's distress, "my head of security is former FBI, and he still has some contacts in the Bureau. Duncan told me some things that could help us with the Mannings, and Clarence went to work on those. Once he had some evidence of their lack of fitness to have custody of my granddaughter, he took it to his associates and started the ball rolling. Duncan and Lilly got back to the States about ten days ago and Duncan signed his deal yesterday. They're back home to stay." Jake's happiness would have been contagious, if the reason for it wasn't filling Logan with crushing dread. All he could think of was convincing Veronica not to go back to Neptune. If she didn't encounter Duncan, maybe he would be able to keep her.

"So, is he going home with you now?" Logan asked tentatively, trying to plan how he could keep Duncan and Veronica from spending time together.

Jake grimaced. "They're going up to Napa first to stay with Celeste for a few weeks. She insisted, since he has been very clear that he is coming home to Neptune to live. They're flying to Napa with her this afternoon."

Okay, so I've got some time.

Jake's laugh interrupted Logan's frenzied thoughts. "When she thought Veronica was going to be coming with them, I thought her head was going to explode."

That screeching noise filled Logan's head again. "What do you mean? How would Veronica be with them?"

"She's with them now. For another few hours at least, until they leave for Napa. Strangely enough, it turned out that Veronica is out here on an FBI internship. Did you know anything about that?"

Logan nodded slowly. "Yeah. I know about that."

"Well, once Duncan and Lilly came back into the United States, they were officially in the custody of the FBI. They've been in a little apartment on the FBI grounds in Virginia. The FBI had to have
an agent staying with them, but once Clarence realized that Veronica was already on the grounds, he arranged to move her in with them. She's been there for a week. It was nice, giving them some time to be alone without any other stressors, letting Lilly and Veronica get to know each other. She's never had a mother before but it's like Veronica was never apart from them." He pulled his phone out and poked it a few times. "Aren't they cute together? They really could be mother and daughter."

Logan took the phone and looked down at a picture of his wife with a tiny blonde girl in her lap. They were both smiling, big toothy smiles, and their hands were against each others, playing patty-cake. "There's more, just flick to the side," Jake said. The next picture was with the little girl cuddled against Veronica's chest, Veronica's chin resting on the curly head. Another flick and Logan was nearly sick: Duncan was leaning into the picture, one arm draped around the back of Veronica's chair and the other hand in a three-way patty-cake pose with both Veronica and the baby. Duncan was grinning like an idiot, the baby was laughing, and Veronica was looking fondly at both of them.

"That's a cute one, huh?" Jake snagged the phone back and thumbed rapidly through the pictures. "This one's my favorite. I really shouldn't have it. We couldn't go on the grounds but I got someone there on the base to keep an eye on them during the week. Duncan was so certain that he and Veronica would get back together right away but I wasn't quite as sure. Turns out he was right all along. He's probably pushing for them to get married as soon as possible so she can adopt Lilly and they really can be a family." He held the phone out again and Logan took it cautiously. The picture was outside, Veronica asleep on a blanket with the little girl snuggled in her arms, and Duncan lying behind Veronica, his head propped up on his hand, looking down at them both. Logan jerked his thumb across the picture to get it out of his sight and the next one was worse. Same position but Veronica was awake, with her head turning back across her shoulder, looking at Duncan. They both looked serious.

*Jesus, they're probably kissing in the next one.* Logan snapped the phone shut before his traitorous thumb could confirm his worst nightmare and handed it to Jake. "Well, that's a happy little family Duncan's got there. In a couple of years, no one will even remember that Lilly's not Veronica's. Until they see her brown eyes and wonder where Veronica's been spending her nights." His voice was bitter and Jake finally seemed to notice, looking at Logan with confusion. "You might want to invest in little blue contact lenses; it will further the image." He stood up. "Thanks for saving my life, Jake, but it probably wasn't worth the bother. Getting taken out by the Russian mob sounds a little more interesting than just drinking myself to death but, oh well, what are ya gonna do? Although, I guess if it was the catalyst to get Duncan back the life he deserves, it was beneficial to someone." He took a step away and bumped into a blonde woman. "Excuse me."

"Logan?"

He looked at the woman for the first time and discovered he had collided with Veronica's mother.

"Mrs. Mars?"

Jake slid out of the booth and pulled Lianne into him. "It's Mrs. Kane now. Finally. It took us a little longer than it should have but..." Jake smiled down at her and gave her a kiss on the top of the head before looking up to give Logan a rueful grin. "It's going to make for weird in-laws, I know. When Veronica's mom is also her step-mother-in-law and Duncan's dad is also his step-father-in-law."

Logan backed away a little. He had to get out of there. "Yeah, it sounds like a wacky sit-com, or maybe reality TV. If I hear about a new show called 'The Kanes', I'll be sure to have a look." He took a step towards the door. "Hey, be sure to tell Duncan and Veronica I'm very happy for them. I'll keep my eyes open for an invite to the nuptials. See ya."
Logan held himself together across the lobby and up to the room. There were too many people everywhere to lose it. He got up to the room and stepped inside, leaning heavily against the door, trying to process any scenario where his life hadn't just blown apart. He couldn't think of a single one. Veronica had left him for Duncan and hadn't even bothered to mention it to him. He thought about the call with Jeannie a couple of days before. She said that Veronica was staying elsewhere on the grounds but would be back by Wednesday night. Well, obviously she would be, Duncan and Lilly were leaving for Napa and she couldn't go with them. Celeste wouldn't have allowed it. Is she going to tell me tonight or just let me keep thinking everything's okay? No matter what else was happening between her and Duncan, he couldn't see a scenario where Veronica would keep stringing him along until Duncan was back in Neptune. She was probably going to break the news to him tonight. He was planning to make up for a lost week together in the back seat of the Range Rover and she was planning to tell him they were through. *Nope, I think I'm gonna skip that.*

He grabbed his bag and threw his clothes in it, then headed for the bathroom, realizing suddenly that the bathroom door was closed because Sam was here with him. As if remembering his existence summoned him, Sam threw open the bathroom door and walked out, grinning at Logan.

"All right. I'm finally ready. You've got your bag. Are we going to put the bags in the car and check out now? I can shift my stuff over once Mady gets here later to pick me up."

Logan's brain was whirling around too much to understand him at first. When Logan continued to stare at him, Sam took a step toward him. "Hey man, what's up?"

The simple question was something Logan could process. "Umm, I've gotta go."

Sam closed the distance between them and put a hand on Logan's upper arm. "What's the matter? Did something happen to Veronica?"

Logan barked out a laugh and sank down onto the couch. "Yeah, you could say that."

Sam followed him. "Dude, tell me what's happening. Are you crying? Come on, what's wrong?"

Logan wiped angrily at his eyes and shook his head. "Nothing much. I was just informed of my wife's upcoming marriage to someone else, but really, I should have been expecting it. I should have known it was only a matter of time until he managed to get back to her. I'm a place holder. Someone to occupy her time while she waits for him to come back to her. That's all I was the first time and it's all I've ever been for her."

Sam gaped at him. "Are you nuts, dude? She's crazy about you. She lights up when she sees you. What's making you think this all of a sudden?"

"I saw the pictures. Got the happy news from her future father-in-law. You know, if Lilly would have managed to keep from getting herself killed, he probably would have been my father-in-law too. Of course, Lilly would have been cheating on me constantly but what the hell. I was used to that." Logan stood up again and walked into the bathroom, grabbing his stuff and bringing it back out to shove it into his suitcase. Sam was sitting on the couch now, a disbelieving look on his face.

"I seriously do not know what you're talking about. I can't—won't—believe that Veronica's with someone else."

"I SAW THE PICTURES!" Logan paused and took a deep breath, trying to get control of himself. "Veronica and Duncan and his little girl, playing 'happy family' together. Just what Duncan came back for. And just what Veronica's been waiting for. It sounds like they've been in communication all along, even though she told me she hadn't seen or heard from him since he split. Who else would
have told Duncan what happened back in May? It only makes sense that she reached out to him to get him to help get us both out of trouble." His voice softened, "I don't think she expected he'd be back. I won't believe she talked me into getting married if she thought he would be back a few weeks later. But it makes sense that once it happened, she'd go back to him. That's what she did the last time. He's who she really wants."

"There's got to be another explanation," Sam said, rubbing his face with his hands.

"Well, if you think of one, let me know. I can't think of anything that makes more sense." Logan zipped his bag shut. "Look, I'm sorry, but I've got to get out of here. I'm going to get my stuff from the hotel and leave. I don't want to have to go through this with her."

"No!" Sam scrambled to his feet. "You've got to give her a chance to explain. This is a misunderstanding, nothing more."

Logan released a grim chuckle. "No. I'm getting out. I'll figure out what I'm going to do on the way home. I can't go through hearing her tell me all of this. I'm afraid I'm going to break down and beg her to stay with me. I've got to finally accept reality. I'm afraid I won't be strong enough to do that if she's standing right in front of me."

"You're making a mistake," Sam insisted.

"Look dude," Logan said, "you've known Veronica for a month. I've known her since we were twelve. Duncan's her first love. She dumped me for him once before and then when he took off, I guess I assumed I was safe. But now he's back and my moment in the sun is over." He looked sadly at his bare left hand and rubbed his eyes again. "When's Mady going to get here? You'll be okay if I leave, right?"

"Sure, I'll be fine but I don't think you should be by yourself. Let me ride back with you. I'll find another way back home." Sam bustled around the room, throwing all of his belongings into his duffel bag.

"I'm going to the hotel and getting my stuff and heading back to Neptune. You can't just trail along with me to California."

"I can if you need me too." Sam stopped his hurried packing and looked at Logan earnestly.

"Seriously, man, the sympathy is going to be what kills me here. I'm holding it together for now but I can't keep myself from breaking down if I'm dealing with you too. Thanks, but I just need to go." He looked at Sam. "I'm sure the front desk will hold your bag until Mady gets here. That way you can still go down and watch the competition."

"Do you really think that's what I'm worrying about right now?"

"No. I'm sorry. I'm not really thinking straight." Logan went to Sam and gave him a quick hug. "I'm going. Give me a call if you're ever out in California. Maybe I'll get out here again...no, I probably won't. Too much of her here." Sam's arms tightened around Logan, pushing him that much closer to finally breaking down so he struggled away. "Bye." The last thing he saw as he hurried out of the room was Sam dropping back onto the couch with his head in his hands.

Logan got back to the hotel by 2:30 PM. He let himself in the room and looked around. Veronica had stuff everywhere. He slowly walked through the unit, cataloging items that didn't belong to him. Books, clothes, stuff all over the bathroom. He walked into the bedroom and grimaced; there were still clothes everywhere from their last night together. They'd been in a hurry to get Veronica to the
base on time after her rough night and he hadn't bothered straightening up when he and Sam had been there on Monday night. Back then—when he still thought he was happily married—he'd enjoyed the reminders of Veronica all around him.

She'd been in two different sets of lingerie last Tuesday night; the first was a ruby-colored camisole and tap pants. She'd been wearing them that day and he'd peeled them off of her when they first got home from the birthday party. The camisole was still on top of the TV where he'd tossed it and the tap pants were on the low dresser that held the TV. He'd pulled the camisole over her head and set her onto that dresser when they first got into the bedroom, eventually pulling the tap pants off her also before she wrapped her legs around him and they'd...he groaned and banged his head against the wall. Nothing good was going to come of remembering what they'd done next. He could see the other item, a stretchy black lace chemise that he'd gotten her for her birthday, peeking out from under the pillows on the bed. After that first time on the dresser, she'd put the chemise on, saying that he'd really only gotten it for himself so he should at least be able to unwrap it. He reached for the ruby camisole and held it against his face. Even a week later, it still smelled like Veronica, that marshmallows and Promises scent he'd teased her about in the past. It had become such a reassuring scent for him; even when she was locked away on the base, he always felt like she was with him when he put his head on her pillow. Now, there was no reassurance, only the pain that he was losing her again, and this time it was going to be for good.

The camisole was soaked before he realized he'd been leaning against the dresser crying into it for several minutes. A quick glance at the bedside clock showed it was nearly 3:00 PM. Stop feeling sorry for yourself and grab your stuff. You've got to get out of here before she figures out that you know and shows up to explain herself.

He was pretty sure that listening to her explain what had happened would be the end of him.

He grabbed his large suitcase and quickly pulled everything of his out of the closet and the drawers. He did his best to not focus on Veronica's clothes; every time he identified an item, the tears started up again. When he realized that he was holding his shirt from the wedding, he flung it back into the closet like it had burned him. He could see Veronica's dress further back in the gloom of the closet and he had to turn away. Luckily, they'd kept separate drawers so he didn't have to chance on any other lingerie that might distract him further.

By the time he'd gotten his bathroom items separated from Veronica's, Logan was physically exhausted. He pulled the suitcase into the living room and looked around. His eyes fell on the wedding pictures he'd had framed the prior week. The one from the wedding itself caught his attention. They were facing each other, hands joined, probably during the vows. Their eyes were locked on each other and they looked so damn happy. He picked up the photo and ran his thumb gently over Veronica's face, shaking his head. He'd never imagined he could have been that happy. He should have known it was only fleeting.

He set the photo carefully on the table next to the others. He considered hurling them all at the wall but he couldn't bring himself to do it. He really had been happy in that moment—that wasn't fake. Maybe it hadn't been able to last but...at least he'd had that moment. He knew it was real. Even if it was over, he couldn't destroy the evidence that it had existed. He considered for a moment, then picked the frame up again and fit it carefully into his suitcase. He wasn't sure it was the smartest thing to do, to keep dwelling on happiness that was gone, but he figured if it got too painful, he could get rid of the photo later. Now, it was all he had left.

With everything that he needed in his bag, Logan went to the desk and pulled out a piece of the hotel stationery. One more quick note for Veronica, mostly to discourage her from trying to chase him down and explain herself. He really didn't need any more explanation.
When he was done, he hauled his luggage down to the truck and loaded it up. He then ducked into the hotel's office. He confirmed that he was paid up through the end of the month and let them know that his ex-girlfriend still had stuff in the room and would probably be there by the weekend to pick up her belongings. In case she did not, he signed a release that they could sell anything that was left at the end of the rental term.

Agent Morris dropped Veronica off at her dorm but all the other interns were still at their work assignments. Veronica let herself into her empty dorm room, wanting a nap since Jeannie wouldn't be back for another hour and Logan probably wouldn't be arriving for at least a couple more. Before her nap though, she needed to find her phone and try to reach Logan. They'd been apart for a week and she'd had enough of the separation. She dug through her desk drawers, looking for her phone, but found nothing so she took a peek into Jeannie's and found her phone in the top drawer, powered off. She turned it on and seeing the battery was low, plugged it into the charger. She listened to several messages from Logan and then dialed his number. The phone rang a few times then went to voice mail. She figured he was still driving back from Virginia Beach so left a quick message.

"Hey there. I'm back to regular life for a while. I've got some news. Let me know when you're going to be here so I can go down to the parking lot and meet you. Love you."

She set the phone on her desk to continue charging and lay down on her bed, falling asleep quickly with no little feet pummeling her for the first time in a week.

Logan got back to the truck and programmed Neptune into the GPS. He wasn't sure how long he'd be able to drive but he wanted to get as far away as he could before he broke down. He knew it was going to happen; it was sheer stubbornness that was keeping him going at this point. It didn't really matter. He had no place to be other than away from here. He plugged the phone into the charger and saw that he had received a voice mail, probably while he was in the hotel office. He blanched when he saw Veronica's name showing a missed call and a voice mail.

Logan listened to the message twice. She had news. Yeah, your future father-in-law beat you to the punch, baby. The part that made him angry though, was the 'love you' at the end. Why is she still doing that? It just makes it worse. The thing was, he didn't doubt any longer that she did love him. She'd managed to convince him of that even though a few months ago he'd had serious doubts. She just didn't love him as much as she loved Duncan. And he was done being her second choice.

He pushed the button to roll his window down and deliberately dropped his phone out onto the ground, then backed out, and back in again, taking some pleasure in the cracking sound as his front tire passed over the phone. The phone would only be trouble. She would either call him incessantly until he broke down and answered to hear her voice or she would understand his note and not call at all. He wasn't sure which would be worse, constant calls or radio silence, but with the phone dead, that problem ceased to exist. He was on his own.

Veronica woke to Jeannie's voice. "Oh thank God, you're finally back." She sat up slowly, stretching and yawning. She reached for her phone, expecting a text or a voice mail from Logan but found none. She frowned and looked up at Jeannie.

"Did he message you instead?"

Jeannie had moved over to her side of the room and was changing out of her work clothes into shorts and a tee shirt. "Who? Logan? I don't think so." She pulled her phone out of her bag to check. "Nope, nothing here. Maybe he got a late start from Virginia Beach. He could have gotten caught in
the rush hour traffic around Richmond." She dropped the phone on her bed. "Did you call him earlier?"

"Yeah, I left a message at around 4:00 pm, I think. I'll try again."

She pushed Logan's number again. The phone went straight to voice mail. "Hey, where are you? I haven't seen you for eight days and you're avoiding my calls? Unacceptable, Mr. Echolls. Call me back ASAP. I'm dying here. Missing you and starving. That is not a good combo." She cut off the call and looked over at Jeannie. "I wasn't kidding. I really am starving. Do you think we can run over to the cafeteria?"

Jeannie nodded. "Sure, I'm fine with that. You'll be able to get the call in the cafeteria and that way, if he's really late, you'll be set. Plus, you owe me an explanation of where you've been and what you've been doing for the last eight days. I've been going nuts here. Everything's okay, right?"

"Absolutely. Things have actually turned out great. There was a pesky confrontation on the very first day—"

"I already heard about that from that Agent Morris. She said you put him in his place. What place was he trying to get into exactly?" Jeannie raised speculative eyebrows.

Veronica snorted a laugh. "Yeah, it was exactly the place you're thinking. But I made it very clear that it was not the place for him." She chuckled. "I had to remind him a few more times over the week but he didn't try anything too inappropriate. Sometimes he touched my hair and periodically he whined."

Jeannie laughed and rubbed her hands over her face. "Oh, that's such a relief. I talked to Logan on Monday and had to tell him you were out on this project so I hadn't seen you. He didn't ask how long since I'd seen you and I didn't volunteer. It was seriously awkward."

They left the dorm and walked to the cafeteria. Veronica gave Jeannie a shorthand version of the Duncan situation, dating back to when he'd run away with his baby up through his current deal with the Feds that enabled him to come home and retain custody of his daughter.

"Geez, he really got lucky. Most people would probably be on the run for the rest of their lives but he knows the right people and gets to come home. Pretty charmed life."

"Yeah, in some ways. In others, not so much. It's better for Lilly to be in a safe and secure environment. Even though he was living pretty well for an international fugitive, there would always have been such an element of uncertainty. They could be feeling completely stable and one thing happens and they're out in the wind again. This'll be better. I can't wait for Logan to meet this little girl. She's a charmer. He'll be wrapped around her tiny finger in a heartbeat."

They reached the cafeteria and were wandering through with trays, picking up whatever looked good. Jeannie looked up from the questionable cheeseburger she was eying and wrinkled her nose at Veronica. "Do you think Duncan's going to let you guys hang around him and his kid? I would think he'd be a little put off by his former best friend being with the woman he planned to spend the rest of his life with."

"Well, I dunno," Veronica replied as she chose her own burger. "I told him I was with Logan—not the other thing, you know, that we have to tell Dad first—and he said he'd work on getting used to it. Hopefully, by the time he escapes from his mother's clutches and gets back to town, he'll have had enough time to work through the crushing disappointment." She smirked at Jeannie. "You can imagine how crushing losing me could be, I'm sure."
Jeannie laughed and shook her head. "Yeah, that would be a blow."

They finished making their selections and sat down to eat. When there was still no word from Logan when they were done, they loaded up on ice cream and waited some more.

By 7:30 PM, there was still no call or text from Logan and Veronica was getting worried. She called his phone and again went straight to voice mail.

"Try calling that Sam guy," Jeannie suggested. "See what time he left."

"I don't have his number," Veronica answered, frowning. "I should have gotten his number. Oh, wait, I'll just try Mady. She'll know how to reach him."

She hunted for a moment for Mady's number and pressed send. The phone rang a couple of times before Mady's voice answered. "Veronica, did you call him?"

Veronica was startled into silence for a moment. "What do you mean? Call who?"

"Logan!" Mady's voice shrilled into the phone. "Didn't you get Sam's message?"

"No, I didn't." Veronica pulled the phone away from her ear to look at the display but there were no messages showing. "I've been trying to call him but his phone's going straight to voice mail. What's going on?"

She shot a worried look over to Jeannie who was staring at her. She heard voices on the other end of the phone, and then Sam's voice was booming into her ear. "Veronica, did you get back with some old boyfriend in the last week?"

Veronica's mouth fell open. "What? No! Why would you think that?"

Sam was swearing into the phone. "I told him it wasn't right. Dammit. I'm gonna try to call him."

"Wait, Sam. What's going on?"

"Logan talked to someone this morning, your future father-in-law he said, and was told you'd gotten back with your first boyfriend and his kid and you were all like some big happy family."

"Why would he believe that?" she all but shrieked into the phone.

"The guy had pictures, I dunno how, and Logan was convinced that you'd dumped him again for this guy. He was going home, like California home, when he left here. He hasn't called you, has he?"

"No, and he's not returning my calls. Call him and see if he'll answer for you. I'm going to go to the hotel now. Call me if you catch up with him." She snapped the phone closed and looked at Jeannie. "You'll take me to the hotel, won't you?"

"Absolutely, let's go now."

They ran to the parking lot and Jeannie sped the whole way to the hotel. Veronica alternated between calling Logan again, leaving pleading messages, and staring at the phone in her hand, willing it to ring. When it did, she jumped, but saw it was only Mady's number again. "Hello?"

"Hey Veronica." It was Sam. "I'm going straight to voice mail too. Maybe he just turned his phone off? Are you at the hotel yet?"
"Almost. Look, I'll call you in a little while, okay." She closed the phone again and looked at Jeannie. "God, I'm so stupid. This is all my fault."

Jeannie glanced over at her. "What are you talking about? How is this your fault?"

"If I would have let you tell him the truth from the beginning, he would have been worried this week but he would have known what I was doing. Now, Sam says Jake showed him pictures. I don't know of what but since he was caught off guard, he thinks any pictures are proof that me and Duncan are back together. I swear, we weren't doing anything but recent pictures of the two of us, or worse, the three of us, are going to make him believe the worst. God, he must be feeling so betrayed." They pulled into the parking lot and she was out of the car and running for the stairs before Jeannie had the car turned off.

Jeannie got out of the car more slowly, afraid of what they were going to find upstairs. She wasn't sure if Veronica noticed on her sprint to the room but the Range Rover was not in its usual spot. Jeannie walked past the space and noticed a demolished cell phone on the ground. She wasn't sure but she had a feeling that was Logan's phone. She went up the stairs and went into the hotel room. The front room seemed pretty normal but it didn't have a lot of personal stuff in it to begin with. She glanced into the kitchen and then jumped when heard Veronica's voice cry out.

"Nooo." She ran down the hallway to the bedroom and found Veronica on the floor in the closet, rocking with a blue shirt in her arms, tears streaming down her face. The only other clothes in the closet appeared to be Veronica's.

"Sweetie, calm down. What is this?" She tried to pull the shirt away but Veronica was clutching it too tightly. She sank down next to her and tried soothing her but that only seemed to make her cry harder. "Veronica!" Jeannie tried a stern voice. "What is this?"

"It's Logan's shirt from our wedding. All his stuff is gone except this. He threw this on the ground and left it." She motioned up to the lace dress hanging next to them. "That was my wedding dress." She reached up and stroked the skirt.

"Okay, so we'll get his shirt with the rest of your stuff for you to bring home. He's going to want it once this gets straightened out." Jeannie wrapped her arms around Veronica and smoothed her hair. "It's gonna get straightened out. Don't worry. He's crazy about you. This is all a misunderstanding."

Veronica looked up at her. "Promise?"

_Oh crap._ "Yeah, I promise. Let's get your stuff gathered up so you can take it home. Do you still have a plane ticket to get home if he's really left town already?"

"Yeah, I never got around to canceling it. It's for Saturday morning."

"Okay," Jeannie stood up and tugged Veronica to her feet. "Let's pack up your stuff. Why don't you sit down and call Sam back to see if he got Logan." She pushed Veronica into a seated position on the edge of the bed and pulled Veronica's phone from the side pocket of her messenger bag. "Here. Call Sam."

Jeannie found Veronica's suitcase and laid it open on the dresser so she could start packing clothes into it. She listened to Veronica's side of her conversation with Sam.

"No, he's cleared out of here. What all did he say?" There was a long silence as Sam apparently outlined the conversation he'd had that morning with Logan. "No, I know who he talked to...Okay...Well, if you do hear from him, please tell him this is all a misunderstanding. I am not with
Duncan. I don't want to be with Duncan. I only want to be with him. Please tell him." She was quiet again. "Okay, thank you, Sam. I'll talk to you soon. Okay, bye." She closed the phone and looked up at Jeannie before standing up and walking back down the hall. Jeannie finished up with the clothes in the room and followed Veronica. She found her curled on the couch with the wedding pictures and a piece of paper. Jeannie sat down on the table next to her.

"Whatcha got there, V?"

"Logan's 'it's been fun' letter." She held out the sheet of paper and Jeannie took it, scanning the page quickly.

Veronica,

I'm sorry to take off but I thought it would be easier this way. Jake filled me in on what you've been doing this week. I don't need to hear it again from you. I saw the pictures. The three of you make a really cute little family. I knew you were going to be a good mom. I just had a different picture of what that was going to look like, although a little blonde girl with brown eyes was definitely in the realm of possibility. Forgive me if it takes me a while to be able to be okay with this. Can you please just let me work this out for myself? I don't need you to help me. I just need some time. If I disappear for a while, just let me be. I got through this before, I can do it again.

Our rings are at a jeweler in town, Tony's. I know that money's not going to be an issue once you're a Kane but the rings will at least give you some cash of your own, in case you need it, in case things don't end up working out with you guys. I'm really not sure he's going to be able to deal with who you really are. But, you've changed for him before, maybe it will keep this time. I can't wait around for that. I can't be your second choice anymore. I thought I could be enough but I guess I wasn't counting on him coming back so soon.

I love you Veronica but I know it isn't enough. Have a good life.

L

Jeannie looked up from the page to Veronica, who was staring at the photos. "I think he took one of the pictures," Veronica said in a sad, small voice. "I don't see it smashed anywhere."

"Umm, speaking of smashed," Jeannie said. "I kinda think his cell phone is out in the parking lot. You can take a look but it's in the space he usually parks in."

"So no one's going to be able to talk to him until he turns up at home. Great." Veronica huffed out a sigh and stacked the pictures onto the table next to Jeannie before pushing herself off the couch and starting to walk around the room, gathering up books and papers from the desk and the tables. Jeannie watched her for a minute than started to do the same thing.

With the room packed up, they pulled the bags down to the car and Veronica took a quick look at the smashed cell phone. There was no way to know for sure but she thought it was likely that Jeannie was right. Logan had made sure they wouldn't be able to talk.

"We'll come in tomorrow as soon as we're done with work so you can pick up your rings," Jeannie said as they pulled out of the parking lot. Veronica nodded but remained silent. "It's going to be okay, V. You'll both get home and you'll explain what happened and he'll feel dumb for falling for this stupid story and spend the next month trying to make it up to you for jumping to this conclusion."

"He jumped to this conclusion because he thinks it's something that I would do. He thinks I've done
it before. Even if he figures out that he was wrong, is he ever going to believe that I won't eventually end up going back to Duncan? That's what he said, that he can't be my second choice any longer. What if he never believes I only love him? I don't want him going through our whole lives waiting for the other shoe to drop." Veronica ran her hands over her face and looked at Jeannie. "After everything we've done and said this summer, he believes immediately that I'm dumping him for Duncan. How am I going to get him to really believe that won't ever happen?"

Jeannie reached over to pat Veronica's hand. "I don't know but you're going to figure it out. Once you get him back in your sights, he won't stand a chance."

Veronica nodded. "I hope you're right."

"And once you've got everything back in order, you guys can have a wedding reception, and you'll have to fly me and Sam and Mady and those other Chincoteague people out to California for the party to make up for this really crappy end of the summer screw-up. Got it?"

Veronica gave a half-hearted huff of amusement that ended in a snifflle. "Yeah, that's the best idea I've heard all day."
Jeannie unlocked the door to their room and Veronica shuffled inside, dropping onto her bed, facing the wall. Jeannie watched her for a moment, then sat down beside her. "Veronica, sweetie, can I get you anything? Why don't you get ready for bed? You're going to be uncomfortable like that."

"I'll be fine," Veronica said in a flat voice.

"Veronica, are you sure?"

"Jeannie, please. I know you're just trying to help but can you please leave me alone for now?" Veronica grabbed her pillow and pulled it over her head.

Jeannie got up and went to her own bed where she sat, watching Veronica and wishing for a time machine. After twenty minutes or so, she got up and went down to the community bathroom to get ready for bed. When she came back, Veronica had fallen asleep, breathing deeply but also muttering and moaning. Jeannie pulled a blanket over her and sat down next to her again, stroking her hair and making soothing noises, repeating the same words over and over. "It's gonna be okay." Veronica finally settled down and Jeannie went back to her own bed, falling into her own uneasy sleep.

Some time later, Jeannie woke to find Veronica's bedside light on and the girl herself digging angrily through her messenger bag, grumbling.

"Veronica? What are you doing?"

Veronica's head snapped up and the determined look on her face softened to something more like remorse. "Oh, I'm sorry, Jeannie, I didn't mean to wake you."

"It's okay, I wasn't sleeping that well, it wouldn't have taken much." Jeannie sat up to watch her roommate. "So what are you doing?"

Veronica made a triumphant noise and straightened up with her phone in her hand. "I just realized that I need to call home and put them on alert."

Jeannie glanced at the clock. "It's two in the morning."

"Not in California," Veronica said as she scrolled through the numbers on her phone before pressing a button and raising the phone to her ear.

The James Bond theme blared from Mac's phone, startling her out of her light doze and she reached blindly in the direction of the sound. "Bond? Why are you calling me in the middle of the night?"

"Q! Whatcha doing?" Veronica's voice sounded overly jovial, which seemed suspicious.

"Well, I was sleeping. What are you doing up at 2:00 am?" Mac pushed herself up into a seated position, leaning back against the headboard.

"Sorry, It's barely 11:00 pm there, I thought you might be up. Do you have to work tomorrow?"

"Yeah, actually I do but it's no big deal. What's up with you? Aren't you guys coming home soon?"

"Yeah, well, that's kinda what I'm calling you about. Some of us are coming home sooner than
"others and I wanted to give you a heads up."

Mac raised an eyebrow in surprise. "I'm guessing that 'some of you' means Logan? What's going on, Bond?"

"Well, we had a little misunderstanding and he took off."

"Is he not answering his phone?" Mac asked, frowning.

"It looks like maybe he ran over his phone."

Mac burst out laughing. "You're kidding, right?" The silence from the other end of the line sobered her quickly. "Veronica? Seriously, tell me what's happening."

She heard a long shuddering sigh. "He got some really wrong information and he thinks I dumped him. For Duncan."

Mac sat bolt upright. "Duncan Kane?"

"Do I know another Duncan? Of course Duncan Kane. But it's not true; it's all just a misunderstanding. I just need him to listen to me for a minute and he'll get that. Can you get a message to Dick—tell him I didn't do what Logan thinks I did and he has to make Logan listen to me. He's the only one Logan will probably even see once he gets home. Unless...are you still hanging out at the Grand at all?"

The question made her pause briefly. "Umm, yeah...sometimes."

"Okay, if you see him before I do, make him understand, I am not with Duncan. Please?"

"I'll do my best, Bond. When are you getting home?"

"Saturday, late afternoon. I'll call you when I get in. He left this afternoon; I don't see how he can get back before Saturday. He's driving by himself; he can't go straight through like you guys did on the way out but just in case, make sure you're keeping an eye out. Okay?"

"You got it. Hold it together. You'll work it out; you always do."

"I hope so. He's really hurt this time. He might decide I'm not worth the trouble."

"Nah. Stop worrying and get some rest. I'll talk to you in a couple of days."

"Thanks, Mac. You're a pal."

The call disconnected and she laid the phone back on the nightstand before turning back toward the center of the bed.

"You caught most of that, I presume," she said.

Dick was stretched out next to her, his hand resting on her hip, a sneer on his face. "Yeah, sounds like your pal has screwed over my pal yet again and he's finally manned up enough to tell her where to go."

"That's not what it sounds like." Mac pushed away from him, taking the sheet with her to cover her bare torso. "They've had some misunderstanding—"

"Yeah, right. What I heard was that she dumped him for Duncan, AGAIN, and when that didn't work out, AGAIN, she wants Logan to crawl back to her. AGAIN. Well sorry, Macster, I like you a lot but your friend? She's a bitch who has chewed Logan up and spit him out more than once." Dick
had flopped over onto his back and was gesturing angrily with his arms to emphasize his words. "Frankly, if he's ready to tell her 'no mas', far be it from me to discourage him."

"You don't even know what happened. She says it's just a misunderstanding."

"Of course she does. But he's sure enough that he ran over his own phone so he wouldn't have to listen to her bullshit. All I can say is, good for him. It's about time he took his balls back."

Mac glared at him and leapt out of the bed. She gathered her clothes and left the room. He sat up, calling after her.

"Oh, come on, Mackie. Their problems don't have anything to do with us. Come back to bed."

Mac came back to stand in the doorway, pulling her tee shirt on over her head. "You being a jackass has to do with us. You jumping to conclusions without all the information has to do with us. You trying to hurt one of my best friends has to do with us."

"Her hurting a guy who's like my actual brother—again—is what I've got against her. And it still doesn't have to have anything to do with us." He climbed out of bed and walked over to wrap his arms around her waist. "Don't let Veronica mess us up too."

"Do you get that you and I probably wouldn't even talk to each other if it wasn't for them?" Mac rested her hands on his arms and gazed up at him with a serious look, willing him to grasp the severity of the situation. "And we've been having a good time for the last few weeks because you're not acting like a jerk anymore but I am not going to stay here and watch you actively try to hurt my friend."

Dick smoothed a blue-tinged lock of hair behind her ear. "Look, I get that this is important to you and I'm not planning to do anything to Ronnie. But, I'm also not going to take her side over Logan's. There'll be a bunch of you supporting Veronica and trying to bully Logan into doing what she wants. She doesn't need me doing that too. I'm going to support my friend, who doesn't really have anyone but me backing him up. And if he's decided he's done with Veronica—really done, as in 'can't take the pain anymore' done—I am not going to try to talk him out of it."

Mac sighed and leaned her forehead against his chest. "It's not like she's actively trying to hurt him."

"Yeah, imagine if she was. He'd be dead a hundred times over."

"That's not fair." Mac pushed his arms away from her and walked towards Logan's bedroom, where quite a few of her belongings had migrated over the summer. "They've both done not very nice stuff in the past. Logan's not an innocent angel."

Dick snorted out an angry laugh, following along behind her. "I'm not saying that. But you haven't seen him on the downside of Hurricane Ronnie. We're lucky he hasn't done himself in. And I will tell you, if something happens to him while he's out there with his heart ripped out again by your friend, I will make her pay for that."

"Oh really?" Mac grabbed her bag off the bed and started shoving her clothes in it. "You'd better be sure you're ready to play if you decide to come after her. And it's not just Veronica you're going to need to look out for." She threw her bag over her shoulder and pushed past him into the living room where she started to dismantle her laptop setup on the coffee table. Dick followed along behind her, looking dismayed.

"Mackie, come on. I don't want to fight. Don't go. They're not even back in town yet. Let's just see what happens." He tugged her away from the computer and pulled her down next to him on the sofa.
"Please don't go."

"I can't stay here with you if you're looking at whatever happened here as a good thing or if you're hoping this is the end of them." She looked him straight in the eyes. "I get that you're not a fan of Veronica but if she makes him happy—and you know damn well that she does—then you need to get over yourself and not try to undermine them."

"She doesn't always make him happy," he challenged.

"Nope. And he doesn't always make her happy. That doesn't give anyone the right to try to break them up."

"It sounds like Veronica's managed that all on her own."

Mac shook her head at his stubbornness. "I'm going to go. Hopefully, once this is resolved, we can figure this out because I've been having fun with you. But until this is over, I'm not going to come over here to see you." She stood up again, finished packing her laptop and hoisted her bags back up onto her shoulders. He continued to sit on the sofa with a lost look on his face. She leaned over and kissed the top of his head. "I'll see ya, Dick."

Veronica went to class with the rest of the interns for the first time in a week the following morning but her mind was elsewhere. With only two days left in the program, all the other interns were wrapping up their work projects and since no one wanted to start her on something new, she got excused from the afternoon work session and borrowed Jeannie's car to go back into town to go to the jeweler.

She found the jewelry store easily in the tiny town. The showroom was empty when she entered but the bells at the door summoned an older man from the back of the store. "Good afternoon, miss. I am Tony and this is my place. How may I help you today?"

She smiled at his unusual but friendly manner. "Oh, hello. My husband dropped off our wedding rings for engraving about a week ago. I need to pick them up."

"You must be Veronica then," he said.

"I am. I'm guessing we're the only ring engraving you've done lately?"

"Yes, that is true. Hang on for a moment, I'll go get your rings out of my safe."

Veronica nodded and then wandered along the display cases, admiring the jewelry. She glanced at a case of wedding sets but moved on quickly; none of them were as interesting as her rings. She was looking at earrings when Tony appeared again. "Here we are." He laid out a display tray and started to open the familiar little box that Logan had been using to carry the rings but she stretched a hand out to stop him.

"Hang on. I'm not sure if I'm ready to see them."

Tony tilted his head at her. "You've seen them already, have you not?"

"Well, yes, obviously but I don't know what he had engraved. I don't know if I want to see without him." She leaned her elbows delicately on the glass counter and cradled her forehead against her hands. She hadn't considered this until Tony had started to open the box.

"Can he come back in with you later today?"
She shook her head, feeling a stab of pain at the innocent question. "No, he already left for home. I'm flying back on Saturday."

"Did he ask you not to look?" Tony asked.

"Well, no." *It probably wasn't a big priority for him yesterday.*

"Then you should go ahead. You'll like them, I'm sure. You're probably going to need my loupe on the engagement ring though. There's a lot of writing on that one considering the size."

Veronica laughed in spite of herself. "It's a quote, right? Oh, let me think." She racked her brain, trying to remember the words he'd used to toast her with their mimosas the morning after they'd gotten engaged. "Something like loving today more than yesterday but less than tomorrow?"

Tony smiled admiringly. "Impressive. You know him well. Got it in one." He laid all three rings out into the display tray and handed her the engagement ring. She peered into the center of the ring at the tiny script. "Here, this will make it much easier." He pulled a silver, tear-shaped item out of a black leather bag and pushed on the side, releasing a small magnifying glass. She held it to the ring and tears welled in her eyes.

More than yesterday • Less than tomorrow

She smiled up at Tony. "He used the whole quote as a toast the day after we got engaged. He's all about a quote for every occasion." She moved the magnifier away but since she knew the words now, they still seemed clear.

"The prints not quite so tiny on the wedding bands, especially on your husband's band since it's wider." Tony held out Logan's ring.

"It's different than the engagement ring?" Veronica asked as she accepted the ring in the palm of her hand.

"Yes, but the wedding bands match each other."

She peered into the inside of Logan's ring and the tears threatened again.

07-26-07 • Love • Forevermore

"Forevermore—that was in the vows. Mine's the same?"

"Yes, he thought they should match." He held out Veronica's ring. "I'm sure you want to put this back on."

She let him drop the second band into her palm and she stared down at the pair of matching rings nestled together. She did want to put it on but she wanted Logan's on his hand even more.

"Actually, I'm going to wait until we can both put them on each other again." She looked up and Tony was smiling.

"The two of you are certainly a romantic pair, aren't you?"

She gave a weak chuckle. "No one's ever called me a romantic but maybe he's rubbing off on me." She gently laid the bands back into the tray with the engagement ring. "What I would like is a chain that coordinates with them so I can keep them all together on me. I need the chain to hang fairly low; I don't want anyone to be able to see them if I'm not showing them deliberately."
The man nodded. "That's an easy one." He walked to another display case and pulled out another tray holding several platinum chains.

She reached for one and then paused. "May I?" Tony nodded and she lifted one of them to study. It was made of delicate oblong links and when she held it up against her, the bottom of the loop hung between her breasts. "Is this heavy enough to hold all three rings at once?"

"It's platinum; it's very strong."

"Okay, then. That's what I need."

Logan groaned and clutched at his head as he swung his feet to the floor. He'd driven until nearly 10:00 PM on Wednesday before he pulled into a shady little motel with a liquor store across the parking lot. Other than a couple of stumbling trips to the liquor store, he was pretty sure that he hadn't left the room since he'd checked in. He looked around the room through squinted eyes. He'd obviously had pizza delivered because he could see two boxes stacked on the tiny desk but he didn't remember it. There was an empty fifth of Jack Daniels next to the pizza box and another with about a quarter left sitting on the nightstand. There was also an empty six pack carrier on the floor and a few empty bottles lying next to it. Geez, how long have I been here?

He had spent the summer mostly dry with Veronica so he wasn't surprised by how terrible he felt after consuming this much booze by himself. Oh God, what if I didn't do it by myself? He looked around frantically for any sign that he'd had a woman in the room with him but there was nothing. He stood up carefully and walked to the bathroom, rapping once and then opening the door to an empty room. Why are you worrying about cheating on her? She's left you.

He made his way back to the bed and collapsed onto it. It didn't matter if they were on their way to being done, he'd never cheated on her before and he wasn't going to start now. Once the legalities were done, sure, he'd have sex with whoever he wanted, but right now, she was still his wife and that meant something to him, even if it didn't to anyone else.

He could see a tiny stream of light in the seam between the curtains but he had no idea what day it was. He looked for a clock on the nightstand but there wasn't one there. He stood up again and went to the window, peering through before closing his eyes and turning away with a curse. The bright light felt like an ice pick in his brain. He turned on the television, looking for a station that would tell him something but all he could tell was that it was probably a weekday morning because he found 'The Price is Right'. Logan switched the TV back off and walked back to the bed, noticing then a power cord hanging over the side of the nightstand. He pulled the cord and ended up fishing a clock up from behind the nightstand. The clock read 10:38.

It's gotta be Friday—no way I drank this much in twelve hours. I think I'd be dead of alcohol poisoning. He lay back down on the bed and wrapped his hands around his skull. So, do I wallow here for another day or try to drive some more?

He finally decided that he needed a shower whether he stayed or not so he stumbled back to the bathroom and stood under the stream of hot water for an extended period. Sobering up meant he was thinking about the destruction of his life again and he was not enjoying it. The photographs that Jake had shown him were seared into his brain but even worse were the pictures that he conjured up for what was happening beyond those moments. Erasing those pictures was what had been pushing him to start drinking again until he passed out.

Once out of the shower and dressed in fresh clothes, he decided to start driving again instead. Even without the phone, he knew Veronica could track him if she wanted to and he really didn't want her
hunting him down in the middle of nowhere to make him sign divorce papers. He wasn't getting out of this mess intact but he could at least try and retain a little dignity. He wasn't sure if he'd be able to make it without any more self-medicating of his pain, but he could get another seven or eight hundred miles closer to home first. Logan gathered up his belongings, including the remaining Jack, and headed out to settle up with the front office.

The last day of the internship didn't involve much work and ended with a banquet. Veronica had been trying to stay focused on the events happening around her but it was hard. Her mind was too busy, wondering and worrying about where Logan was and how he was doing. Jeannie stuck right beside her, nudging her forward whenever she got stuck in her head. Veronica had called Mac a couple more times, checking to see if anyone had heard from Logan but there had been no word from him as far as Mac knew.

Saturday morning was chaotic as Veronica and Jeannie rushed around to finish getting packed up for their trips home. Veronica had planned to take the shuttle to the airport but Jeannie wouldn't let her, instead insisting on packing Veronica's suitcases into Jeannie's backseat for the trip to the airport.

Once Veronica checked all her luggage with the skycap, she turned to Jeannie and they shared a hug.

"Well, V, other than the last week, it's been a great summer," Jeannie said as they pulled apart, both smiling but a little teary. "I got the pick of the litter as far as roommates go. Keep in touch, okay?"

Veronica gave her a wistful sigh. "Absolutely. You're coming to our reception, right?"

"Oh yes, I would not miss that. Keep me in the loop and once you're done with the make-up sex, make sure you tell Logan he's in trouble for skipping out without telling his big sister good-bye. Got it?" They smirked at each other but Veronica could feel the tears threatening. "And, don't forget to send me a text when you get home so I know you've made it back. Okay?" Veronica couldn't answer past the lump in her throat but she nodded, blinking rapidly to hold back the tears at Jeannie's final, quick hug. "All right, I'm going to go. Fly safe, V, and we'll talk soon." Veronica managed a smile as she watched Jeannie back away with an encouraging smile before turning to walk to her car. As she reached the driver's side, she looked back toward Veronica and gave her a quick wave before getting into her car and pulling away.

Keith stood just beyond security, waiting for Veronica. To say he was surprised when she'd called him to remind him of her arrival time would be a huge understatement. He knew Logan had been in Virginia all summer and she'd mentioned a cross-country trip home at one point so he did not understand this development but he was going to roll with it until she was ready to explain herself.

"Dad!"

Veronica was suddenly in his arms, her arms around his neck, clinging to him. "I missed you so much, Daddy."

He grinned and planted a kiss on the top of her head. "I missed you too, kiddo. I'm really glad to have you home." He pulled back and settled an arm over her shoulders as they walked to baggage claim.

"So how about the FBI? Am I going to get to brag to all my friends about my daughter the Federal agent?" He looked down at her but she seemed distracted. "Veronica?"
"Huh? Oh, I'm not really sure, but I kinda think no. The parts I liked, I've got here with you. Most of it just seems too 'rule-y' for me." She looked up at him with a smile. "I hope you're not too disappointed."

Keith leaned over to kiss the top of her head again. "You could never disappoint me."

They'd reached the baggage carousels and as they stopped to wait, she looked at him again. "I really hope you're right about that." She ducked out from under his arm and walked to the carousel to wrestle a suitcase off it. He took it from her and moved back a little to leave some room for the rest of the passengers. She brought him another bag and turned back toward the carousel.

"Didn't you leave here with two suitcases?" Keith called after her.

She turned back with a smirk on her face. "Logan bought me another one to fit all my extra stuff in." She moved back to the carousel and Keith watched her. She was fiddling with her necklace; he'd noticed her doing that as soon as she'd joined him. In addition to running her thumb under the chain up around her neck, she periodically laid her hand flat against her chest like she was feeling whatever was hanging on that chain. If she'd come home with Logan and was displaying this nervous behavior, he would be willing to put money on there being an engagement ring dangling off that chain. With Logan not attached to her like a growth, he wasn't as sure.

"Okay, Pops, this is the last of it." As he ruminated over what she might be hiding from him, she had managed to get right beside him without him even noticing. Her hands were full with one tugging the last suitcase and the other clutching her messenger bag.

"Alright then, let's get going. I'm seeing some lasagna in our future."

"I think that's just what I need."

Not yet ready to explain herself to her dad, Veronica dawdled in her bedroom, slowly unpacking her suitcases. She'd gotten all of her clothes put away and had added her new books to her shelves but she'd put a lot of the items they'd acquired over the summer back into the new suitcase until she'd had a chance to come clean with her dad. Their wedding clothes were hanging together in the back of her closet but their silk scarves and the wedding pictures and the dried rose bouquet from the wedding were still safely tucked away.

She'd called Mac to see if she knew anything more almost as soon as she'd arrived at the apartment. Mac hadn't heard anything new and had suggested that Veronica consider running a check on Logan's credit cards but Veronica wasn't quite willing to do that yet. If no one saw him in a couple more days, however, she was going to figure out where he was using his cards. That would at least confirm that he hadn't done anything...drastic. She didn't believe he would hurt himself but if he continued to be incommunicado, she was going to have to confirm this for herself. She tried not to think about what she would do if there were no hits on his cards. She'd been keeping that panic at bay but if she couldn't find any evidence of him traveling, she was pretty sure she was going to lose her self-control.

"Honey, how are you doing in here?" Keith popped his head around the door. Veronica knew that she had a lot of questions about her summer but was restraining himself since she'd turned up without Logan. *I should just put him out of his misery—at least about why I didn't come home with Logan like I'd told him I would.*

"Hey, Dad. I'm doing okay. I've gotten a lot of stuff put away and I think it's time to fill in some of the gaps for you." She smiled weakly at him. "I can see how valiantly you're holding onto your
questions. Very impressive."

Keith gave her a tight-lipped smile. "Veronica, you really don't need to put on a show for me. Just tell me what's going on with you." He paused and the smile fell away from his face. "You're okay, aren't you?"

"Healthy as a horse, Dad, don't worry about that. Look, let's go in the living room. I think we've both got things to talk about." She caught his arm and walked them towards the living room. "Like the unexpected voice of Alicia Fennel on my birthday message. Is there something I should know?"

Keith looked at her skeptically. "Not a lot to that story—we've been dating again, but really, it isn't that big of a deal. We just enjoy each other's company."

"I'm glad, Dad, Alicia's great. I'm happy to hear you're seeing her again." She suddenly realized something and laughed. "If I'm going to have to have step-brothers, I want Wallace and Darrell included in that group."

"Thanks, honey. I know you haven't always liked my choice of girlfriends..."

"Alicia is the exception," Veronica said firmly. "And on that note, I have some news." She grasped her dad's hand. "I found out in the last couple of weeks that Lianne married Jake." She peered closely at Keith. "Did you know?"

Keith's lips pressed together in a thin line. "No, I hadn't heard that yet. How did you find out all the way in Virginia?"

Veronica raised her eyebrows, a little surprised at his muted response. "Well, I actually got the news from Special Agent Morris. Remember her? Charmer who tried to send me to prison a couple years back?"

This time, Keith's mouth fell open and, in spite of everything, Veronica laughed. "I know, right?"

"Is she assigned to Quantico now?" Keith asked.

"Nope, still a field agent in California. She came in from the field a couple of weeks ago to participate in resolution of one of her unsolved cases." Veronica raised her eyebrows and tilted her head at her father. "Any guesses as to what case that might have been?"

"They caught Duncan?" Keith said in a low, incredulous voice. "Veronica. Are you...okay?"

She smirked a little at him. "They didn't catch him. He turned himself in and Clarence Weidman, former FBI agent, brokered a deal for him. He's a free man as of last Wednesday."

"And the baby?"

"Full custody to Duncan. They're in Napa with Celeste for a couple of weeks. Child Services will be checking in with him over the next six months or so, they're paying some fines, and, voilà, all is forgiven." She gave him a wide-eyed, innocent look. "He got help getting out of the country from associates of Cormac Fitzpatrick. Luckily, he's deceased, so he can't get into, or cause, any trouble in the face of such an accusation."

Keith dropped his head into his hands for a moment. "So did Agent Morris apologize for her pursuit of you back when Duncan ran?" He glanced up at Veronica with a questioning look.

Veronica sighed. "In a manner of speaking, she did. She even tried to make it up to me, to my
everlasting chagrin," she said.

"What does that even mean?"

"Well, I didn't know what was going on when I initially found out that Agent Morris was looking for me and I didn't want anyone worrying unnecessarily so...I chose to keep both you and Logan in the dark about what was going on. Then, she wanted me to come with her to meet with Duncan and I wanted to try to make sure nothing bad was going to be coming our way so I went with her. And then, to try to make sure things worked out the way I wanted them to, for everyone, I stayed."

"Stayed where?" Keith's voice had that sheriff-interrogation ring to it, and Veronica knew her next statement was going to go over like a lead balloon.

"Agent Morris volunteered me to be the FBI representative staying on base with Duncan and Lilly."

"Oh my God, Veronica. You moved in with Duncan and his daughter?"

"Well, yeah, technically, I guess you could put it that way. Only for a week."

"And that explains the absence of your boyfriend who I know has been shadowing you all summer. He got miffed when you told him you were going to move in with your ex and his kid."

Veronica looked at Keith, feeling both confused and guilty. "If that was what happened, why would you be on his side? I was just trying to protect everyone."

"No man wants the woman he loves moving in with an ex-boyfriend, especially one he believes she's chosen over him in the past." Keith gave her a serious look. "Speaking as someone who was second choice for a long time, it isn't a happy place to be."

She gaped at him. "There's so much about that statement that I can't even begin to wrap my head around."

Keith stood up and started to pace nervously. "So are you back with Duncan or not?"

"No, I'm not. I don't understand why everyone's so quick to believe I've been pining for Duncan all this time." Veronica ran her hands through her hair. "I can't believe this. I expected you'd be on my side, not Logan's."

"I'm not taking sides, honey. So what did Logan say to try to talk you out of it?"

"He didn't. I didn't tell him." Keith's look of shock made her hide her face in her hands. "I was trying to protect him. I didn't want the FBI looking at him."

"To the best of my knowledge, he had nothing to do with Duncan's disappearance. No one was going to be able to pin anything on him." Keith leaned against the back of his armchair, looking exasperated.

"You never can tell; Logan didn't kill Felix either but that didn't keep him from getting arrested for it. Twice. I was trying to keep something like that from happening again."

"So he got mad when you came back from your little 'vacation' with the Kanes and told him where you'd been?"

"No. It's worse than that." Veronica hung her head.

"Oh Veronica, he found out from someone else, didn't he?" The angry tone was gone, replaced by
something that sounded sympathetic.

She nodded. "Yes, but that's not the worst of it."

Keith looked confused now. "What else could there be?"

"The person who told him, my very helpful new step-dad, believed that Duncan and I were back together—like a couple again—and all ready to get married. Showed him pictures of me and Duncan and Lilly all hanging out. I'm not even sure how he got some of them; he must have had someone on base spying on us. Anyway, Logan didn't even come looking for me to give me a chance to explain. He just took off." Veronica looked up at Keith, her eyes full of tears. "He believed Jake and he left me. No one has seen or talked to him since Wednesday."

Keith moved to sit beside her, wrapping his arm around her shoulders. "I'm sorry, but are you really surprised, Veronica? You guys have been off and on, over and over again. I can understand why he believed what Jake showed him. We, of all people, know the value of the money shot."

"There was no money shot! We never did anything like that!" Veronica exploded. "Never! I told Duncan on the very first day that we were not together."

"Figurative money shot, honey. But you say Duncan thought you would come back to him? Can't you see why Logan would think that too? For him, it was just another go-around with you going back to Duncan."

"He should know better." Nothing her dad was saying was different from what she'd been beating herself up with for the last few days, but hearing it from her dad, always her staunchest supporter, was more painful than she would have expected.

"Why, Veronica? Why would he think this time was any different?"

"We promised. It was different this time. We were different. I would have never..." She laid her hand against her chest, pressing the rings hard against her skin. "Why couldn't he believe in me? In us? Tears were threatening to fall again.

"Whatcha got there, Veronica?" Her dad was eyeing her speculatively. When she didn't answer immediately, he said, "You've been paying a lot of attention to whatever's on that chain since you got home. If I guess it's a ring will that make it easier for you to answer me?"

She looked up at him with wide, surprised eyes, then shook her head. "No, probably not." She ducked and reached back to lift the chain off her neck and over her head. She pulled the necklace up so the rings were still concealed in her fist. "Dad, don't go nuts, okay? I can't deal with that right now."

He looked at her strangely. "Veronica, I'm not sure what you're saying. Just tell me what you need to tell me."

She reached her clenched fist out to him and Keith held out his palm with a confused look. She dropped the rings on their chain into his hand. "Logan and I got married last month."

Keith gasped in a breath and the hand with the rings jerked. The chain started to slide between his fingers and she reached forward to clamp her hand over his to keep the rings from falling. "Dad! Are you okay?"

"You got married? Are you serious?" He slid his hand out from under hers and stared at the trio of rings. "I can't believe this." He rubbed his free hand over his face and glanced at the rings again.
"These are some rings."

"Logan had them made. The diamonds were from a necklace that belonged to Lynn." She smiled fondly at the treasure in his palm. "They're beautiful, aren't they?"

"Veronica, yes, they're beautiful rings, but that's totally beside the point. When did you two get married? And why? Why without me, or anyone else who cares about you? Logan talked you into this?" Keith dropped the rings onto the coffee table with a clatter and Veronica snatched them back, cradling them in her hand.

"No, Dad, it wasn't like that. I actually talked him into it." Veronica clutched at his arm. "He warned me that you'd be upset that we did it without you but it just seemed so perfect." She explained the Chincoteague trip and the wedding tradition. "I knew he was right but I didn't want to lose that opportunity and he finally agreed." She peered up at him. "I am sorry that you're hurt, but I'm not sorry we got married."

"Even though he's already left you?" Keith asked bluntly.

"You've already pretty much told me that was my own fault, Dad," she said. "And you're right, you're absolutely right. If I would have relied on both of you more when I was afraid of what was going on with Agent Morris, he'd be here, holding my hand while I sucked up to you and begged for your forgiveness for being too impulsive. But now, I need you to be the one who helps keep me together while I'm begging him to just hear what I need to say. Please, Dad, don't be mad. I can't do this without you."

Keith reached out and pulled her into his arms. "Honey, I love you, you aren't going to have to do anything without me. Except right now." He sat back and looked at her sympathetically. "Right now, I need a little time to process everything. Okay? Why don't you go rest. I'll be back in an hour or two and I'll grill some steaks for dinner. Sound good?"

Veronica smiled weakly. "Okay, Dad. I am tired. I haven't been sleeping very well and where I started this day, it's three hours later than it is here. Thanks for not going crazy on me. I love you."

"Love you too, honey."

Keith slammed into Mars Investigations and headed straight for his computer. He'd had a record of all of Logan's credit cards since he'd found out, after the fact, that the little twerp had followed Veronica to New York on her graduation trip. It had taken some subterfuge to get his hands on the kid's wallet but he was a professional. He hadn't actually had any cause to run the cards since that time but now he wanted to know where his runaway son-in-law (!) was hiding out.

It didn't take long to see that Logan hadn't gotten too far on that first day and he appeared to have a fake ID, probably Veronica-made, based on the multiple transactions at Park Place Liquor in Kingsport, Tennessee. At least he wasn't sleeping in his car; there was a Holiday Inn transaction dated the day before. Presumably that meant he'd checked out Friday and got back on the road after a daylong bender. It was unlikely any additional charges would hit the account until Monday so Keith closed the computer window and leaned his head in his hands.

He'd come to an understanding with himself over the summer that he was likely going to end up with Logan Echolls for a son-in-law at some point in the future. He and Alicia had actually discussed the issue at length and she had helped him come to grips with some realities he'd never wanted to face before. Like his daughter not necessarily wanting the safe and certain life that he wanted for her. Alicia had had quite a lot of fun at his expense pointing out that since he'd been letting her do pretty
much whatever she thought was best since she was sixteen years old, it was unlikely that she was going to be willing to only do what he wanted for her now that she was actually an adult.

He reached for his phone and hit the name at the top of his recent calls.

"Why, Mr. Mars, this is an unexpected pleasure. I expected daddy-daughter time to last until tomorrow at least."

Keith smiled. "Said daughter is jet lagged and should be napping right now so I thought I would check in with my other favorite girl. How’s your day going?"

"It's quiet. Darrell went over to a friend's house a while ago to spend the night. Do you think Veronica would notice if you disappeared a little later?" Alicia chuckled. "We're going to have a big change in our habits now that our traveling children are coming back to town."

"Probably not as much as you think. Wallace will go back to the dorms and Darrell's always heading off somewhere."

"What about Veronica?"

He harrumphed at that. "That's undetermined right now but my guess is she'll be living elsewhere inside of a month. Hey, do you want a little company now? I can fill you in on my domestic drama."

"Ooh, that sounds intriguing. Come on over."

"On my way. Just be forewarned...I'm going to need comforting."

Alicia chuckled again. "I'm sure I can oblige you."

Logan's hangover was back with a vengeance on Sunday morning. He'd driven the whole day on Friday and fell into his substandard hotel bed that night without even touching his remaining Jack Daniels. He was up early and driving on Saturday morning with no problems until he stopped on Saturday night in Van Horn, TX. He took a quick swim to cool off and then headed for the Van Horn Cattle Company for dinner. Unfortunately, his waitress was a petite, flirty blonde. Five scotch neats later, the end result was him leaving his car in the restaurant parking lot and stumbling the four blocks back to his hotel, drinking straight from the full bottle of scotch he'd purchased from the bar before he left the restaurant. He was wakened in the early afternoon when the housekeeper came in to clean and shook him awake to make sure he was still alive. He confirmed that he was—although he barely felt like it—and told her that he was staying another night, before walking back to the restaurant to retrieve his car. He ordered a sandwich to go and hid in the bar the whole time he was there, unable to risk encountering the blonde again. Once he was back at the hotel, he took the sandwich and the remainder of his scotch down to the pool, then sat on the bottom of the shallow end, his head resting against the concrete side, water lapping at his clavicles as he watched the sun descend.

It was nearly noon on Monday when Logan woke up, both the scotch and the Jack Daniels dry, and his mouth feeling like something furry had climbed in and died. On top of the hangover, with only the sandwich to eat the day before, he was starving. He knew he only had about 800 miles to go to get to Neptune, but he couldn't decide if he was ready to go back yet or not. He finally decided to try to get a little further down the road, so he took a quick shower and headed out.

By Monday afternoon, Veronica's patience had reached its end. Her dad had gone into the office that morning so she was on her own with no one around to hear her vent. She called Mac to see if she'd
heard anything new but with no news from that front, she dug her keys out of her desk drawer where they’d been stashed all summer and headed for the Grand.

She stood in front of the door to Logan’s suite for a couple of minutes, debating whether to use the keycard he’d given her for her birthday a year earlier. She’d rarely used it but had never returned it, not even after they’d broken up the last time. She raised her hand to knock several times but always restrained herself, finally muttering, “Quit being a chickenshit,” under her breath as she beeped herself into the suite.

The beeping at the door brought Dick out of his room in a hurry. "Logan, are you finally home?" he said before he could register it was Veronica standing just inside the door.

"Well looky what the cat dragged in," he said with a sneer. "What are you doing here, Veronica? From what I hear, you’re not exactly welcome."

"Have you spoken to Logan, Dick?" Veronica asked as calmly as she could.

"No, I thought he didn't have a phone anymore. Something about wanting to stay as far away from you as possible so he killed the phone so he wouldn't have to listen to you whine at him." Dick looked at her coldly. "Or did I get that wrong?"

She took a step toward him, giving him a menacing smile. "Nope, you've heard correctly."

"Then what the hell are you doing here? Can you not take a hint?" Dick stepped closer to her. "You need to go."

"I don't think I do, Dick. I think I'm going in Logan's room right now." She started to walk past him and he sidestepped to get in front of her.

"You're not welcome here, Veronica. Go home."

"What makes you think I care what you think?" Veronica said. "I've never cared what idiot thoughts managed to make their way through your head before; I'm sure as hell not starting now."

"Where's Duncan, Veronica? He already dumped your skinny ass and you're back here to whore your way back into Logan's good graces? It's not gonna work this time. He's done with you."

"You'd best watch yourself, Dick," she said in a venomous tone. "I will make him understand that he just got bad information and then, once he's back in MY good graces, I'll be sure he knows just how you treated me. You wait and see how long he lets you keep hanging around here like an abandoned pet once that happens."

"Yeah, we'll see. You go ahead and plant yourself in Logan's bed for now. Once he's back, he'll kick you out of there himself." Dick pushed past her and grabbed his keys and wallet off the counter where the coffee machine sat. "Stay out of my room. I don't want to have it fumigated." The door slammed as he left her alone in the suite.

She stood still for a moment, the only sound her heavy breathing in the aftermath of her battle with Dick, then she made her way into Logan's room and threw herself onto the bed. After all these weeks, there was no remaining scent of his aftershave on the pillow. As the rage began to dissipate, the tears she’d been holding back for the last day began to fall. What if Dick's right? What if he won't believe that I never wanted to get back with Duncan? What if he really is done with me? She sobbed into the pillow until she fell asleep.

Her phone woke her up at around 6:00 PM. "Honey, I just got home from the office and expected to
find my dinner waiting for me but no...my dutiful daughter had vanished. Where're you at? You want to meet me somewhere for dinner?"

Veronica's stomach rumbled in response but now that she'd made it into the suite, she wasn't going to leave. "No, not tonight, Dad. I'm at the Grand, waiting around in case Logan shows up. But if he doesn't show tonight, I'm probably going to want to run his credit card numbers at the office tomorrow. I'm getting worried that he hasn't made it back yet. He's had plenty of time."

"Wellll, I might have already done that."

She sat upright. "How could you do that? I've got his card numbers but I've always been an overly suspicious girlfriend. Why would you have information about his cards?"

A harsh laugh echoed through the phone. "I thought we'd established some time ago that your suspicious nature was an inherited trait. Do you really think I wouldn't make sure to have a way to track the kid in case you two ever disappeared?"

"Seriously, Dad? I can't believe you would do that."

"Don't pull that self-righteous crap on me. I did it after the two of you disappeared to New York together. Huh. Didn't know I knew about that, didja?"

Veronica was silent as she absorbed the news that her dad had known about Logan following her to New York more than a year before. They'd thought they'd been so careful. She finally said, "How did you know about that?"

"I'm not giving away any more of my secrets. You use them for evil. Now, do you want to know what I've already found out about where he is or are you going to keep trying to deflect?"

She realized that in spite of the embarrassing reveal, his invasion of Logan's privacy was good for her at the moment. "Yeah, I'll stop. Where is he now?"

"The latest charges to post were from a restaurant and a hotel in Van Horn, Texas. Depending on when he checked out of the hotel and got back on the road, he could be home tonight."

"Oh Dad, thank you so much. I'm going to stay here and wait for him. Don't worry about me, okay?"

"That is easier said than done but I'll try. Good luck, honey."

"Thanks, Dad."

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At 1:30 AM, Logan dragged himself through the door of his suite. He'd come close to stopping in Tucson, AZ, in the early evening but decided that he only had four or five hours to go and kept driving. He'd finally hit Neptune and could not wait to pass out on his own bed.

That thought went out the window when he opened the door to his room and found Veronica curled up on his bed. What should have been his favorite sight instead made him feel sick. "Why is she doing this to me?" He was very clear in his own mind that even if she and Duncan were not actually on the verge of marriage like Jake said, even if they were already on the outs again, he was not going to get back on this merry-go-round. He knew he was as pathetic as his own mother in allowing his romantic partners to lead him around by the nose—or some other protruding body part—before cheating on him or dumping him and he was finished being that guy. As desperately as he loved the heartless creature now inhabiting his bed, he was not going to let her suck him in again. He backed
out of his doorway and silently shut the door again.

"Dude! You're back." Dick's voice was low. He clearly didn't want Veronica disturbed either. "Are you okay?"

"I've been better but I'm going to be fine. How long's she been here?"

"Since about the middle of the afternoon. Look, she keeps saying it's all a misunderstanding. I don't know what's true and what's not. Mac said I had to let you decide but I can't watch her gut you again." Dick reached out and clasped Logan's shoulder. "I'll do whatever you want."

"Thanks man. I'm not planning to get anymore gutted than I already am. You've been right all along. Nothing's worth what she's put me through in the last few years." Logan rubbed at the back of his neck, hoping that he actually meant what he was saying. "I can't be around her right now, though. I'm going to get another room here for tonight and then tomorrow I'll get a room in one of the hotels down on the PCH. Just for a little while, to keep her off me. Maybe we can put it on one of your credit cards so it's harder for her to hunt me down. I don't have a phone right now but I'll pick one up tomorrow and call you."

"Sounds good," Dick said. "What do I tell her?"

"Tell her I showed up, saw her cluttering up my bed, and left. That ought to send a message, right?"

Dick guffawed, then shushed himself furiously. "Oh crap, can't wake the monster now. You get out of here and we'll talk tomorrow. Glad to have you back, buddy. It'll be even better when you're not dodging your ex but just a little bit longer and then she'll give up, right?"

"I guess we'll see. It's a little more complicated this time around but I'll work it out." Logan stepped forward and gave Dick a quick hug before he realized that was something he did with Sam, not with Dick. Dick didn't seem to mind though, and hugged him back. "I'll talk to you tomorrow. Thanks for the help."
The front door of Mars Investigations slammed hard enough to shake all the windows in the place. Keith poked his head out of his office to find his daughter throwing herself into her desk chair and pounding on the computer keyboard.

"Morning, honey. Do I dare ask how the day's going so far?"

Veronica looked up at him and he nearly took a step back at the furious look on her face. "Dick Casablancas will rue the day he met me."

"And what has Dick done now?" Keith asked, keeping his voice calm and even. He had the feeling that the next couple of days were going to require a lot of calm, soothing voices.

"He's hiding Logan from me. Logan came home last night, after I'd fallen asleep, and he turned around and left the suite rather than talk to me. Dick knows where he is now and he refuses to tell me. But I've got the credit card numbers so I'll figure it out and then I'm going to get Mac to erase Dick's very existence from this world." She was still pounding furiously and Keith stepped close enough to see that she was accessing Logan's credit card information.

"You know, Veronica, I don't see a lot of value to Dick Casablancas' continued existence on the planet either but I'm not sure he really deserves what you've got in store for him. He's not hiding Logan; he's just not giving you information that it looks like Logan doesn't want you having. This is something of a messenger shooting plan you're brewing for him."

She gave an angry shriek and slammed her hands on the desk. "Nothing since Texas on this card except gas station charges. Where is he?" She looked up at her dad. "What were you saying about Dick?"

"Just that I'm not sure that Dick deserves to get wiped off the planet for doing what his friend asked him to do. Your quarrel is with Logan. Dick's just got his back. That's not a bad thing."

Veronica looked at him like he'd grown an extra head. "What? What is wrong with you? Why are you standing up for Dick?"

"I'm not; I'm just suggesting that Dick is simply doing what his best friend asked him to do. He didn't make Logan take off and he isn't making Logan avoid you now. He's just trying to do what his friend wants him to. Logan's pretty limited on people who will do that for him. I'm no fan of the big doofus but I think you should probably cut him some slack right now."

Keith could see the fight drain away from her. "But...he should be getting Logan to talk to me," she said in a mournful voice as she sagged against the desk, her eyes welling with tears.

"He thinks you've done exactly what both Duncan and Logan thought you'd do." Keith took a step closer and squeezed her shoulder. "Why would you expect Dick to have better insight into you than either of them?"

Veronica's head dropped onto the desk with a groan. "I wouldn't. I just wanted him to help me get Logan to talk to me. But you're right. He thinks I'm 'rich dude kryptonite'. Why would he help me?"
Keith turned away from the desk, pressing his hand over his mouth, so his grieving daughter couldn't see him struggling not to laugh out loud. *Rich dude kryptonite.* He took a deep breath and faced her again.

"Veronica, why don't you go home and go back to bed? I'm sure you're exhausted. I'll keep an eye on his cards and I'll call Cliff to let him know if Logan comes in or makes an appointment that he needs to let us know."

She looked up at him, her face blank. "Why would he make an appointment with Cliff?"

"Well, I wouldn't be surprised if he wanted to beat you to the punch on filing for divorce. That would give him at least some semblance of control of the situation." Keith was dismayed when the tears that had been brimming in her eyes suddenly spilled over and full-on crying began.

"Divorce? No. Why?" She buried her face in her arms.

"That's what he thinks you want, honey. He could just want to do it on his own terms."

"He should be fighting for me," she said, sitting up again, her face now reddening with anger. "He's trying to just hand me over to Duncan. He never cared about me at all."

"Nope, I don't believe that and neither do you," Keith said, shaking his head. "Like I said, he thinks this is what you want so he's giving it to you. He probably thinks he's doing you a favor by not fighting you on it."

"Then he should talk to me."

"He's probably afraid to. He's trying to maintain some dignity in this mess and looking at you...he's probably afraid he'll break down and beg you to stay with him."

"That's what I want—to stay with him." Her face crumpled and she hid it in her hands.

Keith huffed in exasperation. This was a Veronica he'd never seen before. "But he doesn't know that. Okay, come on, we're going home. You need some sleep." He leaned over her and powered the computer off, then gathered up her bag and pulled her to her feet. "We'll get your car later. You're coming with me."

Veronica cuddled into his side and he put his arm around her to lead her out of the office. "I just need him to talk to me, Daddy."

"I know, sweetie, I know. And he will. We'll make sure of it."

Mac knocked on the door of the Mars' apartment and was surprised when Keith answered.

"Oh, Mr. Mars, hi. Is Veronica here?"

"Hey Mac." Keith's smile seemed strained but he held the door open wide with a welcoming gesture. "It's Keith; you're an adult now. And yeah, she's here, but she was sleeping. I'm not sure if she's up again."

"She is," Veronica said, coming into the room. "Hey, Mac." She walked up and hugged the other girl. "How was your summer?"

Mac looked at her in confusion. "It was fine. Umm, how are you today?"
"I've been better but Dad made me take a nap and I've figured out what to do next. And you're just the person to help me."

Mac glanced at Keith, who had raised his eyebrows speculatively. "Now honey, we talked about this. It's not right to have Mac make Dick disappear."

"What?!" Mac sputtered. "Why would you want...oh. What did he do?"

"No, no, Dad's right. I'm not gunning for Dick right now. Right now we need to search for any other accounts that Logan might be using—hey, can you see if he's using the corporate account for the website business? You've got legal access to that account; let's start with that."

Mac laughed. "Yeah, let's start with the legal stuff. I like that best."

Veronica snorted. "Yeah, right. You're just saying that cuz my dad's right here." She turned to Keith. "Did you talk to Cliff?"

He nodded. "He hasn't heard from him. He pointed out that it seemed unlikely that Logan would use him for that sort of legal action, given our personal relationship with him." He looked hesitantly at Mac. "Veronica, does Mac know about..."

"Oh! No, we wanted you to hear first. And you have." She spun to face Mac who took a half step back from Veronica's manic look. "So, exciting news, Logan and I got married in July." She pulled a chain out from under her shirt with multiple rings hanging from it. "See?"

Mac stood rigidly, trying to grasp what she was hearing. "Married? Seriously?"

"Yep. It's a long story but it'll have to wait, we're a little busy right now. I presume you're hauling your laptop around in that bag." She bounced on her toes, making Mac think more of Tigger—or Logan—than Veronica.

"Um, yeah—yeah, I am."

"So why don't you set up at the bar. I'm going to check the account I've got access to and see if anything new has shown up since this morning." She hurried back towards her room.

Mac turned to Keith with her hands extended in a 'what just happened?' pose. "Is she okay?"

Keith shook his head. "She's been like Sybil all day. Raging, crying, now in a frenzy. I don't know what to expect next."

"Married?"

"I was as surprised as you. But I can't yell at her like I want to since she's so distraught." Keith looked at Mac with an evil grin. "But just you wait til they've got this worked out. They're both gonna hear from me about impromptu weddings. And it won't be pretty."

Mac chuckled. "No, I bet it won't be." She peered toward Veronica's room. "I'd better do as instructed." She moved to the bar to set up her computer. "What did you think she wanted me to do to Dick?"

"Earlier she wanted you to erase all evidence of his existence but I told her that Dick isn't who she's got the quarrel with."

"She's always got a quarrel with Dick. Did he do something in particular?"
Veronica bounced back into the room. "Logan came home last night and is avoiding me. Dick knows where he is and won't tell me."

Mac nodded to herself. "That sounds like something he'd do."

"Doesn't it? Dad says it's a good thing for him to be loyal to Logan so he doesn't think I should have you ruin his life." Her tone was completely matter-of-fact, like they were discussing where to have lunch. "I'm not saying the idea is completely off the table but I'm gonna hold off for now."

Mac struggled to keep a straight face. "Well, okay then. I'm putting destroying Dick's life totally on the back burner for now." She booted up her laptop and accessed the credit card account for 'Rate My Everything, Inc'. "Nothing here in the last month except the automatic charges for the web hosting. It doesn't look like he's used this one."

"There weren't any new charges on his personal card either. But unless he's bunking with a friend, he's got to be paying for food and lodging with something." Veronica slumped against the bar. "Who else is he friends with out here except Dick? He owns Weevil's grandma's house and she used to like him—it seems unlikely but I'll swing past there, just in case."

Mac looked at her skeptically. "I'm pretty sure he's not having a sleepover with Weevil."

"I don't think so either but if I've got to kick over all the rocks in this town, then I will."

With her back to Veronica, Mac raised her eyebrows and rolled her eyes at Keith. "Until the runaway boyfr...er...husband slithers out."

"Yep. Until he slithers out."

Veronica lay in her bed, watching the digital numbers on her alarm clock change. As predicted, Logan was not at Leticia Navarro's house. Luckily, neither was Weevil since Keith had sent him out of town on a job the day before Veronica came home. She was pretty sure he would have laughed his ass off if he'd seen her desperate enough to check his house for Logan. Mac had spent the better part of the afternoon hunting for additional credit card accounts for Logan, using every alias that Veronica imagined that he might have used in order to maintain a clandestine account, but had not uncovered anything.

Two weeks. It was Wednesday again and it had now been two weeks since she and Logan had kissed good-bye at the Quantico gate and he'd gone off on his rafting trip and she'd embarked on what was turning out to be the biggest mistake of her life. As the clock clicked to midnight, he'd been out of touch with everyone, except Dick, of course, for a week. Worse than that, their one month anniversary had been on Monday and they had been apart. Worst of all, she was so distracted on Monday that she didn't even remember until it was too late to make any gesture to commemorate the day. She'd ended up sleeping in his bed that night, but she was all alone and she hadn't even realized the date until later.

She twisted onto her side and thought about the wedding. That memory had kept her going more than once in the last week. She concentrated on the look on his face as he'd waited for her at the end of the aisle, held in his spot only by Bob's anchoring hand. It was so much better than the way he looked at her in her dreams now—hurt and accusing. Worse yet were the dreams of him with other women, walking past her with his arm wrapped around a faceless brunette, not even bothering to look at her. Logan always drowned his sorrows in indiscriminate sexual encounters; what had he been doing in the last week while he thought she'd dumped him to be with Duncan? It made her physically ill to consider but how could she blame him? A face popped into her brain and she shot
out of bed to the computer. A bit of Facebook stalking later and she relaxed in her chair with a sigh of relief. Hannah Griffith was still shown as a student at Lyndon Institute in Lyndon Center, Vermont. That could just be out of date information and she could have returned to Neptune High for her senior year but she'd checked in five hours earlier at Max's Dance Hall, a country/western dance club in Sutton, Vermont, so Veronica felt quite certain that Logan wasn't camped out on her mom's couch, waiting for Hannah to sneak down to comfort him in the night. Thank God for over sharing innocents on social media.

Veronica closed the laptop lid and crawled back into bed. School started in a week and she knew Logan was enrolled. They'd done that over the summer and Mac had confirmed that he hadn't withdrawn from anything. Of course, he didn't need to worry about timely withdrawal to get refunds on tuition; if Logan had decided to bail on school, he probably would just stop showing up. Or never show up at all. But at least she had a possible location to find him if all else failed in the meantime.

She flopped onto her side and pummeled her pillow into an acceptable position, then waited for sleep to come without success. After nearly an hour of tossing and turning, she finally got up and stumbled into the kitchen. She couldn't sleep anyway and Wallace was coming home tomorrow. After a summer in Africa, he was probably going to need some snickerdoodles.

"I found him!"

Veronica took a step back as Mac burst into the apartment, a triumphant smile on her face. "They tried to hide from me but I figured those sneaky bastards out!"

"That's my Q," Veronica said with a grin. "So, let's hear it." She led Mac to the kitchen and motioned her to a stool.

"Okay, but first I need you to listen to me. No running off half-cocked. If you spook him before you get a chance to make him listen to you, it might make it harder to find him the next time. Do you understand, Bond?"

"Sure, I haven't lost my mind. I still have stealth skills." Veronica crooked an eyebrow and curled her lip in derision. "Do you think I've gotten that pathetic already?"

"You're not at full power, Veronica, and no one expects you to be. You've had a really shitty week." Mac reached over and gently squeezed Veronica's upper arm. "It's okay to be a little out of sorts right now."

"I'm gonna be okay as soon as I get to talk to Logan. So what's the deal?"

"Well, Dick's paying right now. That's why there are no charges on Logan's cards; he's using Dick's credit card."

Veronica gave a high-pitched laugh. "Oh, you're right, the sneaky bastards." She hopped off her stool and paced nervously. "I might be impressed if I wasn't so pissed."

"Okay, well, be that as it may, I logged into his credit card account and there's a charge for The Seaside Lodge on the PCH."

"And why are you so sure that's Logan? Dick could be screwing someone he doesn't want coming back to The Grand when he's done with her. That seems more likely to me."

Surprisingly, Mac looked a little annoyed. "No, I disagree. But, since I did anticipate this bad attitude, I swung by there first. The Range Rover is parked in the parking lot."
"Oh my God, what's the address? I'm going now."

"Hang on, Bond. This is what I meant about going off half-cocked. I don't know the room number yet and I'm worried that if you just stake the place out and he sees you first, he might disappear again and find another way to stay hidden. I've got another plan."

Veronica slumped back against the counter. "I've got to do something. What's this other plan?"

"I managed to get into Dick's phone records. For the last two days, he pretty much has only talked to one number. It's a prepaid phone. My guess...that's Logan."

"How does that help me?" Veronica asked. "He probably won't even answer if I call. Or once he knows it's me, he'll just hang up."

"Use my phone and talk fast. Try to get him to meet you."

"And if he won't talk?"

"Then we work on figuring out which room he's in. Probably someone besides you sits outside the hotel and watches for him. Hey, Wallace is back today; maybe he can do it tomorrow if you can't get Logan to agree to a meeting today."

Veronica barked out a bitter laugh. "Highly doubtful. He gave me this whole moving speech at the beginning of the summer about how he was going to witness real hardships in Africa and by the time he came back, he would see how pointless it is to get worked up about my love life. Well, apparently Piz has decided to transfer to NYU and Wallace isn't happy about it. He came over this morning, already kinda mad cuz he thinks I'm one of the reasons that Piz decided to transfer, and then when I told him what was going on, he laughed. Said he wasn't surprised at all and that we're both idiots. Then he left. Didn't even take the cookies I made for him last night." She reached across the counter and pulled out a box. "Want some cookies?"

Mac smiled at her. "If you made them for Wallace, they've got real butter and eggs in them so I've gotta pass." She leaned her elbow on the counter and rested her forehead on her hand. "I'm sorry he wasn't supportive."

"I guess I couldn't really expect anything different." She poked at the box with an outstretched finger. "He's probably hoping we split up for good."

"I know he's not hoping for you to be hurt. Even if he's really angry, that's not how Wallace is. He probably just thinks you made a mistake. You'll just need to show him over time that you didn't." She reached into her pocket and pulled out her phone and a slip of paper. "So, think for a couple minutes about what you want to say to Logan and then call this number. Have a plan for if he answers and for if you go to voice mail. I would suggest that you keep it short and know exactly where to tell him to meet you. Okay?"

Veronica took the phone and the paper. "Okay, that sounds good. Do you mind...if I..."

"If you want to take the phone to your room so you've got a little privacy, that's fine. I'm going to check Dick's credit card account again and...hey, I haven't gotten on his email. I'll check that too. I'm good here while you're figuring out exactly what to say. You probably won't have time to think on your feet—you really need to go into this prepared."

Veronica nodded as she turned toward her bedroom. "Good advice, Q, thanks. I shouldn't be long."
Keith was surprised to hear the bell ring to signal that someone had entered the office waiting room. He didn't have any appointments; he was working on reports. He stepped out into the waiting room and stopped dead at the sight of his ex-wife. It had been more than two years since she'd run off with $50,000 while he lay in a hospital room covered in burns and bruises.

"Keith. Hi. How are you?" Lianne was skinnier than she had been two years earlier, too skinny, really, but she was dressed much more fashionably. She was smiling at him but her eyes still looked haunted. Keith was unmoved.

"I'm fine, Mrs. Kane. What can I do for you today?"

The smile on her face fell away. "Oh Keith, don't call me that."

"I'm sorry, did my daughter get it wrong? I thought that was your name now."

"Well, yes, technically that's right but between us—"

"Between us, I think it's especially appropriate. So, I'm a little busy right now, is there something you need?"

Lianne took a tentative step toward him. "I came to apologize. For everything I put you through over the years. You never deserved any of it and I'm so, so sorry."

Keith sighed and shook his head. "Okay, well, thanks, that oughta do it. Thanks for coming by." He turned back into his office, intending his action as a dismissal, but the clack of her heels alerted him to her pursuit as he walked to his desk.

"Keith, please, don't be like this." She stopped in the doorway and gave him a pleading look. "Look, I'm going to be living in town now so we're going to see each other. Can't we try to get along?"

He sat down heavily in his chair. "Surprisingly, Mrs. Kane, it's unlikely that we're going to be running in the same circles. Truthfully, I hadn't seen your new husband for more than a year before he tried getting me and my daughter arrested last spring." He was disappointed to see that she didn't flinch at that statement. "So you married him knowing what he tried to do to her. Why am I not surprised?"

"It's complicated."

"No, it's really not. Either you put your kids first, or you don't." He shrugged. "And you didn't."

"She broke into his house, Keith, and you covered it up. Why wouldn't he press charges?" She looked genuinely perplexed and he shook his head again.

"Well, when you put it that way..." He raised an eyebrow at her. "Although, I'm pretty sure that if the child of the woman I loved did something like that, I might try to do what I could to find out what was going on and maybe protect the rotten brat rather than try to get them prosecuted...but maybe that's just me." He stood up and walked around the desk, stopping to lean back against it. "So, now that we've caught up, I really do have work to do."

"Keith, I need to see Veronica. Is she at the apartment?"

He bristled at the mention of Veronica. "I don't know. Why do you want to see her?"

"Well, even if you're right and you and I won't be bumping into each other, that won't be the case with Veronica and I, and we need to clear the air...soon." She took a deep breath. "Duncan and Lilly
will be back in town early next week and I need to mend fences with Veronica so she doesn't try to influence him to avoid Jake. She was very dismissive towards me when we saw her in Virginia and he's worried that she'll keep them from coming around our house to visit. I need to try and fix things with her."

Keith scoffed in disgust. "Now I get it. You'd better get her in line or Jake might be unhappy. You can't have that, can you?" He dropped his head back, blinking at the ceiling for a moment before fixing her with a baleful glare. "Just when I thought you couldn't be a worse mother, you come in here and lower the bar even further." He turned to walk back to his chair. "Don't bother my daughter. She's got enough on her plate right now. And you really don't need to worry—I seriously do not see Veronica influencing Duncan in any way. We're both going to dodge a bullet there." He sat at his desk. "We're done here, Mrs. Kane. If you'd show yourself out..."

"One more thing, Keith." Lianne reached into her purse and pulled out an envelope. "I made a huge mistake when I left two years ago and I'm sorry." She dropped the envelope on the desk. "This belongs to you."

"Ahh, my $50,000, I presume," Keith said coolly. "That does belong to me. And I'm keeping it; I earned it. I hope you don't think that returning my hard-earned money is going to influence me to put a good word in for you with her."

Lianne shook her head. "No, I would never expect any such compromise from you, Keith," she said before turning and walking out of the office.

Logan clicked the television off and tossed the remote onto the mattress next to him. He was sure he was dying of boredom. He had gotten out for the last couple of mornings to go surfing with Dick and then had come straight back to his hotel room prison, still wanting to stay out of Veronica's way. He'd managed to get out of the suite at the Grand that first night without waking her up and begging her to come back to him, but it was incredibly difficult. He'd had a moment of imagining himself throwing her over his shoulder and carrying her off somewhere where she couldn't get away but he knew that was ridiculous and the vision passed quickly. He was bored enough now that he thought that in a couple of days, he would be able to encounter her without crying or begging.

The burner phone he'd picked up Tuesday morning rang and he picked it up automatically. "Dick. No more pizza. Bring me something different tonight, seriously, I'm begging you."

There was silence on the other end of the line and he took the phone away from his ear to look at the display. Not Dick's number but not Veronica's either. "Hello?"

"Logan?" Veronica's voice was tremulous. "Please don't hang up."

He sucked in a breath and nearly snapped the phone shut but decided he had to deal with this. "We really don't have anything to talk about, Veronica. Can't you just leave me alone while I try to get over losing you? It's not exactly the easiest thing I've ever done and you're making it harder."

"But you don't have to lose me. I don't want to lose you. This is all just a misunderstanding. I'm not with Duncan, I swear. I made a mistake—I know that—but that doesn't mean that I want us to be apart."

He switched the phone to his other ear and ran a hand through his hair. "Look Veronica, even if you and Duncan are already on the outs, I just can't keep up this farce. At some point, you guys are going to get on the same page and then I'm out. As much as I want to be with you, I can't just go through my life waiting for it to be the last day. I'm done being that pathetic. Can't you please respect that? I
know you care about me, even if I'm not the one you really want to be with. Don't you get what this is doing to me? Please stop."

He could hear her crying into the phone and his heart clenched. He didn't want to be the cause of her pain but he couldn't just fill Duncan's shoes until the next time they tried to work things through. "Veronica, please. I'm sorry but I've got to go. Please don't call me anymore."

"No! No! Please, Logan, don't hang up on me. Can't we please meet? I need to see you...and explain what really happened. You've got it all wrong. Please let me explain what happened. I'm begging you."

"I really don't think that's a good idea..."

"PLEASE! Logan, please, don't hang up. Please, I've got to see you. Meet me please, wherever you want. Amy's? Luigi's? Java? I don't care where, as long as you meet me. Once we talk, you'll understand that this is a mistake. I am not with Duncan."

He sighed heavily. What if he really was wrong? Was he going to throw away his life because he believed the wrong person?

"Logan, are you there? Don't hang up."

"I'll meet you. There's a coffee shop on the PCH, The Surf Bird. I'll meet you there at 5:00 PM."

"Oh my God, thank you. You won't regret it. I promise. I love you, Logan."

"I'll see you at 5:00 PM, Veronica."

At 4:15 PM, Veronica headed out to her car. She'd changed her clothes several times, not really sure what one wears to try to win one's husband back. She'd discarded the flowery sun dress quickly, deciding it made her look too much like someone Duncan would want in his life. She pulled on a denim mini-skirt and boots but decided that was too high school. She finally tugged on a pair of jeans and a tee shirt with the boots. Logan never seemed too concerned about what she was wearing, as long as he could get it off her. She ran back into her room before she left, grabbing her leather jacket out of the closet. Assuming things went well, they might end up out on the beach and she'd want the extra layer.

She found The Surf Bird easily. It was right on the water and was probably a hot spot with surfers but when she arrived, it was nearly empty. She looked around the restaurant, trying to figure out the best place to sit where she could see the front door easily and get to it quickly in case Logan got cold feet once he saw her and bolted. The problem was the seating was either tables in the middle of the room, with no privacy at all, or booths with backs too high for her to watch the door. She decided that privacy was more important, hoping that if she couldn't see him, he wouldn't be able to see her until he was close enough to catch if he ran.

She sat down and ordered a soda and fries. Her soda arrived and she was rehearsing what she wanted to say to Logan when she heard her name.

"Veronica...can we talk?" She looked up in surprise to find her mother staring down at her.

Lianne left Keith's office in a panic. He was so dismissive, just like Veronica was in Virginia. I know they were hurt but don't they understand that I was sick? I left to protect Veronica anyway—Celeste was threatening her. How could I have known that the photos were just a bluff to get rid of me? The
witch knew Jake would never love her like he loves me. How dare Keith talk about what a bad mother I am—I did what I did to protect my child. I did the only thing I could and my disease got worse because of it and all they do is blame me.

She got into her new Mercedes, still thinking about Veronica. Of course, I'm sorry about the money Veronica spent when she made me go into rehab that first time but I never asked her to do that. She'll get that money back soon anyway...that's one of the nice perks of being Mrs. Kane and Veronica will know that for herself soon enough. And damn Keith, yes, I shouldn't have taken that check but Veronica was kicking me out—what else was I supposed to do? I needed money to live on. Once Jake found out, he told me I should replace it—he's such a great man—and now I have and all Keith can say is that paying him back doesn't mean he owes me anything? It was a bad impulse and I was sorry and I've fixed it. Why is he still torturing me? If I hadn't married Keith in the first place, I would have been married to Jake a long time ago and none of this would be an issue. I should have gone to college with Jake right after high school. Then that witch wouldn't have gotten her claws into him.

Lianne pulled into traffic, heading for Keith and Veronica's apartment. She had to see Veronica. The only problem in her life right now was Jake's fear that Veronica was going to try to keep Duncan and Lilly from him. He'd tried to discourage Duncan from pursuing Veronica but his son had been adamant that he and Veronica were meant to be together and if Jake didn't like it, his place in Duncan's life would be limited. The same was true about Lilly—whom Jake was crazy about—and any more children that Duncan and Veronica would certainly have. Jake had immediately backed down and, when he'd heard that Veronica was already on the Quantico grounds, he'd pushed hard to find a way for his son to get his girlfriend back in his life immediately. Celeste was still struggling with the development but she was angry about everything since the divorce and Lianne could not care less about how her rival was dealing with the resumption of Duncan's relationship with her daughter. Everything was perfect until Veronica snubbed me at that meeting and Celeste saw.

Jake hadn't realized at first how the reunion had gone; Lianne had never been entirely forthcoming about how she'd vanished from Keith and Veronica's lives on the night that Aaron was arrested so he hadn't been concerned before and he'd been completely distracted the day of the deal signing by the presence of Duncan and Lilly. Jake had plenty of his own issues with Veronica so it wasn't like he was trying to spend time with her. Celeste, on the other hand, had seen the whole thing and when they'd seen her at the airport before everyone headed for California last Wednesday night, she'd been almost gleeful as she expressed her 'concerns'. "If the girl is avoiding her own mother, Jake, do you really think she's going to be encouraging Duncan to spend time with you? And when they start having babies—are you ever going to get to see them, Jake?" The miserable bitch. The worst thing was that Jake had been completely dismissive of Celeste's pretense of sympathy and everything had seemed fine but as soon as Celeste stepped onto the plane with Duncan and Lilly, he'd turned on her.

"What is she talking about, Lianne? I know there's been a disconnect between the two of you since you left but Celeste made it sound a lot worse than you've described. Your problems with your daughter better not mess up my time with my son and granddaughter."

And he'd barely spoken to her since, other than to ask if she'd been able to sit down and hash things out with Veronica yet.

Lianne reached the apartment complex and was slowing to pull into the lot when she saw a silver SUV on the way out, pausing to check for traffic. The driver glanced in Lianne's direction and she saw that it was Veronica. There was no indication that she'd realized that the oncoming car was being driven by her mother as she pulled onto the street. Rather than turning into the lot, Lianne pulled to the side of the road for a moment, then pulled back out to follow Veronica's car.
Veronica led her through Neptune to the PCH, ultimately turning into a diner parking lot. Lianne drove past the lot, then made a U-turn and came back around. She wanted Veronica to be in the diner before she approached her; she was afraid that if Veronica saw her while still in her car, she might leave before Lianne could talk to her. She gave Veronica a few minutes to get settled in the diner and then followed her in.

The interior was set up with high-backed booths so Lianne didn't see Veronica immediately. She walked further into the restaurant and saw Veronica sitting alone at a booth, a drink in front of her, staring down at her hands.

"Veronica...can we talk?"

"Why are you here? I'm meeting someone and it's important." The sudden appearance of Lianne was completely unexpected and unwelcome. She needed to get ready for Logan.

"This is important too, Veronica." Lianne slid into the booth.

"Somehow I doubt that." Veronica checked her phone for the time. Logan was due in fifteen minutes. "I've got five minutes for you, Lianne. Then I need you to leave."

"It's up to you how long this takes. I know you're mad at me for all the stuff in the past but Jake's worried—and so am I—that this rift between us is going to cause a problem for Duncan and Jake. What can I do to make you see that I've gotten better and I'm ready to be your mom again?"

Lianne's face was pleading and Veronica could barely comprehend what she was saying. "Hang on. You're here to talk about fixing things with me...so I don't hurt Duncan's relationship with Jake? How would I do that?"

"If you won't come to the house with them, or do family things with us, Duncan might decide he doesn't want to either. Even if you're not ready yet to think about me as your mom again, will you be able to think of me as your mother-in-law? It won't be long before you see I'm ready to be there for you again. I just need to know that you're not going to try to influence Duncan to stay away from us."

Veronica's mouth dropped open in shock. "As my mother-in-law?" She dropped her head into her hands. "Hasn't Jake spoken to Duncan in the last week?"

"Not really. He's still at Celeste's and, unless it's an emergency, Jake doesn't think it's a good idea to interrupt their time together."

She rolled her eyes and shook her head. "Okay, well, once Jake does talk to him, you'll see that this is a non-issue. Any decisions I make about you won't impact anything between Duncan and Jake. Okay? I promise you. I won't keep Duncan and Lilly away from Jake. Now, I need you to go."

Lianne shook her head. "I'm not sure you understand. If you won't have anything to do with me, it is going to be a problem. Jake wants to be part of your lives. When you guys start having kids, they're going to be Kanes and they'll need to be part of Jake's life. You can't keep them away from him. I'm begging you."

Veronica sat up straight and looked directly at Lianne. "Look, if I promise you that I won't keep Duncan, or Lilly, or our potential kids, away from Jake, will you leave me alone? I'm waiting for someone and I need you to go so we can actually talk."

A relieved smile swept over Lianne's face. "Thank you so much, honey. This means so much to
me." She stood up to leave but paused next to the table. "Look, I know Duncan and Lilly will be back next week. It will mean so much to us if you'll join us for dinner as soon as they're back. We've all got to start learning to be a family as soon as we can. It's really important to Jake. He lost the first year of Lilly's life; he doesn't want to miss any more. And once you guys start having your own kids, he's really going to want to be a part of those babies' lives."

"I know I'm going to regret this question but I just can't help myself. You've got a lot to say about me needing to make these efforts because Jake wants to be part of my kids' lives. But what about you? You haven't said a word about how you want to spend time with these future baby Mars-Kanes. Why do I suspect that if I wasn't with Duncan, or Jake wasn't making you, you wouldn't care if you had any involvement with me or my future children?"

"No, no, honey, of course I'm going to be excited to be involved with them. I think it's amazing that we're going to be married to a father and son. This will give us the opportunity to build our relationship back to what it was before." Lianne looked panicked again and Veronica had to look away.

"Huh. Interesting. You know what? I've changed my mind." Lianne took a step closer to Veronica's side of the table and reached for her arm but Veronica put her hand up to stop her as she pinned her mother with an angry glare. "Duncan and I and our kids...if I had my way, we wouldn't have anything to do with you or your precious husband. Do you know that he tried to have me arrested last Spring? That's not someone I would ever trust with my children. So if I do ever have kids, their only grandparent is going to be Keith Mars. Now why don't you run along and tell Jake you haven't been able to get me in line. Or maybe you'll just lie to him, like you lied to your first husband for your entire marriage. We are done here." She shook her head in disgust and looked away, noticing for the first time that Logan was now standing just beyond the booth, leaning up against the high divider. He looked like he'd just been kicked in the stomach. As he caught her eye, he suddenly backed away, then turned and bolted for the door.

"Logan, wait!" Veronica jumped out of the booth, pushing her mother out of her way as she chased him out of the diner. She reached the door and ran out, looking for where he'd gone. She spotted him, almost to the Range Rover, and she shouted again. "Logan! Wait!"

He stopped where he was and whirled back to face her. "Why, Veronica? Why did you make me meet you? I already knew about you and Duncan and you knew that. You thought I needed to hear it straight from your mouth? Well, newsflash, I didn't. I've been struggling with this for a week and instead of just leaving me alone to figure my life out, you had to, what? What possible reason could you have to deliberately hurt me like this? You wanted to make sure I understood in no uncertain terms that we're over? I get it. Okay? I get it. Now will you leave me alone?"

"Logan, no, what you heard, it wasn't real." She reached out, trying to touch him, his arm, his shirt, it didn't matter, she just needed to touch him and make him understand, but he spun out of her reach. "Look, she was pushing me about being part of their family and how important family was to Jake and she made me mad."

"Yeah, I heard. First you agreed that you wouldn't keep Duncan and Lilly and your future kids away from them but then when you realized that your mom doesn't care about the baby Mars-Kanes, you said you wouldn't trust your kids around Jake. Your kids' only grandparent will be Keith Mars. I heard the whole thing."

"You've got to believe me; I didn't mean any of those things. Except the part about Dad being the only grandparent. That's totally true. We don't have anyone else."

He threw his hands up. "God damn it, Veronica, I don't understand you. Why are you saying these
things when I just heard you planning out your family with Duncan? You know, I really thought you
loved me, even if you loved him more, but now? You're deliberately trying to hurt me. Why would
you do this to me? Why jerk me around like this?"

"I'm not jerking you around, Logan. I'm telling you the truth." She reached out for him again and he
jumped back, throwing his hands up between them.

"You know what else I heard, Veronica? You accusing your mom of lying to her first husband for
their entire marriage. Maybe that's what this is about. Like mother, like daughter. Just leave me alone,
Veronica. I mean it. Stay away from me. I'm done being the one you lie to." He turned away and
practically ran to the truck, jumping in and speeding away. She watched until he was out of sight,
then sank down onto her knees in the middle of the parking lot, sobbing.

Lianne's head was spinning. She gotten a somewhat dismissive agreement from Veronica but then,
suddenly, she turned sarcastic and said she'd never agree to Jake spending time with her children. It
was like her daughter was a total stranger. Lianne rubbed her elbow where it had struck the divider
between the booths when Veronica pushed her to chase after a young man who she could have
sworn was Logan Echolls. She dropped a few bills on the table to cover whatever Veronica might
have ordered, and then grabbed the bag that Veronica had left in the booth when she raced out.

Lianne walked out of the diner trying to figure out what she was going to tell Jake when she
registered that her daughter was now on her knees in the parking lot, crying and rocking back and
forth.

"Veronica, are you hurt? What's wrong?" Lianne knelt next to Veronica, putting an arm around her
shoulders while patting her with her free hand checking for injuries to explain why she was on the
ground. "Honey, where are you hurt? Do we need to call 9-1-1?"

Veronica's head snapped up and she glared at Lianne. "This is your fault. He's done with me and it's
because of you." She jumped to her feet—still crying—but now yelling at Lianne. "Why couldn't
you just leave me alone? Instead of coming back to tear my life up again? He was going to listen to
me and everything was going to be okay. And now he thinks I've been lying to him all along, that
I'm trying to hurt him."

Lianne stood shocked as her daughter continued to berate her in an increasingly shrill voice. She
finally took a step toward Veronica and tried to break in. "What are you talking about, Veronica?
That was Logan, right? Is this about him?"

"Yes, it's about Logan and, once again, trying to spare Duncan from embarrassment or
uncomfortable feelings has ended up hurting him. You can go home and tell your husband that I
won't be keeping him from his precious son and granddaughter because I am not with Duncan and I
never will be. Now stay away from me." She whirled away from Lianne and ran for her car.

Lianne followed, trying to stop her. "Veronica, hang on, you shouldn't be driving like this. Please
wait." She caught up to her as Veronica began climbing into the car and grabbed her arm. "Please,
honey, don't go, you're too upset to drive." Veronica pushed her away.

"I'm fine, just get away from me." She slammed the door and drove away.

Lianne stood for a moment, watching her daughter disappear. She pulled her phone out of her purse
and searched her contacts list for a minute before selecting the name she was looking for. The phone
rang through to voice mail which was not unexpected.
"Keith, it's Lianne, please don't just delete this. I know you don't want to talk to me but Veronica just left this diner out on the PCH, The Surf Bird, and she is really upset. I tried to stop her but she ignored me completely. I don't really understand what happened but it had something to do with Logan Echolls and she says she's not with Duncan. I'm really unclear on the details but I just wanted you to know that she's out there somewhere really upset. I'm so sorry for whatever I did to cause this—she said it was my fault but I'm not sure how. Anyway, I know you probably think she's right and maybe she is but it, whatever 'it' was, was completely accidental. No matter what you and she think, I really do want what's best for her. Please keep an eye out for her and, if you can, let me know when she's made it home safe. Thanks, Keith. Please tell her—whatever I did—I'm really sorry."

"Mac, it's Keith Mars, call me as soon as you get this message."

Keith had headed for the diner after listening to Lianne's message, watching for Veronica's car all along the road. He'd called Veronica's cell and left a message but had heard nothing back. He sat in the lot for a few minutes, trying to think where Veronica might have gone. When his phone rang, he had it open immediately.

"Veronica?"

"No, Keith, it's Mac. What's going on?"

"Did you know anything about Veronica meeting Logan tonight?"

"Yeah, they were meeting at a diner on the PCH. At 5:00 PM. I haven't heard from her since then; do you know if they met?"

Keith glanced at his watch. An hour ago. "Yeah, it's my understanding that they did but it didn't go as planned and now I can't find Veronica and she's not picking up her phone. Do you have any idea where she might have gone?"

"Well, I had figured out that Logan was staying at The Seaside Lodge but I didn't know the room. If she's looking for him again, she might be there. It's on the PCH."

"I know where it is. Thanks Mac. And if you hear from Veronica, tell her to call me immediately. I mean it. Immediately."

"Absolutely. I'll try calling her; see if I can get her to answer. Can you keep me in the loop? Once you catch up to her, I mean."

"Yeah, definitely. Talk to you soon." Keith dropped the phone back into his pocket and headed for The Seaside Lodge. Once there, he sat in his car for a moment and made a quick call. "Mac. She's here, at the motel."

"Is she okay?"

Keith looked across the parking lot at his daughter, sitting on the hood of her car, watching the motel. "I'd say that physically, she's fine. Beyond that, your guess is as good as mine. I'll have her call you tomorrow. I think we'll be here for a while."

"Okay, thanks for letting me know. Tell her I said...whatever you think would help. And good luck."

"Thanks, Mac." Keith tucked the phone away again and stepped out of his car. He walked across the parking lot, looking for Logan's Range Rover but not seeing it. He reached Veronica's Saturn and leaned against the hood.
"You used to be better at this staking out thing, honey," he said. "Pretty sure anyone who drives into this parking lot is going to see you."

"I'm not hiding. I'm just waiting."

"Do you want to talk about what happened with your mom?" She looked at him for the first time and shook her head.

"Not really. Not now at least." She went back to staring at the motel.

"Well, maybe I can sit with you a while?"

She gave him a weak smile. "I think you're going to dent my hood."

"It's a Saturn; it's supposed to bounce back." He grinned at her and used the tire to lift himself up onto the hood, sliding gingerly over next to her and putting his arm around her shoulders.

"I hope you remember that when you're getting Weevil's bill for un-denting this baby." She leaned her head against his chest and sighed. "I've messed this up so badly, Dad."

"You never do anything halfway, honey." He squeezed her shoulder gently.

She gave a short laugh that ended up sounding more like a sob. "Mom made me so mad and I said some stuff just to hurt her. Only Logan heard them and believed they were true and I know I hurt him so much. I don't know if he'll ever believe that I want to be with him now."

"Give him a little time. If he's hurting like you say, he's probably not thinking straight."

"Yeah, and what's he doing as a result? He doesn't make the best decisions when he's feeling like he's got to be feeling." She sat up from her huddle against Keith and thumped her head back against her windshield. "And if he does do something desperate, I can't blame anyone but myself. I started this whole thing by not letting him know what was happening with me. Jeannie warned me I was making a mistake but did I listen? Of course not. Veronica Mars doesn't need advice; she's smarter than everyone."

"Weelll, present company excluded, of course."

She chuckled. "Of course." She shook her head. "So, Mr. Smarty Pants, if you really are so smart, what do I do?"

"You're not having much luck with the in person attempts and you can't call him, right?" He looked down at her questioningly.

"Mac found the number for the phone he was using; that's how I set up the meeting with him. But I tried it after he took off again and it's going straight to voice mail. He probably trashed it since it was compromised."

"So, try the old fashioned way—send him a letter."

"Really?" She wrinkled her nose skeptically.

"If you put something in the mail tomorrow—to the Grand, it's the only address where you know that he'll get it—he'll have it in a day or two and hopefully he will have calmed down a bit and will actually read it. If you don't hear something after that, then it's back to stalking." He pulled her back against him, tucking her head on his shoulder and tipping his head against hers. "So, enough stalking
for tonight?"

"Not quite yet, Dad. Do you mind?"

"Nope, I'm with you for the long haul."

Chapter End Notes

It's been a while since I expressed my ongoing appreciation to KMD0107 for all the help she's given me with this story. Even with her incredibly busy life, she's there for me every week to get the final edit of the week's chapter done. She's gotta be glad that we've only got 3 more chapters to go.

Speaking of that...next week we are finally to the point where the action picks up at the close of Chapter 1.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Just a reminder—Chapter 1 has occurred in the break between the end of the last chapter and the start of this one. If you haven’t already ducked back to Chapter 1 to refresh yourself, feel free to take a moment to do so. It’s a short chapter, it won’t take too long.

One other note—there is brief mention of suicidal ideation in this chapter.

September 4, 2007

Veronica sat staring at the stack of divorce papers on her desk for the remainder of the class. It was the first meeting of the semester so maybe it was only supposed to be thirty minutes long. Quickie classes in the first week of instruction weren’t a totally uncommon occurrence so Veronica was determined to not add to her already huge pile of guilty feelings by feeling bad for screwing up the first class for her professor. After Dick’s abrupt interruption and departure, the instructor had finished up her personal introduction, gone through the syllabus with a fifteen minute discussion of the semester project, assigned reading and discussion questions and released the class. Thirty minutes of a ninety minute class. Oh well.

It seemed her fellow students didn't mind since most had jumped up immediately and left the room. Or maybe it was more accurate to say they fled the room, probably wanting to get clear of her humiliation or maybe they just raced out to tell their friends what they’d witnessed. Delivery of divorce papers in the middle of class was probably a first at Hearst. Probably a first for most colleges actually. Being first wasn't a first for Veronica. She was probably the first to solve a murder in front of a whole class also. That one had been more humiliating for Tim though. And she found she wasn’t crazy about being on the receiving end of the humiliation.

"Ms. Mars? Are you all right?"

Veronica looked up to find both her teacher and Mac looking down at her. The rest of the room had cleared.

"Oh sure. Caught a little off guard, I will admit. He's usually so private; I never expected Logan to air his dirty laundry so publicly."

"Oh BS, Veronica!" Mac said fiercely. "Maybe you've forgotten but this is a classic Logan move from back in high school. He's gotten more private since the really bad shit from his dad turned into the Tinseltown Diaries but before that, how many throw-downs were you at the lunch table for between he and Lilly? He loved that attention. You're the one who didn't."

"He was different then..."

"Maybe but at this point, he's trying to hurt you as badly as he thinks you've hurt him. Same as what always happened with Lilly."

Veronica dropped her head into her hands. "I'm just one more person in his life who's hurt and abandoned him. Lilly, his parents, and me. How many times have I run away and blamed him for
whatever went wrong between us? How has he stayed so open to loving anyone when every important person in his life has betrayed him?"

Mac gave a loud, huffy sigh. "Veronica! You didn't do anything wrong here. I think you're starting to believe what Logan believes."

"It might as well be true if he won't listen to anything I say." She slumped across the desk and started to cry, unable to hold onto her tenuous control any longer.

Mac threw up her hands as Veronica's tears started. "God damn it. I'm going to skin Dick Casablancas alive." She looked apologetically at the professor. "She's really not usually like this."

"I'm sure. That was a rough thing. Does she live on campus? Even if she's got another class today—I'm really not sure she's up to it."

"I think you're right. And she doesn't live on campus but I do. It's gonna be hard getting her all the way there though. She'll die if the whole campus sees her like this." Mac glanced up at the clock, trying to decide what to do. As she did so, her eyes passed over the door and she saw Dick peering in through the little window. He seemed to be looking at Veronica and his expression was more than a little unsettled. Mac charged toward the door and her movement must have caught Dick's eye because he vanished from the window.

"I'll be right back," Mac called back to the professor and flung the door open. Dick was only a couple doors away but he was moving quickly.

"Get your ass back here, Dick," she shouted after him and she saw him flinch but not stop moving so she ran after him. "Stop right now, you cowardly piece of..." She caught up to him and grabbed his arm, yanking him to face her. "I can't believe you did that. I really thought you'd changed but what you did to Veronica just now—I am never going to forgive you for that." She reached out to slap him but he raised his arm in front of his face and cowered back.

"Come on, Mackie, don't be like that. Logan needed the papers served; I was just taking care of it so he wouldn't have to hire someone."

"Yeah, because paying someone to serve her in private at her house would have been such a financial hardship on him. You wanted to do it and then you stuck around hoping to see that it upset her. You are the lowest..."

"Why is she upset anyway? He's doing what she wants so she can be with Duncan." Dick seemed genuinely confused.

"How many times do I have to tell you? She doesn't want to be with Duncan. He surprised her in Virginia, tried to make his move, and she rejected him. She hadn't told Logan when she first found out Duncan was back because she thought there might still be legal problems and she was trying to protect him. Then he got the mixed up story before she got to tell him herself and he's refused to let her explain. She's been a mess since she came back but what you did today... I think you finally broke her. Good job. Hasn't that been your goal since tenth grade?" She spit the last sentences out sarcastically and turned away from him, walking back toward the classroom.

"Mackie? Where're you going?"

"You idiot, I've got to figure out how to get my heartbroken friend someplace where she can deal with the destruction of the life she thought was finally perfect without everyone looking at her. She's not really used to losing control in front of anyone." They stopped in front of the classroom and Mac
peeked in the window. Veronica's head was still down on the desk. Mac turned back to Dick who looked completely confused as he watched Veronica. "I'm giving you one more chance to help fix this. You go tell Logan what you've seen and what I've said and get him to listen to her. I will never ever forgive you if you won't."

"I don't know if I can get him to change his mind at this point. Something happened last week, I'm not sure what, but he's been drunk and angry pretty much ever since then. He sobered up enough to meet with his lawyer and then he got hammered again and hasn't stopped drinking since."

"I know what happened last week and yeah, it was bad. But he was here on campus earlier—I swear I saw him—did he come to school drunk?" Mac ran her hands through her hair in agitation. At this rate, this probably was still gonna be hard to fix, even if Dick got on their side.

"Yeah. I actually dragged him out with me this morning hoping that a little fresh air and time away from his bottles might help. Plus, I'm getting a little afraid to leave him alone. I dreamed last night that I came home and found him dead in a pool of vomit. But now he's planted himself in the Pi Sig house and is going through their liquor cabinet."

"Do you see now that this breakup is not making him happy? And you can see how she feels about it." Mac motioned to the little window and was relieved to see Dick nod.

"You're absolutely sure she told Duncan no?" he asked. "It's not that something didn't work out and she's just biding her time with Logan until Duncan is available again? You're absolutely sure?"

"Yes, I'm absolutely sure." Mac turned to look directly at Dick. "Logan's my friend too. I don't want him hurt either. She's not going to hurt him. Not on purpose. This has all been a huge mix-up but Veronica's only mistake was trying to keep Duncan coming back a secret until she knew that him being home wouldn't be a threat to her and Logan legally. She should have told him anyway; 'shared her burden' as my mother would say. But she's still learning how to do that. That isn't something that's gonna come easy for someone like Veronica. Everything she did was supposed to be to keep him safe. I swear, Dick."

He looked at Veronica for another moment than turned to Mac. "I'm gonna trust you on this, Mac. I'll try to get him to see her again."

"He's back at the Grand with you?"

"Yeah, but don't try getting her in there. The staff basically has a restraining order against her. If they see her, they're supposed to stop her from getting upstairs and then call the cops."

"What the hell?" Mac looked at Dick with her mouth open in shock.

"Whatever this thing was last week, he reacted really badly. He doesn't want her getting in the suite again. The assistant manager was happy to oblige him. In fact, I think he's the one who suggested calling the cops. I don't think that was Logan's idea." Dick peeked in the window again. "She must've really done something to piss that guy off. I think he hates her."

"If it's the guy I'm thinking of, he and Veronica have had some run-ins, at school and at the hotel. He must have gotten promoted. Kinda surprising, actually. She thought she might have gotten him fired last school year." Mac chuckled. "Jackass."

"Thank God you're calling someone else that," Dick said and tried to slide his arm around her waist. She stepped away and held her hand up.

"You work with me on this, we'll talk. Until then..." She shook her head at him and he shrugged.
"Had to try. All right, I'm going to try to get Logan to talk to her again. I'll call you a little later." He looked at her with his eyebrows raised. "That means you have to answer when I call."

She gave him a small smile and shook her head. "All right. I guess."

He grinned and struck like a snake, giving her a quick kiss on the cheek and darting back out of the way of her hand that slapped up at his chest. "We'll be talking soon, Mac-a-roonie."

He took off down the hallway and she smiled watching him go. She hoped he could get somewhere with Logan. As shocking as it seemed, she missed Dick. She'd been so worried about having to tell Veronica that she'd fallen into a romantic relationship with someone that Veronica judged to be only slightly above pond scum. She wished now that that was the biggest of their problems.

She re-entered the classroom and saw that the professor was now at the podium rifling through her notes. The woman looked up when the door opened and Mac went to her and spoke quietly. "I'm sorry about this. I'm going to try to get her out of here now."

"It's really not a problem. There's not another class scheduled in here for another two hours." She looked over at Veronica. "She's fine there until then."

"No, we'll be out sooner than that. Thank you so much for being flexible about this. She's really going to appreciate it too, once she's got things back on track." She tapped her fingers on the desk next to her, thinking for a moment, then walked back over to where Veronica was still sitting.

"Hey Bond. How ya doing?" Mac slid back into the seat she'd been in during class and turned toward Veronica who sat a little more upright but continued to lean across the desk-top. Her face was red and her eyes puffy.

"I just can't believe how awful this has gotten. We were so happy. Everything was so perfect. I should have known it couldn't last. Nothing good ever lasts. How did I forget that?" She looked at Mac earnestly. "How many times have I learned that lesson and somehow I thought...that life was going to be different. But it's the same old life. People die or they run away or they hurt you...in terrible ways. You know it too. I can't believe I let myself forget."

"Veronica, that isn't all there is. No, nothing's perfect, and you and Logan in particular are never going to be perfect—" Veronica snorted a laugh at that and Mac felt a wave of relief "—and yes, this is much worse than what your average person probably has to deal with but come on—when have you ever been average? We are going to get this straightened out and you guys can go back to be perfectly imperfect together. He is never going to love anyone like I know he loves you. He wouldn't be reacting like this if that wasn't true. And he is going to understand. We just have to find the way to do it. We're getting close to the point where I hit him with my car and you explain while he's in traction and can't get away but hopefully, we've still got a few avenues before I have to actually commit a violent felony." She reached out and put a comforting hand on Veronica's arm. "So, are you up to a stroll across campus to my dorm room?"

"I should probably just drive home."

"I'm hoping you'll humor me a little and just come back with me to my dorm. Maybe take a little nap. You've had a really bad shock. I know you can take care of yourself but I'd like to be there for you in case I can do anything. Can you work with me on this?"

"I'm not sure I really want to see Parker..." Veronica wrinkled her nose and frowned.

"As I have advised you on at least five occasions, Parker did not return to Hearst. Her best friend
from high school went to some college in the south and came back with such glowing tales, Parker decided she should try a college where someone actually had a good first year."

"Oh, yeah. That sounds kinda familiar. Well, your new roommate then..."

"As I have advised you on at least four occasions, I managed to wrangle a single. No roommate." She gave Veronica a devious smile and Veronica gasped and held her hand over her mouth in faux surprise.

"Why do I think some computer-related espionage may have been involved here?" Veronica asked in a low voice and Mac raised her eyebrows and gave her a wide-eyed innocent look.

"I know not of what you speak." They both laughed then and Veronica stood up from the desk, wiped her eyes, and walked to the instructor.

"I am so sorry about this. I promise to be the most boring student you've got for the rest of the semester." While Veronica spoke to the instructor, Mac gathered the divorce papers and put them into her own bag. Keeping them out of Veronica's sight for a while seemed like a good thing and hopefully, they'd be able to shred them soon because Dick would get this whole thing fixed.

Chip met Dick at the door of the Pi Sig house. "You need to get your asshole friend out of here."

Dick bristled at the statement. "What's your problem, man? Logan's cool. You've never had a problem with him before."

"He broke open my good scotch and now it's gone. Do you know how expensive that shit is?"

Dick tried to push Chip out of the way so he could find Logan. "He drank an entire bottle of scotch? Is he still conscious?"

"Yes, unfortunately. He didn't drink it all himself; he shared it with the NIBs. Those little punk-asses don't deserve my expensive scotch. I barely consider them brothers since we had to dumb down the pledge program so much last semester."

"Chip, you sleaze-bag cheap-skate. Your precious scotch will get replaced. Don't worry about it." Dick shook his head and stepped into the house, heading down into the basement where he'd last seen Logan.

"Well, he's paying to re-felt the pool table too," Chip shouted after him.

Dick shuddered and walked down the stairs cautiously; even this early in the day there could be stuff on the stairs that the sober man seeks to avoid. As it happened, there were no land mines on the stairs but there was a blanket flung over the pool table with a wet patch soaked through. Dick grimaced and moved further into the basement, following the sounds of frivolity.

"Dick! Come 'ere, man." Logan was sprawled on one of the couches, legs over the back, and head hanging down toward the floor, with a game controller in his hand. Two of last semester's new initiates were sitting on either side of him in the same position. "We're practicing our upside-down driving under the influence." The room erupted with shouts and catcalls as one of the cars on the screen shot off the animated road into the ocean alongside. A very unrealistic ball of fire—considering the car was now underwater—erupted and Logan dropped the controller on the floor and giggled. "I'm not doing so good."

"You're getting better, dude," one of his game-playing companions said. "Keep it up, you'll be ready
"No, he won't," Dick said in an agitated voice. He reached down and shoved Logan's legs so he somersaulted backwards onto the floor, where he lay face down, still giggling. "Come on, you doofus. I'm taking you home."

Logan pushed his arms against the floor and pressed himself up so he was looking at Dick. "It's boring there," Logan sulked. "And too much...no, I wanna stay here."

"Well, too bad. Chip's on the warpath and you're being evicted from Casa Pi Sig. At least until the pool table's operational again." He moved closer to Logan and hauled him onto his feet, to the protests of the other game players.

Logan burst into laughter as he leaned heavily against Dick. "Hey, that wasn't me. That was one of your little bros. Pi Sigs can't hold their scotch apparently."

"Well, Chip's blaming you anyway. And he's pissed you drank his expensive scotch." Dick began to pull Logan toward the stairs.

"That wasn't expensive, what we drank earlier. I'll get him a case of some actual good stuff. Maybe he'll stop whining like a little bitch then." After the first couple of stairs, Logan stopped and looked up to the top. "These are steep."

"Yeah, they are. So come on. Just one at a time if you're having trouble." He tugged on Logan again but Logan only shook him off and stared at the steps.

"I'm surprised none of you assholes have broken your necks on the way down these steps before," he said thoughtfully, before starting to climb again. "A little trip at the top... I bet that could be lights out."

Dick's mouth dropped open as he watched Logan pulling himself up the stairs using the handrail, then he followed him, trying to stay completely behind his friend as he lurched up the stairs. "More likely you'd just end up paralyzed, not dead. No glamour in that. Seems like a big risk."

Logan turned unsteadily and looked at Dick over his shoulder. "Ya think?"

"Oh yeah, then you'd just have to have some guy taking care of your bodily functions for the next forty years while you lay in a bed. That sounds bad."

"Why do I have to have a guy? Maybe a chick instead. That wouldn't be as bad." Logan stopped and dropped onto a stair, leaning back to lean his head on a higher step. "Gotta rest."

"You're too big for a girl to manage, well, maybe some body builder type so she can roll you on your side sometimes so you don't get bedsores." Dick went searching through his brain for any ideas that could discourage Logan from throwing himself down the stairs. "Plus, it's not like you have any need for a chick anyway." He paused and lowered his voice. "None of the equipment would be working, ya know."

Logan nodded solemnly. "Yeah, that doesn't sound good." He sat up and turned his head, looking from the top to the bottom and back. "This staircase seems longer than the ones at the Grand too...dontcha think?"

"Yeah, yeah, definitely. Only paralyzed on the Grand stairs too." He held a hand out to Logan, who took it readily enough, and pulled him carefully to his feet. "Now let's get out of here. And only elevators for you from now on, my friend. Logan shrugged and began to trudge up the stairs again,
Dick following behind, mind whirring with thoughts of how he could get through to Logan.

Dick ended up half-carrying Logan to his car and he seemed to fall into a stupor once he dropped into the passenger seat of Dick's convertible. They were nearly to the freeway exit to take to get to the Grand when Logan's voice startled Dick's thoughts.

"Your car is too low to the ground. I can see the ocean from here when I'm in the Rover."

"Not everyone needs a monster truck."

"I never hear you complaining when we've got surfboards to transport," Logan said petulantly.

"That's true," Dick admitted. "It's easier to take your car out surfing. Hey, maybe we can go out early tomorrow morning."

"Umm, maybe, yeah."

"You're gonna have to sober up though," Dick said. "I saw your fake driving back at the house; I'm not riding with anything that looks like that."

"Like you've never driven while you were shit-faced," Logan said scornfully.

"You're right, but I'm trying to be more responsible. You actually used to encourage that." Logan shrugged and rolled his eyes.

"Ya know, that game this morning, the car flew way out over the water even on the straightaways. I bet on a curvy part of the PCH, you could really get some impressive air off the side." He looked around the inside of Dick's car. "I bet your car would get a lot further than mine since it's so much lighter."

"Godammit, Logan, shut the hell up," Dick shouted. Logan jerked at the loud voice and shrank against the car door. "I am done listening to you talk about all the fun ways you can kill yourself."

"I was just talking about the design flaws in the game, Dick," Logan said in a hurt voice, his lower lip jutting out in a way that would have been hilarious if Dick hadn't suddenly been so angry.

"Yeah? And what about the design flaws in the staircase at the Pi Sig house? Get off it. I don't believe you. In case it's slipped your love- and alcohol-addled brain, both my brother and your mom killed themselves. Do you really think I'm going to find this to be an enjoyable conversation?" He took the downtown exit and headed toward the hotel. "Look, I get how unhappy you are without her. Maybe you need to rethink this. She definitely wants to get back with you—"

"No, she doesn't. Not for real anyway. As soon as she and Duncan work things out, I'm disposable."

"How can you be sure when you've never talked to her?"

"Dick, knock it off! I may not have talked to her but I heard her talking very clearly. She's already planning their little family. Where does that leave me? Tagging along behind her until Duncan crooks his finger and then it's 'sorry, Logan, but you've always known'. No thanks."

Dick turned into the hotel parking garage. "I think you've gotten your messages mixed up. Since when does Veronica Mars plan a family? Are we talking, like, kids? That doesn't sound like her."
"Shows what you know. We talked about kids. That's partly how she got me to agree to get married."

"Wait, she convinced you? If that's true why would she leave you?" This was new information for Dick. He'd always pictured Logan as the one who pushed the issue of marriage. He pulled his car into a parking space and turned it off.

"She thought Duncan was gone for good. I'm good enough when he's not available but once he came back, it's hasta la vista, baby." He shrugged. "I've always known it was true. I just let myself forget for a little while." He opened his door and got out but the sudden movement brought him to his knees. "God damn it. Now my stupid legs have given up on me."

Dick was out and around the car immediately, pulling Logan to his feet. "It looks to me like you just need to sober up and eat some real food. Come on, let's get upstairs and we'll get you a buffalo burger."

"I do enjoy a good buffalo," Logan laughed and he leaned heavily against Dick's shoulder. "You're a good friend, Dick. Pretty much my only friend. Thanks for helping me."

"You've done the same for me," Dick answered. "I just wish you'd listen to me about talking to Veronica."

"Nope. Done talking to her. She can talk to her next husband. I'm officially out of the Veronica biz...well, not quite officially yet, but soon. Hey—" he punched Dick lightly "—if DK invites me to their wedding, you've gotta come with me, okay?"

"Logan, my dad's been married...three times...I think...he never invites his exes."

"But Duncan was my best friend...he'd invite me to his wedding, wouldn't he?"

Dick shook his head in exasperation. "Dude, you're convinced he's stealing your wife. Why would you want to go to his wedding to her?"

"He didn't steal her; she was his. I was just the placeholder when they couldn't be together. It's not their fault."

"That's it; no more alcohol. That is officially the stupidest thing I've ever heard. And I know stupid."

"I can't blame them. I want to but I love them both too much, no matter what happens. I just forgot my place in our little group. It hurts right now but...since you're getting your undies in a bunch about the idea of me seeing how much air I can get flying off the PCH, I guess I'm just gonna have to get used to it."

They'd reached the door to the suite and Dick opened the door and Logan stumbled in and collapsed on the sofa. Dick followed him in and stood over his still inebriated friend. "All right, anything more than the buffalo burger?"

"A beer? Or six?"

"No, Logan, no more beer. You need to sober up. You've been drunk for pretty much five or six days straight. Even I know that isn't healthy." Dick grabbed the phone and called their lunch order down. "All right, I'm jumping in the shower. I ran out in too big of a hurry this morning and for some reason, spending time with you in the Pi Sig basement made me feel dirty." Logan cackled at that and Dick shook his head. "If room service knocks before I get back, let 'em in."
"I'm drunk, Dick, not an idiot. I've been letting room service in for nearly two years. Go shower. I'll be out here practicing my golf swing. Hey, bring me the controller, would'ja?"

Dick did as Logan asked and then ducked into his room. He turned on the shower as cover and called Mac.

The noise of the phone vibrating against the desk made Veronica start to mutter in her sleep again and Mac flung herself at the noisy device. Once in her hand, it was basically silent again and she checked to see who was threatening to undo the fragile calm that had descended on the room once Veronica drifted off to sleep. No picture popped up but the name was 'Secret Lover'. She growled at the phone and popped it open.

"Hang on," Mac said in a low voice. She took a closer look at Veronica and, satisfied she was still sleeping, grabbed her room keys and slipped out into the hallway.

"You idiot, how did you change your name in my phone? I told you not to do that again."

"You told me to stop taking revealing selfies to set up as my profile picture."

Mac banged her head against the hallway wall. "And I told you to leave your name as DC. Imagine my surprise."

"I just wanted you to always know it was me." Mac could hear Dick grinning through the phone. She wasn't sure how that worked but something in his tone of voice caused a picture of his smug face to appear in her head.

"Well, it worked. And you're going back to being DC as soon as I hang up on you. So, did you get anywhere with Logan?"

The sigh that came through the phone wiped the smug face out of her mind. "No. He's just lost his mind. He was talking about going to their wedding; he expects an invitation because Duncan was his best friend once. And then he was talking about why it's not their fault they're together—like he was the one who'd done something wrong by forgetting that Veronica belonged to Duncan. And before that..." Dick let out a deep sigh and Mac's breath caught, a little afraid of what he was going to say next. "Mackie, he just kept talking about ways to hurt himself. First, it was like he was thinking about hurling himself down the stairs at the Pi Sig house. And then he started talking about how far he could get my car to fly out into the ocean on a curvy part of the PCH. I yelled at him...made him stop...but there's no way to know if or when he's going to start thinking like that again. I can't lose him. He's like my brother. I've got to help him."

"So maybe if he sobers up, he'll listen to you?" Mac suggested.

"I'm not sure anymore. He seems to have convinced himself that there is no alternative. But I've got an idea and I need your help."

Mac felt a tiny sliver of hope. "Anything. What do you need from me?"

"I need to find Duncan Kane."

Keith hung up his phone and rested his elbows on his desk, pressing his fingers to his temples. Even when Lianne was cooperative, it was still a chore dealing with his ex-wife but it appeared she was a necessary evil for what the Casablancas kid was suggesting.
According to Dick, Logan simply would not believe that Veronica could choose him over Duncan, no matter who tried to convince him. The only possibility that seemed to remain was getting Duncan to try.

Mac had expressed her concerns that Duncan could use the opportunity to undermine Logan further so Duncan could possibly have another chance at Veronica but since no one had any other ideas, she was reluctantly in agreement. She made it pretty clear though that Duncan would regret if he tried anything and Keith was getting the impression that Mac could follow through on that threat pretty effectively. She'd called Keith to see if he knew where they could find Duncan. She said she'd be able to find him if necessary but with Lianne married to Duncan's dad, she thought there might be a quicker way, and Keith agreed. As a result, he found himself calling Lianne to see if Duncan had made it back to Neptune yet. Conveniently, Duncan and Lilly were supposed to be arriving from Napa that day. Celeste had her visit through Labor Day and with the unofficial ending of summer, Duncan was heading home to try to resume his abandoned life. Keith had passed this news along and Mac had promised a call back within the hour with a plan to ambush the Kane heir and convince him to help his former best friend see reason.

As promised, Mac had called with a proposal and Keith had called Lianne again to get her agreement. She was reluctant at first, not wanting to face that Veronica did not want to be with Duncan but when Keith reminded her of Veronica's meltdown in the diner parking lot a week earlier, Lianne finally relented and agreed to make the arrangements. The Kanes, all four of them, would be dining at the five star restaurant in the Neptune Grand that evening.

"Okay, they're heading out. Are you ready to bump into them?" Mac's eyes were pinned to the Kanes as they exited the restaurant. Jake was leading, carrying Lilly, with Duncan and Lianne trailing behind them, chatting.

"Ready to rock and roll, Mac-a-doodle-do. Wish me luck. You're gonna wait upstairs?"

"Yeah, I'm heading up now." Mac pressed the elevator button as she continued to watch the Kanes. "They're almost to you. Good luck. See you in a few."

"Remember, if this works, you promised to spend the night."

"Then I guess you better make it work."

Dick stepped through the front doors of the Grand and stopped short, fixing his face in a picture of happy confusion. "Duncan? Is that you? My God, it is you! How you doing, man?" He went up to Duncan and pulled him into a bro hug. "I can't believe you're here...oh!" He stopped and looked around nervously, lowering his voice dramatically. "Oh, I'm sorry, are you still hiding? Do you use a different name?"

Duncan laughed and clapped Dick on the back. "Nope, I'm me, free and clear."

"That's awesome, dude, welcome back." Dick turned to look at Lilly. "Wow, look at this little princess." He glanced back to Duncan. "I can totally see Meg in her," he said in legitimate surprise.

"Meg's my mommy," Lilly announced and Dick's mouth fell open.

"Oh my God, she talks," he said and the adults all laughed.

"Umm, yeah, Dick, she talks," Duncan said with a grin. He took a step toward Jake and held his arms out for Lilly. "Lilbit, this is an old friend of Mommy and Daddy's, Dick."
Lilly held out her hand to Dick and he reached to take it, grinning broadly. "Hi Dick," she said politely and he smiled back, completely charmed.

"Well, hello, lil Princess, it's great to meet you." He looked at Duncan. "She's awesome, dude."

"Thanks, man, I'm so glad you approve."

"Are you home for good?" Dick asked.

"Yeah, we're going to be living here now. I'll get things straightened around with my high school stuff and probably start up at Hearst in the spring semester. Are you going there?"

"Yeah, definitely. You should come hang out with us at my fraternity some time; you probably have a little too much on your hands to pledge with the Princess here—" he reached out to tickle Lilly and she giggled "—but you can definitely hang out."

"You're a Pi Sig, aren't you, Dick?" Jake asked.

"Yes, sir. Best frat on campus."

"Isn't that what they all say?" Jake said with a grin.

"Probably, but the rest are all delusional." Dick looked at Duncan. "So, are you guys heading home? Any chance you can hang out for a while? Maybe catch up?"

Duncan looked uncertain but Lianne put her hand on Jake's arm. "We can watch the baby, right, Jake? Let Duncan catch up with his friend." She looked between Duncan and Jake. "It'll be good to get back to normal, right?"

Jake looked speculative, then nodded. "Yeah, I think you're right. Duncan, why don't you go ahead. Lilly, you want to spend the evening with Grandpa and Gramma Lianne, right, sweetie?"

She looked up at him and then back at Dick, her lip pouting out slightly. Dick grinned. "Don't worry, Princess, in a couple days, we'll get you and your daddy down to the ocean and I'll take you out on my surfboard. But tonight, why don't you go with Grandma and Grandpa? 'Kay?" He chuckled under the chin and she grinned at him before turning back toward Jake and holding her arms out. "Cool." He watched as Duncan kissed Lilly good night and told her to be good and Dick waved good-bye to Lilly with Duncan as Lianne and Jake walked out with her. Once they were out of the hotel, Duncan turned to Dick.

"So, what are you doing here at the Grand, man? Are we going to your frat house?"

Dick looked at Duncan frankly. "Actually, I live here. Your old suite. Logan took me in when my life fell apart and I've been living here nearly a year."

Duncan frowned and furrowed his brow. "Logan still lives here? Is he here now?" He looked nervous and Dick threw his arm around Duncan's shoulders and turned them towards the elevators.

"As a matter of fact, he is, and I need you to come tell him the truth."

After waiting for what seemed like forever, the elevator dinged and Mac saw Dick and Duncan step out into the hallway. "I don't know, man. I don't see how this is my business," Duncan was saying. Dick was steering him towards Mac with an arm firmly over Duncan's shoulders.

"No, no, this is absolutely your business. Your dad told Logan you were marrying Veronica and
Logan believes him. I need you to tell him what really happened between the two of you in Virginia."

Duncan stopped abruptly and looked at Dick. "What do you know about what happened with me and Veronica in Virginia?"

"We know a great deal about what happened," Mac interjected and Duncan's head snapped toward her.

"I know you, from Neptune High, right? You're a friend of Veronica's. Mac? Right?" He seemed to be trying to put on the pleasant face he'd grown up presenting to the world but she could see the moment that her words sunk into his brain. His face turned hard and suspicious. "What do you mean, you know a great deal? What did she tell you?"

Mac took a step towards the guys. "She told me that you thought you guys were getting back together and she told you no as soon as she saw you. And that's what you need to tell Logan. He believes what your dad told him and you need to fix that."

"Why doesn't she tell him?" Duncan asked in an aggravated voice.

"He refuses to believe her since your dad was so adamant about what was actually wrong information. You need to fix this." Mac took another step towards him, growing angrier with each passing moment.

"Hey, Mackie, I'm sure Duncan's going to help us out here," Dick said, clearly trying to smooth the tense situation. "We know he wants what's best for Logan and Veronica."

"But are you sure you know what's best?" Duncan asked. "What kind of relationship do they have if he won't even believe a simple thing like this? I'm just going to go." He turned toward the elevator and Dick jumped in front of him.

"No, man, you're Logan's best friend. You need to do the right thing for him."

"So he can have the girl I love? I don't think so." He pushed Dick out of the way and started back toward the elevator. Mac ran forward and grabbed at the back of Duncan's shirt.

"No, you are not leaving. You fix this or I will make you regret setting foot back on this continent." She stood glaring at him with her fists clenched. "Don't think I can't do it."

Two voices erupted over hers. Dick's alarmed voice said, "Mackie, chill!" and Duncan's angry voice said, "What do you think you can do to me?"

"Hang on, everyone," Dick said, reaching a hand out to each of them. "We just want what's best for Logan and Veronica. They're both miserable without each other but he's convinced she loves you most. We know that is not what she told you and we need you to tell him that."

Duncan slumped under Dick's hand. "If he won't believe she's chosen him, I don't think he deserves her."

Dick shook his head. "How many people have abandoned him in his life? Pretty much everyone. Including you. Is it really hard for you to see why he would think she'd do the same thing?"

Duncan dropped his head back and sighed heavily. "Low blow, Dick. I didn't leave him; I just left."

"You didn't even tell him good-bye. Not even in some code so he'd realize it later. You're just one
more in a long line. Accept your part in this and help fix it." Mac watched Dick's pleading face with a warm feeling growing in her chest. "Come on, man. Please."

"All right, fine," Duncan said in a grudging voice and Dick flung his arms around him, hopping up and down with him a couple times.

"Excellent. Thank you. You're doing the right thing."

Mac gave a sigh of relief. I think Dick might have fixed this. "So, you're going to help us?"

Duncan looked at her with his eyebrows raised. "I guess I better, or you're gonna make me regret returning to the continent, right?"

Mac narrowed her eyes. "Somehow it feels like maybe you don't believe I can do what I say," she said and he laughed.

"Actually, no, it's just the opposite," Duncan said with a shrug. "It occurs to me that underestimating a friend of Veronica's is probably a bad idea."

"Mackie's awesome," Dick said, moving from Duncan to Mac and putting his arm around her shoulders. "Pretty sure she can do anything." He gave her a smacking kiss on the cheek and Mac rolled her eyes at him.

"Yeah, I see that," Duncan snickered. "Okay, let's go in and get this over with before I decide to act in my own best interests again." He walked to the door of the suite and turned back to Dick. "Are you opening this door or not?"

Logan lay on his bed, staring at the ceiling. Dick had carried all the booze in the suite away a couple hours earlier and Logan was debating whether sobriety was somewhere he actually wanted to live. He knew he would still probably blow over the limit if he took a breathalyzer test but he was more sober than he'd been in nearly a week. He could tell because he hurt so much more, both physically and emotionally. The hangover from a week-long drunk was promising to be a doozy and the pain of losing Veronica was back up to nearing the unbearable mark.

"Logan!" He heard his name being bellowed from the living room and he cradled his head between his hands. He remembered the conversation with Dick in the car this morning and he wondered how long he was going to let his guilt about hurting the one person who had stuck by him without fail be more important than just ending the pain. He knew exactly what it felt like to be the one who was left and he didn't wish that on anyone but he knew it would only be so long that he could keep living like this so Dick didn't have to feel abandoned again.

"Logan! Ugh, God, you're disgusting again. Go take a shower." Dick had barged into his room but stopped short at the sight of Logan laying on his bed in his underwear.

"I am not; I just got out of the shower. I just didn't finish getting dressed; it's not like I'm going anywhere."

"Oh, maybe it's just the room needs airing out. Come on, put some pants on and come out to the living room. I've got a surprise for you." Dick's wheedling voice was both aggravating and amusing.

"You didn't get me a hooker, did you? Because I'm not interested, really. Thanks for the effort but no thanks."

"No, no hooker. Just come on. Don't make me come over there and dress you."
Logan sat up, laughing, but stopped short as the pounding in his head increased. "Come on, man, can't this wait? I feel like shit."

"Well maybe you'll consider that before you drink too much again," Dick said in a self-righteous voice.

"Okay, now I know the end times are here. I'm getting a lecture on the evils of alcohol from Dick Casablancas." Logan stood up gingerly and walked to his dresser. "I might as well come see your surprise. With the end of the world coming, the pain will be over soon anyway." He pulled on a pair of jeans then paused. "Is this a shirt-worthy surprise or am I good?"

Dick looked at him speculatively. "Um, go ahead and get a shirt on. A little civilization might be just what you need."

"The things I do for you, Dick." Logan shrugged on a tee shirt and held his arms out, giving Dick a weak jazz hands move. "Ta da. Ready for my close-up."

"Awesome. Come on then." Dick flung Logan's door wide and ushered him out. The living room was empty and Logan looked around curiously.

"So what's the surprise? Dick?" He looked at his friend, who looked guilty. "What did you do?"

"Sit down, Logan," Dick answered. Logan continued to stare at him. "Come on, man, please."

Logan walked to the sofa and plopped onto it unceremoniously. "Look, you took all the booze out of here and I'm not looking to go out and get more right away. I'm sobering up. What else do you want?"

"He wants you to listen to me," said a familiar voice from Dick's doorway. Logan twisted toward it and his mouth fell open at the sight of the person he simultaneously thought of as both his best friend and his worst enemy.

"He's hoping I can convince you to stop wrecking your life." Logan's head snapped back to look at Dick who had to fight his urge to back away. "What is this about? Why did you bring him here?"

"Exactly what he said. You won't listen to me; you refuse to even let Veronica in this building. I figured that even if you won't listen to anyone else, maybe you'll listen to him. And believe him."

Logan jumped to his feet and advanced on Dick, who again had to fight his urge to flee. "You brought the guy who's stolen my wife to come talk some sense into me? Are you nuts?"

"Your what? Your wife? Oh my God, when did that happen? She never said a word." Duncan shook his head and chuckled. "I guess that explains some things."

Logan whirled away from Dick to face Duncan. "Don't worry, the paperwork's been drawn up, she'll be free for wedding number two in a few weeks. Unless you want to speed things up now that her dirty little secret's out and take her to the Dominican Republic. I hear divorce is quicker there."

"Geez, Logan, chill out. Nobody's getting a divorce because of me." Duncan stood calmly, shaking his head at Logan, who was clenching and unclenching his fists repetitively. Dick found himself unexpectedly impressed with Duncan's composure in the face of Logan's rage. Or maybe dude's just stupid.
Logan's voice was shrill. "Have you been listening? I'm getting divorced because of you, you arrogant jackass. You came back to town and broke up my marriage."

"You're the one who isn't listening. I came back to town to TRY to break up your marriage, although, to be fair, I had no idea there was a marriage to break up. And your lovely bride shot me down within probably twenty seconds of her arrival, which seriously hurt my feelings, man. I mean, I'd been picturing this romantic reunion for over a year. Why didn't she just tell me you guys were married? Then I wouldn't have kept pleading all week."

"We'd agreed to keep it a secret until we could tell Keith," Logan said tonelessly. He paced away, confusion on his face, stopping to lean against the back of the sofa. "Why did your dad tell me you guys were getting married right away?" The confusion turned to anguish and his voice began to escalate again. "He had Veronica adopting Lilly even. HE SHOWED ME PICTURES. Why would he do that if it wasn't true?"

"He thought it was true. I hadn't seen him long enough to tell him any differently. Truthfully, I still haven't told him—I only saw him briefly before we left Virginia and I just got back to town this afternoon. Lianne planned this dinner so we hadn't had a chance to talk. Hey," Duncan turned and looked at Dick, "was meeting you downstairs a coincidence or did Lianne bring us here on purpose?"

Dick nodded, a grin on his face. "On purpose. Brilliant, huh? All my idea. Well, getting you here was my idea. I told Mackie she needed to find you so I could get you to talk to Logan. She called Mr. Mars and he got Mrs. Mars...um, sorry, Mrs. Kane...to bring you guys here."

"I heard Veronica talking to her mom about having kids with you," Logan interrupted.

"I've got no idea about that. Believe me, there was no discussion of children. She walked in the door, I tried to sweep her off her feet, and her response was, 'what the hell, Duncan, get offa me.' She threw a grilled cheese sandwich at me, man. Trust me, we're not having kids." Dick burst into laughter at Duncan's chagrined face.

"She threw food at you? You must have really been being an ass. My girl takes her food seriously." Logan's voice sounded amused and Dick didn't miss the 'my girl' reference.

Duncan nodded his agreement. "Yeah, she was lecturing me on revisionist history. Who stole who's girl back in high school. Believe me, I got the short end of that stick."

"So I've been behaving like a complete and total jackass for two weeks because your dad gave me bad information and I believed it." Logan slumped down onto the floor behind the sofa and both Dick and Duncan moved toward him.

"It does kinda seem like that," Duncan said. "What all did you do?"

"I abandoned her in Virginia, I've refused to talk to her for the last two weeks, the one time I did see her I pretty much told her I never wanted to see her again." He hid his face against his knees. "Oh my God, I suck." He suddenly jumped to his feet. "I've got to go see her. Try to apologize."

"Not tonight," came another voice from Dick's doorway. He glanced in that direction and saw Mac standing there, looking at Logan with a sympathetic smile. "She's sleeping and she needs it. She had a terrible day." She gave Dick a pointed look and he ducked his head in embarrassment. "Keith said to tell you that you will not be allowed in the apartment before 8:00 AM." She walked across the room and stood in front of Logan. "That gives you plenty of time to rehearse the groveling you're going to need to do."
Logan threw his arms around her and Dick hoped he wasn't going to break down crying. "Is she ever going to be able to forgive me for what I did? Or trust me again? That's always been the hardest thing for her and I've made it so much worse."

Mac pulled out of Logan's embrace and then tugged him around the sofa to sit. "Well, the lucky thing for you is that she's feeling guilty too, about trying to keep Duncan's return a secret, which set this whole mess in motion. She had the best intentions but pretty much everything that could get messed up, got messed up. I think her guilt for trying to go lone wolf on this will get your foot back in the door. But once that reasoning has been worked over enough, you better be ready to grovel. You really hurt her. And that stunt you two pulled this morning—that was low." She glared at Logan and then at Dick. "Like, the lowest of the low."

"It was," Dick acknowledged, "but I've redeemed myself, right? I told you I'd figure out a way and I did. So I'm forgiven, right?"

"We'll see," said Mac. She looked at Logan again. "So, your head has been extricated from your ass —" Duncan and Dick both laughed "—and you'll be fine tonight, right? I can tell Keith to expect you in the morning?"

Logan blushed but nodded his head. "Yes, my head is back where it belongs and I will be at their door at 8:00 AM sharp, ready to grovel." He leaned in to hug Mac, then glanced at Duncan and Dick. "Thanks a lot...all of you. Even you, Duncan, even though this was all your fault in the first place."

"Hey, don't mention it," Duncan said in a wry voice. "So, if I'm out of the doghouse, does that mean that we really can go surfing later this week, Dick? It's been forever since I had someone to go out with."

"Oh, yeah, definitely," Dick said enthusiastically. "Can we bring the Princess, too?"

"Well, I don't really know. She's too little to really surf, even though you promised to take her out, and we can't just leave her on the beach."

"What are you guys talking about?" Mac said, forehead wrinkled with suspicion. "Who has Dick promised to take out?"

Dick guffawed, thrilled at Mac's response. "Little Lilly. She's totally awesome and she digs me. I told her I'd take her out surfing later in the week." Mac and Logan exchanged skeptical looks. "Dudes, I mean it. She's awesome. You're gonna love her. Mackie! You can come with us and hang out with her on the beach while we surf. It'll be great."

"Yeah, me stuck on the beach babysitting a toddler sounds just like how I want to spend a morning."

Duncan interjected at that point. "She adores Veronica. She couldn't stop talking about her the whole time we were in Napa. It about drove my mother insane." He laughed and looked at Logan. "Maybe if the trouble in paradise has been resolved, Mr. and Mrs. Echolls can join us and Logan can meet his goddaughter."

Logan raised his eyebrows in surprise. "Really? You want me to be her godfather?"

"Who else would be Lilly's godparents beside you and Veronica? She's going to know you as soon as she sees you. She's got pictures she carries around with the four of us. She's gonna be thrilled to meet her Uncle Logan."

"If he won't do it, I will," said Dick. "I saw her first."
"You can't just call dibs on her, Dick," Mac scoffed.

"Well, let's not get too ahead of ourselves. I've still got to woo back the fair maiden." Logan stood up and stretched. "If you'll all excuse me, I've got to start practicing my wooing. Thank you all. Wish me luck." He leaned down to kiss the top of Mac's head, gave Dick a quick hug, and extended a hand to Duncan. "Welcome back, man. It's good to see you." He walked back to his room and, with a final little wave to them, closed his door behind him.

Duncan turned toward Dick. "I'm going to get home. I'll get a cab so you don't have to take me. I'm glad you waylaid me down there; I wasn't sure at first but...it was the right thing to do." He flipped his phone to Dick. "Call yourself from my phone so we've both got each other's numbers and then we'll talk in a day or two about surfing." Dick grabbed the phone and did as Duncan suggested. "So, Mac, it was good to really meet you this time. Hopefully, you'll come out with us to the beach."

"Yeah, Mackie," Dick said with a grin, tossing the phone back to Duncan. The group exchanged another round of good-byes and then Duncan left the suite. The door was barely closed before Dick was next to Mac on the sofa. "So, it definitely looks like I fixed this little problem, wouldn't you say?" He scooted closer and traced a finger up her arm.

"It is looking like you may have helped fix this problem, yes," Mac said, scooting away from him into the corner of the sectional sofa. He followed her, pushing himself between her and the edge of sofa, wrapping an arm around her waist and nuzzling into her hair.

"And so, I believe, you promised to spend the night with me, since I made things right." He ducked his head and began to kiss her neck. Her head fell back slightly and he smirked even as he continued to kiss her.

"I am a woman of my word," Mac said breathily.

"Oh, holy shit!" Logan's shout made Dick and Mac jerk back upright. "I knew it! I knew it. Oh man, Dick, you are so dead. Veronica's going to go nuts."

"Veronica will be fine," Mac said firmly and Logan widened his eyes and raised his eyebrows.

"Color me skeptical," he said and then disappeared into the kitchenette, returning with a couple bottles of water. "Sorry to interrupt. I'm almost all the way sober and I need to hydrate so I'm not too hung over to beg for forgiveness at the crack of dawn." He smacked Dick in the head and walked back to the bedroom. "Keep it down out here. I don't need to hear you guys."

"You've got headphones in there," Dick called after him and laughed as the door slammed. "Now, Miss MacKenzie, shall we continue this here on this fine piece of furniture or shall we adjourn to my bedroom? I made sure to get housekeeping in this afternoon; got them to use the lavender shit you like on the sheets and everything. They left extra mints too...the ones you like."

"I ate those already—while I was hiding out in there when you surprised Logan. They were good. I missed the mints while I was boycotting this place." She hummed in satisfaction as he bent down to kiss her neck again.

"Were the mints all you missed?" he murmured in her ear before nibbling on her earlobe.

"Logan's espresso machine is pretty nice," she answered, then squeaked when he nipped her neck. He stood up and pulled her after him, heading for his room.

"It seems that you need reminding about the other amenities this suite offers."
Logan settled up against the multitude of pillows piled against his headboard and chugged his first bottle of water. He needed to pull himself together as much as possible in the next ten hours and he knew from years of experience that maximum hydration was going to be needed. His second bottle of water lay next to him and across his legs rested an envelope. It had been in the drawer of his nightstand but once he'd left the people who'd given him back his life in the living room, he'd gone to the drawer immediately to collect it. The letter had arrived four days earlier and his first instinct had been to burn it or tear it into a million pieces but, despite the fact that he hadn't wanted to see her rationalization for why she was leaving him, he ultimately couldn't bring himself to destroy Veronica's letter. He'd already resigned himself to what he was sure was the inevitable but he could feel her and smell her on the envelope and he couldn't let that go. He'd been sure he was only torturing himself but, as usual, he couldn't help himself where she was concerned. He'd only really done it on the first day. He'd lain on his bed with the envelope pressed against his face, his lips against the sealed edge, imagining her hands holding the envelope, her dragging her tongue along the adhesive on the top flap. He'd fallen asleep with the envelope clutched in his hand and woke with his face resting on it. He'd managed to put it into the nightstand drawer then and had been able to avoid looking at it since. Now, knowing that the entire crisis had been a series of misunderstandings and mistakes, he was extremely grateful that he hadn't destroyed the letter when it first arrived.

He raised the envelope to his face and inhaled but if there ever really had been a scent to it, it was gone. He slid his finger carefully under the flap and unfolded it. He sniffed at the envelope contents and was sure he could detect the faintest aroma of Veronica's perfume. He sat for a moment, breathing the scent in before he reached in and pulled a sheet of paper out. Along the outside fold, Veronica had written "PLEASE!!! Read Me!!" with a heavy hand. The guilt that had been growing in him since he finally heard what Duncan was trying to say increased exponentially as he considered what kind of pain she had to be in for Veronica Mars to beg like that. In the darkest year of their lives, she'd never begged. She'd never even asked him to stop tormenting her. But now...

He laid the letter on the bed and hopped up, going to the closet and pulling out his suitcase. He unzipped it enough to reach in and pull out the framed wedding picture that he'd taken from the motel room in Virginia but had never unpacked. Had never even looked at since he packed it. He'd turned it face down and had deliberately left it in the suitcase when he unpacked everything else. He took a deep breath and turned the photo toward himself, immediately hurled back to that day when everything had been so perfect. Oh Veronica. He dropped onto the edge of the bed, staring at the picture, then tucked it against his chest and rolled across the bed and scooted back up to his position against the head board. He took one more look at the photo, rubbing his thumb gently across Veronica's happy face, then laid the picture frame on his lap, and recovered the letter. He took another deep breath to steady himself and unfolded the paper.

Logan,

Okay, take 27. Or so. I've started this letter so many times already—maybe this is the one that I finally send. I've tried starting with both ultimatums and begging. I want to be sure that you'll read
this but if you've gotten to the point where you actually open the envelope in the first place, there's a fair chance you'll keep reading no matter how I start.

So here's the really important thing that you need to hear and believe:

I am not with Duncan. I was never with Duncan. I don't want to be with Duncan. I'm not trying to be with Duncan.

Is there any other iteration of that sentiment that I've missed? At no point in this mess have I wanted anyone but you. I understand where you got the other message but it was never NEVER true. Jake knew that Duncan expected that we would get back together but as soon as I saw him, I made it very clear that he and I were not together and would never be together. I know that staying with him and Lilly for a week sent you a different message and I am so sorry but please please please believe me. I only want you.

I only love you.

Being apart from you because of this has been the worst time of my life. And you know I've had some unpleasant times in the past. Understatement of the year, right? But the thought of how much this has hurt you, and the thought that you might never believe me enough to come back to me--nothing has ever made me feel like I feel right now. You know that losing Lilly was horrific and I would never want you or anyone to think that I didn't love her like I did but there is something else here that makes this worse. Maybe it's that I know that it's my fault that you're hurting too. I think some of it is that I've spent so much time in the last couple of months picturing our future together that the thought that we may not get that is so completely devastating. With Lilly, I always expected she'd be in my life but I hadn't made big LIFE plans involving her. I mean, I expected certain things, like we'd go to the next year's Homecoming together, and I'd go visit her at Vassar. And I'd always expected we'd be in each other's weddings, and we'd watch our kids playing together, but it's different thinking of all the things I want with you that I just won't have without you.

Like when we find our house and you go back to carrying me over all the thresholds.

Making love with you in every room in the house...even the closets. They'll be plenty big enough in any house you'll agree to, I'm sure.

Going...wherever...everywhere...seeing everything with you.

Watching your face light up when I tell you we're having a baby. (Which isn't now...don't read that wrong.)

Watching you hold those babies for the first time.

Holding onto each other when they go to school, and start dating, and get married, and have kids of their own.

Growing old with you and embarrassing those kids and grandkids when we still can't keep our hands off each other.

I started thinking about some of those things when you first showed me that ring box but a lot of them didn't really kick in until Irv asked us if we wanted to get married there on the island. And since then, I'm always thinking about them. During the week with Duncan and Lilly, or anytime since, I have never stopped thinking about them. Only now, all those things have this tragic tint to them, like they're lost and I don't know if I'm going to be able to find them again.
Veronica

Logan folded the letter again and wiped at his eyes with the back of his hand, then pushed himself to the edge of the bed and stood up. He put the letter in its envelope and dropped it back into his drawer. He went into his bathroom to brush his teeth and wash his face, then went looking for his shoes and his keys. Keith may have banned him from the apartment until 8:00 AM but he couldn't stay away from her any longer. Once he was ready to go, he grabbed the photo and took it with him into the front room, setting it on the coffee table. It looked lonely by itself but by the end of tomorrow, he was certain it would have its matched photos with it. Logan grabbed another water bottle and headed for the door but at the last minute, stopped to knock on Dick's door. He paused, then opened it a crack but very pointedly did not look in.

"Guys, don't worry, I'm not looking...I just wanted to let you know I'm going to Veronica's. Expect us back tomorrow."

"Hold on, hold on," Mac called and then she was in the doorway, with the king-sized duvet wrapped all around her. "Keith said you couldn't come in until tomorrow. He finally got Veronica to take something to help her sleep and he didn't want that getting messed up. She really was a wreck today. She needed to rest."

Logan looked at Mac in alarm. "I understand but he gave her something to sleep? That doesn't sound like—"

"Don't worry. It's just some over-the-counter sleep aid thing. Just taking the edge off. I promise." Mac smiled at him kindly. "Really. She's okay."

"I believe you. Look, I'm not even going to knock. I just...I need to be there. I'll sit on the porch all night—I don't care—I just want to be closer to her. I'm sorry if that's dumb...that's just what I need to do."

Dick's head appeared suddenly over Mac's shoulder and he wrapped a bare arm around her and her duvet cover-up. "It's cool, dude. We get it. Bring a sweatshirt so you don't get too cold sitting out there." Both Mac and Logan looked at him quizzically, then back at each other and laughed.

"You seem to have domesticated him," Logan said to Mac.

"Weird, huh? I always thought he was feral," Mac answered with a grin.

"Yeah, very. Okay, I'm going." He raised a hand as he started to walk away, then stopped. "And I've got a sweatshirt in my car, Mother Dick. Satisfied?"

"Uh huh, now get out. We were busy." Logan heard the sound of Mac's hand smacking Dick, probably in the chest from the thud and he laughed at the same time that Dick whined 'Mackie, ow' in a petulant voice.

"That's fine, you've got the place to yourselves for the rest of the night but it belongs to Veronica and I tomorrow night. Try not to frighten the neighbors."

Logan pulled into the parking lot of the Mars' apartment complex and turned the truck off. Somehow, he felt both confident and afraid at the same time. Based on the letter, she was going to
welcome him back with open arms. Based on past experience, she was going to be mad at him for months. As much as he hoped for the former, he couldn't be sure what reaction he was going to get. Plus, he had to get past Keith, who probably wanted to have him put down like a rabid dog. On the other hand, it sounded like both of Veronica's parents had contributed to the final plan to bring them back together so maybe it was okay.

He sat in the car for a while, thinking about the summer and the things that Veronica had said in her letter. He chuckled as he thought about her line talking about telling him they were having a baby; he was relieved that she'd clarified that that would be something to tell in the future, not now, because otherwise he would have taken that sentence just how she thought he would. He was pretty sure he would have been thrilled at the news but he knew they needed time together first, especially now that they needed to rebuild some of the bond that had been strained in these last couple of weeks.

Logan opened the car door and slid out, standing for a moment, looking at the apartment. She was in there, waiting for him to come to his senses and come back to her. At least, he hoped she still was after the idiotic stunt they'd pulled this morning. Everything else he'd done may have been dumb but had been to protect himself. The thing this morning with the divorce papers, it had been designed to hurt her. Being a dope who believed the wrong information, that was forgivable. Trying to humiliate her was not. Afraid again for what was going to be waiting for him inside that apartment in the morning, he still couldn't keep himself away. He walked up to the apartment, stopping in front of her window for a moment but the curtains were pulled closed with no gaps to even let him catch a glimpse of her as she slept. He resigned himself to waiting for the morning and slid into a seated position against the wall next to her window. He leaned his head back against the wall and closed his eyes, hoping that if he fell asleep, he would dream of happy, forgiving Veronica.

Logan was startled out of his sleep some time later by banging against his shoes. He opened his eyes and noticed that it was now fully dark. He looked up to find Keith Mars staring down at him menacingly.

"Well, if it isn't my runaway son-in-law," he said in a low voice.

Logan scrambled to his feet. "Umm, I'm sorry, sir, I know I can't come in, I—I just wanted to be here. For when it is okay to come in, I mean." Logan stopped talking and took a deep breath, trying to calm himself. "I'm sorry, Mr. Mars...if you want me to, I can go out and wait in my car. Whatever you want."

"What if what I want is for you to not be married to my daughter?"

Logan took a partial step back, bumping into the wall behind him. "Umm, sir? I'm sorry. I can't help you with that one. If Veronica will take me back, I am going to stay married to your daughter."

"That seems like a pretty big 'if', wouldn't you say?" Keith continued to glare at him. Logan had expected to feel a little more in control once he was standing and looking down at the older man but it hadn't helped anything. Getting stared down by Keith Mars was a lot like Weevil coming at him during the times they had been completely at odds. The height difference wasn't giving him the advantage that it did with most people. The thought of having a father-in-law who was as intimidating as a gang leader did not help Logan's nerves.

"Uh, yeah, right now, I think she's probably furious at me and believe me, I know it's deserved. I know this is my fault. I'm going to do whatever I can to make this up to her. I got bad information and I went a little crazy. It's been cleared up and now, I'm here to beg her to take me back. I'll do whatever she wants. And whatever you want too, sir, as long as you understand, I'm not giving her up, unless she insists. And even if she does insist, I will try to convince her otherwise." Logan ran his
hand anxiously through his hair. "I love your daughter more than anything else in this world. That's not something that is ever going to change. Even when I was sure she was leaving me, that never changed. I'm sorry that we got married without you. We knew that was going to cause an issue but then with everything else that happened..."

"I'm already aware that Veronica talked you into getting married while you were back east. She told me that you tried to get her to wait until you got home and could talk to me first." Logan wasn't sure but it seemed like the man's stance had relaxed a little.

"Well, I could have tried harder to convince her..."

"Trying to cover up for her, hmm?" Keith's eyebrows were raised.

"Umm, no, sir, of course not—"

"That's probably a good skill for you to perfect. I'm pretty sure you're familiar with it already. I know that I certainly am."

"Sir?"

"Covering her tracks. Doing your best to keep her out of trouble. I have a feeling you've been doing that for a while. And I'm telling you, that isn't likely to stop. I do plenty of it myself. Oftentimes to my own detriment but I'm not gonna stop." Keith tipped his head to study Logan. "It seems that is the price of loving Veronica."

Logan nodded at him and gave a tentative smile. "I've noticed that. Personally, I'd rather keep her out of trouble than have to cover her tracks but I will do what needs to be done."

"Yeah, that's always been my preference also but she isn't always cooperative." Keith nodded towards the apartment. "She's sleeping and she needs the rest. Don't wake her up on purpose." He stepped past Logan and started toward the parking lot.

"Hang on...what? Where are you going?"

"I'm going to spend the night with my girlfriend. The door's unlocked. I'm leaving the dog here. If she gets mad enough at you, Backup will handle you and I'll have a solid alibi." Logan's eyes widened and Keith chortled. "I've got a full day in the office; I'll be home at 5:00 PM tomorrow. Then, Alicia's expecting us for dinner. You're invited unless Veronica's run you off by then."

"Sir, thank you. I promise, I won't do anything to make the dog want to kill me."

"It's fairly likely that she'll take care of you herself before the dog gets a chance. She's the one you need to convince." Logan nodded. "All right. Remember this is where I live. Don't do anything to make the neighbors give me the side eye. Got it?" Logan nodded again, feeling his face warm in embarrassment. "Okay then. Perhaps, I'll see you tomorrow. Good luck." Keith walked away, leaving Logan standing stunned.

He didn't move until Keith had driven off and even then, it took him a few more moments before he could turn to face the apartment door. He walked stiffly to the door and turned the knob, half expecting it to be locked and this whole conversation to have been an elaborate hallucination brought on by his sudden alcohol withdrawal. However, the knob turned and, as he opened the door, Backup skittered up, his back end wagging furiously.

"Hey, buddy," Logan said, practically in a whisper. "Good to see you." He crouched down to scratch behind the dog's ears. This was the one member of the Mars family who had never wanted
him to get lost. He stood up after a minute of scratching and cooing and turned toward Veronica's room. "What do ya think, boy? Do I risk it?" The dog bumped against his leg again, as if asking for more attention, but when Logan began to move slowly toward Veronica's room, Backup moved to his bed and curled up in it.

Logan stood for a long time with his hand on her doorknob, unsure if he should go in or not. Finally he shook his head—"Man up, Echolls"—and opened the door and stepped silently into the room.

Veronica was on her side, facing the door, head on one pillow and her arms wrapped around another one that she had clutched against her torso. She was breathing long, deep breaths, like she usually did, but as he watched her, she muttered unintelligibly and shook her head violently. She quieted again then and went back to the regular breaths. She had mostly stopped doing that when they were in Virginia, except that last night. He wondered what she had known that night of her party that had started the nightmares again. He did believe now that it hadn't been anxiety about leaving him and getting back together with Duncan but it appeared that not knowing what was going on must have been bothering her. She thrashed and muttered again and he moved closer to the bed, wanting to comfort her but not sure if she would be okay with him doing that or not. They were technically estranged but she'd begged him to come back to her, although that had been before the stunt he'd pulled today with the divorce papers. She could have changed her mind about wanting him back. But would Keith have welcomed him in, and left them alone, if he thought Veronica wouldn't want him there? That made him hopeful but not enough to push his luck. He walked to the bed and smoothed her hair, then dropped a kiss on her temple, before sitting on the floor next to the bed. He leaned his head back against the mattress and reached up to rest his hand against hers, then closed his eyes, hoping again for forgiving Veronica, both in his dreams and once she woke up.

Veronica came back to consciousness slowly, feeling a little groggy. She'd been so upset the night before that her dad had finally suggested that she take a sleeping pill. That conversation itself had nearly made her hysterical. The thought of voluntarily taking something that could knock her out was distressing enough that she realized that she'd actually stopped thinking about Logan for a little while. Luckily, Wallace had showed up and he'd been able to calm her down. He knew things about her history that her dad did not and he was finally able to convince her that an over-the-counter sleep aid was not going to make her lose control of herself. He'd sat beside her bed until she fell asleep, rubbing her arm and talking to her in a soothing voice.

She stretched and her hand bumped into skin. "Oh, Papa Bear, I'm so sorry. I'm glad you're not mad at me anymore but you didn't have to babysit me all night." She glanced to the side and was stunned when the arm resting against her was considerably paler than she'd anticipated. She rolled over and found that it was Logan sitting on the floor, his head resting on the arm that she'd bumped into. His eyes were still closed and he was drawing in slow, deep breaths. She froze, unable to comprehend what she was seeing. After a moment, she slowly pulled away from him, until her back was up against the wall.

This was her first chance to really see him in three weeks. The single other time at the diner had been so quick and he'd looked gutted. Now he was sleeping peacefully, like he always did with her, any worries or fears forgotten behind his eyelids. He looked young and innocent without the gleam in his eye or a smirk on his face. She wanted to reach out and touch him but she was still afraid of what he would say to her once his eyes opened. That seemed illogical; he wouldn't be sitting on the floor next to her bed if he wasn't coming back to her but for some reason, she was still apprehensive. She edged back toward him and reached out tentatively, letting her fingertips run along his arm. He must have been sleeping lightly because, at the motion, he twisted his arm suddenly and sat up, blinking in confusion. She jerked back to the wall, pulling herself into a sitting position with her knees drawn up, like a wall between them.
"Veronica." The sound of his voice saying her name was...confusing. Part of her wanted to throw herself into his arms but another part of her was too afraid to try. She sat looking at him longingly but he seemed to regain his composure more quickly. "Veronica? I am so sorry about yesterday. About the last three weeks too but what I did yesterday was just despicable. I know you've been trying to get me to listen to you and believe you all this time and...I do believe you now; I'm sorry that it took me so long. But, after what I did to you yesterday, do you still care if I believe you? I wouldn't blame you if you never wanted to see me again after that. I'm not trying to make an excuse but I was so hurt and messed up. I'll do anything you want if you'll just try to forgi—"

His words were cut off when she threw herself at him, her arms wrapping around his neck and her body slipping off the side of the bed to curl around him. All she could hear at first were her own sobs against his neck and her own voice saying 'I'm sorry' over and over. She didn't know how long that went on until she felt like she couldn't breathe and she had to start taking long, slow breaths before she made herself hyperventilate. She could hear Logan's voice then, murmuring 'I'm sorry' and 'I should have listened' and 'I love you so much' repeatedly.

They finally both fell silent and just sat clinging to each other for a long time. Finally, she forced herself to push upright and off him, sitting next to him with only their knees touching. "I don't know what do we do now," she said. "Do we just pretend like the last three weeks never happened? I know I kept saying I wanted you to listen and come back to me but now that we're there, I'm not sure what we're supposed to do."

He smiled at her gently and reached out to stroke her cheek. "Well, maybe we can pretend you're just getting back from your week with DK and his spawn and you can tell me whatever you had planned to tell me and I'll tell you what I wanted to tell you about our time apart," he suggested. "We need to remember whatever lessons we've learned here—like confirming bad news before crushing electronics and running away—but I don't want to lose any more time right now being tortured by a stupid misunderstanding."

She smiled back at him and then stood up and walked away.

"Where are you going?" Logan asked, his voice sounding a little panicked.

"Don't worry," she answered, peeking back at him over her shoulder. "I like the no more torture idea. It's just that you said we should do whatever we'd planned to do if that week had ended like it should have and the truth is, the first thing I'd planned was to kiss the heck out of you. So, I've got to go brush my teeth before I can really do that plan justice."

He gave her a broad grin and leapt to his feet. "That, my dear, is an excellent idea. I hope you haven't gotten too squeamish in the last three weeks to be willing to share your toothbrush with me."

"I think I'll probably be able to be persuaded."

An hour later, they were both back in Veronica's bed, with her spread across Logan, dropping in and out of a light doze as he traced his finger along her bare back. There hadn't been a lot of talking yet. Once they'd finished fighting over the toothbrush, the kissing started, and that sent them back to bed. Logan found the chain with the wedding rings on it around her neck as soon as he pulled her tank top off and that had predictably led to more tears as they'd placed the rings back on each other's fingers and promised not to take them off again. There'd been only one final interruption, when Veronica realized how loud she'd gotten and tried to smother herself with her pillow before Logan could let her know that her dad had left the night before and, other than the dog, they really were alone in the apartment. He mentioned that her dad had just asked that they not do anything that would make the neighbors look at him funny and Veronica's horrified look at the thought of that...
conversation made Logan laugh until he started to gasp for air.

"Bobcat?" Logan was still drawing with his finger on her skin. He'd mostly been putting big, loopy, invisible 'L's all over her.

"Mmmhmm?" she responded without moving from her apparently comfortable spot atop him.

"No pressure here but I kinda thought when you suggested taking a break that we were going to try talking. Cuz if you'd rather nap, I'll do it—I'm still unbelievably hungover—but we really do need to talk. Your dad said he'd be back here by 5:00 PM and then we're supposed to go to dinner at Alicia's, as long as you hadn't killed me or kicked me out before then." Logan felt her snort out a laugh against his chest. "Anyway, I feel like we should have talked out at least some of this stuff before then, ya know? Plus, we're invited to meet up with everyone, including Duncan and Lilly, tomorrow at the beach so I'd like to feel like we've talked everything through by then. From what I can tell, everyone's been trying so hard to help us; I'd like it if we've tried as hard ourselves by the time we meet up with them. I certainly won't complain about getting to sleep with you in my arms again but it feels like we need to do more than that."

As he spoke, she'd crooked her elbow to rest on his chest and was propping her head up on her hand, looking down at him. When he paused, she smiled and reached a finger to trace around his lips. "I think you're right, Logan, and I absolutely agree that we need to talk about what happened. But first, since we're here already, maybe, instead of napping, we can do something a little more interesting?" She smirked down at him and he shook his head at her, doing his best to look stern.

"Okay, but only once more. And then we talk for a while. Okay?"

"Well, maybe once more for you."

Keith opened his front door cautiously, not entirely sure what he was going to find in his apartment. Logan's car was still in the parking lot so they'd either made up and were doing God knows what in his home or she'd killed him and was figuring out how to dispose of the body. He knew the odds were a lot higher for the former and that made him even more apprehensive about opening the door. He was relieved to find both Logan and Veronica on the couch, fully dressed, Veronica sitting in Logan's lap with her phone held between their heads. "Yes, Sam, you were right, I was stupid, I'll never doubt you again," Logan was saying with a smile on his face, shaking his head and rolling his eyes at Veronica as they listened to the other side of the call. "Yes, a dumbass, you're completely right...of course you're invited...Yes...Yes, tell them I'm in for the rafting again; remember, we agreed we were bringing the girls...Yeah, that's fine...Hey...Sam...Sam, shut up, look, Veronica's dad just walked in, we need to get off the phone...Yes, we will let you know...Okay, we'll talk to you soon...Thanks, man...Bye...Bye, Sam."

Logan gestured at Veronica and she called, "Bye, Sam!" before Logan snapped the phone shut, just as she started to laugh. "Oh my God. Seriously, he's worse than Dick." Veronica pushed herself off his lap and came to greet Keith with a hug. "Dad! How was your day?" She had a real smile on her face for the first time since she'd come home from Virginia.

"It was fine. Just a normal day. Things here appear to be much improved." He glanced to the couch and raised his eyebrows. "It appears that I still have a son-in-law."

She looked at him with her head tilted. "Were you expecting something different?"

"Well, I warned him when I let him in last night that he was taking his life in his hands. Between you
and Backup, there was no guarantee he'd make it to the end of the day alive." Keith smiled as she rolled her eyes and scoffed.

"Yeah, right. After all the crying and carrying on, you thought I was going to off him and try to hide the body? That's just silly." She shook her head at him and walked back to the couch where she climbed back into Logan's lap. "So, I hear that we're having dinner at the Fennels' tonight? Are we going soon? It's been hours since I had lunch."

"At least three hours," Logan said with a wry grin. "I'm surprised she hasn't taken a chunk out of my arm yet."

"Very funny. It's been at least four hours. So, Dad, when is this dinner?"

"Alicia usually serves dinner around 6:30 PM so you've got about another hour to wait. Logan, watch your arms. I'm going to get a quick shower and change and then I'll be ready to go. Knowing Alicia, there will be some kind of appetizer as soon as we get there so maybe you won't have to snack on your new husband in order to make it all the way til dinner. But first—" he crossed his arms and put on what he considered his most forbidding sheriff face, "—let me remind you, now that the drama has died down, you're both in trouble. Just because I didn't say, 'don't come home married', didn't mean that you had my blessing to do so. I believe my general attitude about life in general should have implied that impromptu weddings would be frowned upon." He continued to glare at them. Logan, at least, had the decency to look troubled. Veronica however, did not.

"Dad, I'm really sorry that you didn't get to be there with us but I'm not sorry that we did it. Especially now, after the drama, I know we made the right choice. And we'll do it again in 2012 so you can come for that wedding."

Keith wasn't all that surprised by her lack of remorse but he didn't understand the reference to 2012. "You're already planning a vow renewal? You've been married for a month and you spent most of it estranged. Most people don't think about renewals quite so soon after the first wedding. Or five years in advance."

"We were thinking about it before we even got married," Logan interjected. "Every time July 26 falls on a Thursday. That's going to be 2012, 2018, 2029, 203—"

"Okay, okay, I don't need the whole rundown of the calendar. Why does this matter?"

"Dad, go take your shower. We'll explain the whole thing at dinner, and we need to talk about when to have a reception here. You guys missed our wedding but we want to you to help us celebrate now that we're back. And all of our Virginia friends are going to come out, if they can. It's gonna be great. You're gonna love Bob and Carol and Irv."

"Well, except for the part where Irv suggested we get married in the first place," Logan said.

"What a tattle tale you are," Veronica said, poking him in the chest but with a smirk on her face.

"Hey, Irv will only be here briefly. We've got to live with him," Logan said, jerking his head at Keith.

"You're living with me?" Keith asked, startled by that idea.

"Oh no, no, no, he meant that figuratively," Veronica laughed. "We'll stay at the Grand right now but we're going to start house-hunting right away." She looked pointedly at her wrist, tapping the bare spot where a watch might rest. "Tick-tock, come on, Dad, vamonos. I need dinner."
"Logan, go in the kitchen and find the girl something to eat. I'll be out as quick as I can."

Dinner was a raucous affair. Since everyone expected a reconciled Veronica and Logan to turn up, Alicia had had Wallace invite Mac, as part of the 'reconciliation team' and she had wrangled an invitation for Dick as well. They drew the line at Duncan, although his contribution had been what finally made the difference. "Cleaning up a mess that you've made is not cause for special privileges," Mac had said to Wallace on the phone when they were debating the issue and he'd agreed.

"And my mom's dinner is a special privilege," he responded and they both laughed. Several hours later, they all sat dawdling over dessert, listening to the newlyweds talk about their summer and throwing out ideas for a celebratory party. It was nearly 9:00 PM when Mac finally broke up the gathering.

"Well, I don't know about the rest of you, but I have class tomorrow and need to get home." She looked pointedly at Veronica as she said that.

"Yes, I know we have our Soc class again tomorrow and I've skipped everything else since that first class. I'll go to all my classes tomorrow," Veronica said with a shame-faced grin.

"No, no, surfing tomorrow morning!" Dick exclaimed. "DK's bringing the Princess. Come on, you guys have to come too."

"I can't miss any more class, Dick," Veronica answered, "and neither should your BFF, who has not been to any of his classes since the semester began."

"Surfing's early. We'll be done by 9:00 AM and then you can go to class. And so can my whipped BFF who doesn't have any classes before 1:00 PM just for this reason." Dick gave Veronica a goofy grin. "Come on, Ronnie, let Logan off the leash enough to go surfing and then, I promise, we'll go to class tomorrow."

"I don't have Logan on a leash," Veronica said in an irritated voice. "If the last couple of weeks have taught us nothing else, it's that Logan does what Logan wants."

"Hey, hey," said Logan soothingly, reaching out to stroke her arm, "I'm going to every class for the rest of the semester. We can surf first thing, then we'll get you and Mac over to Hearst for your morning class, and run back to the hotel to get cleaned up so we can make it back in the afternoon. No more talk of leashes or anything stupid that I may have done in the recent past." He looked pointedly at Dick. "Does Duncan know what time to meet us?"

"He's waiting to hear from me. And what about you, Wally? Can you come along? Mr. Mars? I bet you're an animal on a surfboard."

The entire table burst into laughter. "No, Dick," Keith said, "I think I'll skip surfing with you kids tomorrow. Thanks for the invite though."

"And I've got early morning conditioning so I can't meet you," Wallace said. "Plan something on a weekend though and I'm in."

"Awesome!" Dick said excitedly. "All right then, I'm telling Duncan 7:00 AM." He reached for his phone over protesting noises from Mac.

"That's too early," she moaned. "You want him to bring a toddler to the beach at seven in the morning? That's crazy."
"Nah, it's really not," Veronica said. "She's awake before then, at least she was in Virginia. Unless maybe she's adjusted to the time zone and that's helping her sleep in."

"They're in," Dick said suddenly and Mac looked at him reading the quick response from Duncan. "Lilly can't wait to see me." He grinned at Mac and she rolled her eyes. "I told you guys. She loves me."

"She's twenty-one months old, Dick," Veronica said in an exasperated voice, "and she's pretty much only known Duncan for her whole life. She doesn't know any better." She shook her head and Mac laughed at Dick's pout. When he looked over at her, she gave him a teasing smile.

"And wait 'til she meets Unca Logie," Mac said. "You're gonna have some competition for fave uncle, Dick."

"Then I'm the one in trouble," Veronica interjected. "She's not really one for sharing." She turned to Logan. "Promise you won't break us up again over another Kane, Logan." The rest of the table burst into laughter, except Logan who frowned at Veronica's attempt at humor. "What? Too soon?"

"Just a little," he answered. "Alicia, thank you for dinner and for letting the old man crash here last night—"

"Don't make me regret that, Logan," Keith growled.

"—and we'll have you guys over as soon as we find a place." He stood up and pulled Veronica's chair out from the table.

"Are you sure we can't help you clean up, Alicia?" Veronica asked.

"Nope, dinner's already cleaned up. All that's left is dessert and that's easy," Alicia said with a smile and stood up to give Veronica a hug. "I'm so happy for both of you." She released Veronica and turned to hug Logan. "I feel like I should have made little net bags filled with birdseed to throw at you guys as you leave."

"I think we can save that for the reception," Logan laughed and started trying to usher Veronica toward the door. She was not being terribly cooperative as she stopped to hug everyone around the table. Mac was amused to see that she even gave Dick a one-armed hug.

"I was ready to have you removed from the planet a week ago but now it looks like it was good that I didn't," Veronica said and Dick made a face.

"Removed from the planet?" he said with a gulp.

"Well, not physically, just electronically. You know, identity erased, bank accounts gone, all your credit cards cancelled. Nothing much. It's not like I was gonna have you killed." The rest of the group laughed at Dick's shocked face.

"You can do that?"

"Well, let's just say I have my sources," she said and the look on Dick's face morphed from shock to realization.

"Oh, now I get it. Mackie. I'm not worried about that; she wouldn't do anything like that to me." Mac looked with alarm from Dick's smug face to Veronica's thoughtful one. *Oh crap.*

"Hey guys, weren't you trying to make a getaway here?" she said, trying to change the subject. "The
day's coming awfully early—didn't you want to get home?"

"They don't have to be in that big a rush," Keith said, sounding a little petulant, but Logan nodded at Mac, giving her a knowing smile.

"Yeah, we should get going. Seven in the morning comes really soon. Good night, everyone." Logan put his arm around Veronica's waist and pulled her toward the door with a chorus of 'bye's' following them. When the door closed behind them, Mac whirled on Dick.

"You idiot. Were you trying to out us to her?"

"Oh God, no," Wallace groaned, throwing his hands up in the air. "It's bad enough I've got to put up with Logan forever, now you're saying that you're with HIM?"

Dick cackled and tried to slide his arm around Mac's waist but she pushed him away. "Isn't it great, Wally? We're gonna be like brothers."

"I'm going back to the dorms," Wallace said, grabbing his backpack. "I gotta re-think my life." He kissed his mother on the cheek. "Thanks for dinner, Mom."

"Anytime, honey. Are you going to be home this weekend?"

"I dunno, I'll let you know. See ya, Keith." He walked to the door, pausing halfway out. "Mac, geez. Dick Casablancas?" Then he was gone.

"I don't think Wally's all that crazy about me," Dick said.

"You're a quick one, Dick," Mac answered.

"You might try calling him by his actual name," Keith suggested.

"He'll come around," Alicia said in a hopeful voice.

"All right," Mac said, "let's get out of these nice people's hair—no pun intended, Keith—" everyone laughed as Keith sneered at her. "Thank you so much for dinner, Mrs. Fennel."

"It's Alicia, please, and you are so welcome. With Wallace gone, Darryl and I love having people over to liven the place up. And this group surely does."

"Yeah, and just wait 'til Logan and Veronica have some mansion on the beach. I bet there'll be plenty of gatherings there too." Mac grabbed her bag and poked Dick's shoulder. "Let's go."

"All right, up you go." Logan scooped Veronica up into his arms before stepping out of the elevator and heading for the suite. She smiled and wrapped her arms around his neck.

"And it begins," she said with a laugh.

"I woulda done it from the garage but you were right—we don't need to call too much attention to ourselves quite yet." He leaned down to kiss her gently. "So, in a repeat of our wedding night, can you reach my keycard? Right back pocket."

She laughed again. "Not going to make me grope you this time to figure out which pocket it's in?"

"Nah, I want to get inside and do some more serious groping. There's plenty of things to repeat from that night; we don't have to spend time on that particular moment."
She leaned back to grab the keycard. "Yeah, especially since we haven't got all that much time since you agreed that we'd meet everyone at freakin' 7:00 AM." She twisted back to face forward and inserted the keycard into the locking mechanism.

"We've got the rest of our lives." She opened the door and he turned her feet toward it, bumping it open with them, stepping inside, and then turning again to let her kick the door closed. They both laughed and then began to kiss as he crossed to the bedroom. He let her kick that door closed too, then set her on the bed, and she pulled him down with her, their mouths locked together and their hands tugging at each other's clothes. "I'm never letting you go again."

"You'd better not."

"Aunt V'ronca!" The little blonde girl shrieked and ran as fast as her legs would carry her across the sand. Mac trailed along behind, the only adult with her. Veronica let go of Logan's hand and dropped to a crouch to get to Lilly's level. She launched herself at Veronica who fell back onto the sand with her arms wrapped around the little girl.

"Oh my goodness, what's your daddy been feeding you? Is this from the vegemite? I think you've grown in the last couple of weeks." Veronica sat up from her sprawl on the sand and sat cross-legged, pulling Lilly into her lap.

"Grampa says I's a weed," Lilly said and everyone laughed.

"I'm pretty sure he said you're growing like a weed, not that you are a weed, Lils," Veronica said with a smile. "I bet he thinks you're his prettiest flower, not some old weed." Logan knelt on the sand next to them and rested his hand on Veronica's back.

"Any chance of getting an introduction?" he said to Veronica.

"You're my Unca Logan," Lilly said to him.

"That I am," he responded with a smile. "Guess I don't need the intro after all." He held out his hand and she took it, climbing out of Veronica's lap to crawl into his arms. He looked surprised, then his smile widened and he stood up with her in his arms. "It is a pleasure to meet you, Miss Lilly. And if I may, awesome outfit." She was in the orange leggings and green tee shirt. Both Veronica and Mac laughed.

"It's my fav'rite." She pulled her top up to show him her purple nylon and white ruffle-covered belly. "My fav'rite swimsuit."

"Are you going to surf with us?" Logan asked in a serious voice.

"No!" she exclaimed. "Too cold!"

"Dick tried to get her to go out with him but as soon as her toes touched the water she decided not to go out today," Mac explained.

"I screamed," Lilly said in a very matter-of-fact tone.

"Yes, she did," Mac said. "Very impressive scream too." She rubbed her ear ruefully and Logan and Veronica both laughed.

"We'll get your daddy to get you a wetsuit," Logan said. "Then it won't be so bad." He turned back toward Veronica who was trying not melt into a puddle of goo as she watched her husband's earnest
conversation with an adorable blonde toddler. She assumed she wasn't doing that great of a job concealing her emotions when he gave her a knowing smile as he passed Lilly back over to her. He cupped her cheek in his palm and leaned down to give Veronica a chaste kiss on the lips, then gave Lilly a smacking kiss on the top of her head that made her giggle. "I'm going to get out on the water." He looked out at the ocean. "I already know that Dick's giving me a ration of sh...umm...hmm, yeah. I know I'm gonna hear about us being late. Ah, I see Dick and Duncan." He started to walk toward the water but turned back to the girls, walking backward as he called back to them. "Hey Lilly, can you keep an eye on Auntie Veronica for me? She's prone to getting herself in trouble when I let her out of my sight." Veronica rolled her eyes at him and he grinned and blew her a kiss, then turned and jogged to the water.

Mac chuckled and Veronica heard her low voice, "I think I've just seen the future," but Veronica had no retort as she watched Logan's wetsuit-clad figure moving away, feeling sure again that he would always come back. Unexpectedly, Lilly's hands clasped Veronica's cheeks and she reluctantly dragged her eyes away from her husband to focus on the toddler.

"Unca Logan say you in trouble, Aunt V'ronca?" she said with a frown. Veronica gave her a broad smile and kissed her forehead.

"Nope, not today. Today, everything's perfect."
What follows are brief moments from the years that Logan and Veronica's anniversary, July 26, falls on the Thursday of Pony Penning Week. There's a lot of missing time in between – I didn't realize until I was putting this together just how long the stretch between Thursday, July 26's can be – each vignette is separated by five, six, or eleven years. I hope you enjoy…

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Thursday, July 26, 2012 — 5 Years

"Auntie Vee, I need your wedding ring. You forgot to give it to Uncle Logan after lunch."

Veronica turned away from Carol and Alicia to find her six-year-old god-daughter standing next to her with her hand out. "I did, didn't I?" She pulled both rings off and handed the wedding band to Lilly, then pressed her engagement ring onto her right ring finger. "Thank you sweetie. I've been forgetting everything lately."

"Uncle Logan said it was pregnancy brain."

Veronica gave the little girl a smile that she knew didn't actually reach her eyes. "Wasn't that sweet of him," she said in a sour voice. Both Carol and Alicia burst into laughter and Alicia stepped forward to wrap her arms around Lilly's shoulders.

"Thanks for coming to get it, Lilly," she said in a much happier tone than Veronica's. "You'd better hurry and get it back to him." She started to usher Lilly toward the door but the girl stopped and turned back to Veronica.

"You look so pretty, Aunt Veronica," she said and wrapped her arms around Veronica's slightly thickened waist. Lilly leaned her head against the tiny bump, pressing her ear against it. She then turned her head, whispered to Veronica's middle, and then kissed it.

"The baby's excited about the wedding," she said with a smile. The room full of women erupted with a chorus of 'aw's. Veronica smiled a real smile this time and crouched down to hug the little girl.

"What did you tell him, honey?"

"Her, Auntie Vee, the baby's a her," Lilly said firmly. "I told her to be good and not make you throw up before the wedding's done." Veronica laughed.

"I've pretty much stopped doing that but thanks for reminding her, Lils."

"Uncle Dick and Sam made a bet about you throwing up in the middle of the ceremony but I don't want that to happen."

Veronica raised her eyebrows and tilted her head. Alicia started to laugh. "Which one of them is betting I'm going to barf mid-ceremony?"
"Sam said you would but Uncle Dick says you won't," Lilly said with a giggle.

Veronica nodded. "I'm glad that Dick's finally learned not to underestimate me. Can you do something for me, sweetie?" She stood back up and stretched; the crouched position hadn't been comfortable.

"Sure."

"Take the ring to Uncle Logan first and then when you go out to sit with your daddy and Teresa, please tell Sam that if I do have to throw up mid-ceremony, I will do it on him. So even if he wins, he loses." There was a burst of laughter through the room. "Got it, Lils?"

The little girl laughed. "That's funny. I'll tell him. But I still hope that you don't throw up."

"Yeah, I hope that too but if I'm gonna do it, let's make it worthwhile, right?" She kissed Lilly's head and turned her back toward the door again. "Thanks, Lils, I'll see you after, okay?" Lilly nodded and disappeared out the door.

"I should probably go with her," Alicia said. "You're going to get started soon, and I kinda want to see Sam's reaction to your message." She wrapped her arms around Veronica. "You do look so beautiful, honey. I'm so glad to be here."

"Where else would my mother be?" Veronica asked and Alicia's eyes filled with tears.

"Love you, sweetie."

"Love you too." Alicia gave her a final squeeze and then headed out to the hall. As Veronica stood, watching her go, Carol stepped up and put her arm around Veronica's shoulders.

"It's so good to see you with her. You deserve to have a mom all of the time, not just the couple times a year that we get to see you."

Veronica looped her arm around Carol's waist. "Hey, I'm seeing you guys a lot more right now than I'm seeing Dad and Alicia. And poor Logan never sees anyone since he's studying all the time."

"He's clearly seeing you, honey," Carol said with a smirk, cupping her hand around Veronica's lace-covered baby bump.

"Ha ha, very funny." Veronica rubbed her hand across her stomach. "I'm the only one he sees. His Master's program's done next May and we'll move back home but right now, Rhode Island's a three hour plane trip to you and it's eight hours to get to San Diego so guess who gets more visiting?"

"And you'll still be close when the baby comes," the older woman said in an excited voice.

"Yeah, but it will be January. Do you really want to travel then?"

"This isn't Antarctica, Veronica. I know your California girl sensibilities are still offended by your first winter on the East Coast but the world does not shut down because a little snow falls. So, don't worry, I will be there when this baby makes its appearance."

Veronica turned to Carol and hugged her tightly. "I'm so glad. Dad and Alicia are planning to come out too, a week before my due date, and they'll stay for the duration. I was so worried about getting snowed in when I go into labor and Logan being off doing his second semester of practicum, and I'm home alone having a baby. But all you guys are coming and the baby's due date is turning out to be between semesters, so I'll have everyone there with me no matter what happens. The only other thing
I could do is move my personal paramedic in with us but that pesky job of Mady's might keep that from working out."

"She's so sorry she couldn't be here today. These five-on, five-off shifts don't really let you plan your life around other people's schedules. She'll come down from Baltimore as soon as she gets off on Saturday morning."

A voice rang through the room before Veronica could respond. "Ladies, it's time. Who wants to be first?"

Veronica smirked at Carol. "I think we should bring up the rear again. See if Logan can wait of his own accord this time."

Logan stood at the front of the room, watching his family and friends as he waited for Veronica to appear. There were eight couples getting married today, five new and one other vow renewal besides he and Veronica and Bob and Carol. When Veronica wasn't the first bride to appear, he assumed she and Carol would be near the back of the line again. That gave him a little time to watch all his guests.

Keith and Alicia, of course. They'd gotten married almost two years after he and Veronica and he could not have asked for a better mother-in-law. No, he couldn't have asked for a better mother, for himself or for Veronica. Veronica was still steadfastly refusing to allow her own mother to be part of their lives but she had embraced Alicia completely. Keith had harassed them good-naturedly for about six months after their secret wedding but then he just stopped and, after four and a half years, Logan felt more of a bond with Keith than he'd ever felt with his own father. And when they'd flown home a month ago to tell the family that Veronica was pregnant, Keith had been ecstatic. On the flight back to Providence, Veronica had reminded him that she'd told him years ago that grandkids would make all the difference and he'd admitted that she'd been right all along.

Darrell sat next to Alicia, a high school student following in his big brother's basketball footsteps. Between Darrell and Wallace was Jeannie. Wallace, like Logan, was about to start the second year of a Master's program but in Mechanical Engineering rather than Forensic Psychology. Jeannie had stuck with the FBI, doing two more internships before she completed her combined BA/MA degree program and she'd been doing her time in the Quantico bullpen since graduation. Jeannie and Wallace had hit it off during the wedding reception five years ago and had had an on again-off again, long distance thing going ever since. Logan knew they both dated other people when they were apart but he also knew that they met up at least a couple times a year. Jeannie had confessed to Veronica about six months earlier that she'd put in for a transfer to either San Diego or Los Angeles and Logan figured that once she made the move, it wouldn't be long before she and Wallace made some kind of commitment. Alicia adored Jeannie and looked at every other girl whom Wallace brought home with a jaundiced eye. Veronica had been thrilled with the news of the California transfer and took every opportunity to remind Wallace of how awesome Jeannie was.

Next to Wallace was Mac, with Dick glued to her side. They'd been living together since second semester of sophomore year at Hearst. Mac had gone straight to work after graduation and was an up and comer at Kane Software's biggest competitor. In a rather shocking turn of events, Dick had graduated on time with a Business degree and had started an MBA program but after one semester, Mac's work transferred her to the Bay Area and Dick quit school to follow her. He'd gotten a job in Asset Management, whatever the hell that was, and proposed to Mac at least monthly. She continued to say no but Logan knew she was starting to soften on the issue.

Next to Dick sat Sam. The two of them were usually inseparable when they got together, which never surprised Logan. Sam was still living on the island and working for the County Assessor while continuing to be a member of the volunteer Fire Department. He and Mady had dated for about a
year and a half but when she graduated and took a job as a paramedic in Baltimore, they had parted ways. Sam didn't want to leave the island and Mady's career was definitely her focus. On the other side of Sam was Irv, still the County Clerk. He'd joked to Logan at dinner the night before that Sam was going to join him in the perpetual bachelor's club since he was still pining over Mady after three and a half years. Geny sat next to Irv, just graduated from college two months earlier and in the midst of a job search.

Beyond Geny was Teresa, Duncan's wife. She had been an Early Childhood Education major at Hearst whom he'd hired to be Lilly's part-time nanny but after only a few months, Duncan had moved her into his house and they were married shortly after that. She was nice enough but Logan wasn't sure what the big rush had been. The irony of him feeling that way after his own two day engagement was not lost on Logan. Everyone had assumed that she'd been pregnant when they got married so quickly but after four more years, Lilly remained the only Kane heir. Duncan sat next to Teresa with Lilly on his lap. Logan may not have understood Duncan's rapid marriage but he'd been glad when it happened. It made him more confident that Duncan wasn't going to take another stab at winning Veronica back. Logan was very confident that all that would come of that would be Veronica trying to stab Duncan but it still made him feel better that Duncan shouldn't even try to be a problem again. He and Veronica really weren't close with Duncan and Teresa; they were only at the wedding because of Lilly. They were very close to the little girl; she'd flown out to visit them over her Spring Break and she was supposed to come stay with them for a week before she and Logan both had to go back to school.

Logan saw the last groom besides he and Bob step forward to meet his bride. He was pretty sure that he was next. "Am I going to need to anchor you again?" Bob said to him quietly.

"Probably not. I'm used to having her now. Back then, I still couldn't believe my luck." Veronica appeared at the head of the aisle then, in her same wedding dress and boots but with the tiniest of baby bumps flaring the dress out in a way it hadn't five years ago. He felt like his heart was going to burst out of his chest as he watched her walking up the aisle, eyes locked on him and smiling like he was the only other person in the world. He took a step toward her and Bob's hand clamped on his shoulder, just like it had the first time. The heavy hand, followed by a burst of laughter from the front row, snapped Logan back to reality and he glanced briefly at Bob. "Sorry. I guess I still can't believe my luck." Bob laughed and held firm until Veronica was within a few steps. Free of the anchor, Logan bounced out like he had five years before, taking her hand and kissing it, then kissing her temple and leading her to the front of the room.

"Logan, you're nuts, I'm fine."

"I believe I am more qualified than you to decide if I'm nuts or not and I most certainly am not, except about you. And your ankles are swollen, so keep them up." Logan sat down next to her on the bed with two flutes of sparkling cider. He handed one to her, then tipped his own glass to hers and the crystal made a delicate clinking sound. "More than yesterday."

"Less than tomorrow," Veronica answered, smiling at their most common toast, before taking a long drink of her cider. She lowered the glass and Logan took it from her, putting it next to his on the nightstand before leaning in to cradle her cheek.

"When I carried you back into this very room, five years ago, I couldn't imagine loving you any more than I did then. I couldn't fathom that there really could be more than what I already felt for you. That 'more than yesterday, less than tomorrow' saying, I loved it, but I had no idea what it really meant. Now, I do know, and it stagers me when I think what's coming. We're having a baby, we'll be back home in a year—"
"Back to the double-headed shower!" Veronica said in a teasing voice.

"How many times do I have to apologize for renting a house out here without that?" Logan answered, rolling his eyes, as he moved his hand from her cheek and ran it down her arm.

"You can never apologize enough for that one," she said sternly, before bursting into laughter.

"And no hot tub," he added.

"That's turned out okay since I couldn't get in it now anyway," she said in a woeful voice.

"See? That's the way to look at the bright side, pookie," he teased, then leaned into her again for a long kiss. She pressed forward against his chest, and then pulled her legs in under her so she could kneel next to him. He wrapped his arms around her to unzip her dress, then pulled it over her head. "Ooh, this is new." He ran a finger along the lacy edge of her bra to its front clasp before tracing the finger down over her swelling stomach and down to the tiny triangle of lace at the apex of her thighs. He pressed gently and she rocked forward on her knees to get more pressure. He chuckled and dragged his finger away and down the straps of her garter belt to the tops of her stockings.

"I had last minute lingerie on our last wedding night; I wanted to make sure I had something a little more exciting this time." She scooted closer and straddled his lap, grasping his shirt on both sides. "And look at you, back in snaps." She smirked and gave a quick tug, pulling his shirt open all the way to the bottom. "Ah, much better." She smoothed her hands up his chest and then looped them around his neck. "So, before I interrupted you about my shower—"

"Your shower?"

"Yes, my shower. I share it with you because you're a very useful accessory in there but make no mistake, it's mine. Anyway, you were waxing poetic about how you couldn't imagine what it would mean to love more and more. You have more love than anyone I've ever known. It doesn't surprise me that you've got more to give me, us—" she pulled a hand from his neck to lay on her stomach and he laced his fingers through hers "—every day. What I'm constantly surprised by is how much more I feel for you. I'm a little on the prickly side...you might have noticed this once or twice—" she gave him a rueful grin and he chuckled "—but what you've given me, the love you've given me, it's been what I needed more than anything else, and I never knew it. I love you, Logan. I'm not sure how I got so lucky to have you in my life but I will never stop being grateful."

"That makes two of us. Just us being out here, not here for the wedding but out here so I can go to school. I always assumed I'd be following you from goal to goal, and the fact that you've set aside working with your dad, or going to law school, and whatever else you've thought of doing, so I can get this degree, it astonishes me daily."

"Logan, it's like you said, whatever I've thought of doing. The thing is, I've got lots of interests and I always love my work with Dad, but right now, nothing particularly compels me. You, you've got a vision for these centers for abuse victims and this Master's program is going to help you achieve that. I know you'd support me in anything but right now, it's my turn to support you." She smiled at him and he cupped his hands along the sides of her neck, combing his fingers into her hair and resting their foreheads together. His eyes were glittering with tears.

"And you think I'm the poetic one."

"Oh, you are. I just get lucky sometimes. And speaking of getting lucky..." She reached up to the bra clasp and gave it a twist. "Your buddy Dick informed me today that I'm getting an awesome baby rack. Let's put it to some use."
"My turn! Daaddeee! Throw me now!"

The blonde two-year-old climbed Logan like a monkey, pool water splashing all around them as she threw her arms around his neck. "My turn. Throw me high."

"Are you sure, Reenie?" He curled his arm under her so she was sitting on it with her legs wrapped around him, then pushed her wet curls behind her ear. "When Uncle Dick threw you last week, you didn't like it."

"Nope, I'm a big girl now. I wanna fly like Lilly and Robin." She waved her arm behind her, toward her older god-sister and sister who were splashing and giggling in the water.

"Okay, baby girl," Logan said, kissing her forehead and shifting his arms to hold the bottom of her tiny feet in one hand and rest the other on her back. "Are you ready?"

"Wait! Mommy! Watch me!" she shrieked over her shoulder. Logan snickered. This was the grandchild his father-in-law described as 'Mars through and through'. Veronica peeked into the basket at her feet, spoke briefly to Jeannie who was sitting next to her poolside, and then stood up to walk to the pool's edge.

"Okay, baby, Mommy's watching." She raised her eyebrows and smiled at Logan. "Careful, Daddy."

"Always," he said and then looked directly at Reenie. "Are you ready?" She nodded eagerly. "Okay, deep breath." He glanced behind him, then took a big gasping breath in with her and sank them both under the water before pushing up and flipping his daughter over his head behind him. He didn't push very far so when she bobbed back up to the surface, cackling like a maniac, she was within easy reach.

"Again, again, again!" she shrieked as she dog-paddled furiously back to him. Her enthusiasm attracted the attention of the other girls who swam out to them. All three latched their arms around his neck and hung on him, laughing—twelve-year-old Lilly hanging on piggy-back with Reenie and five-year-old Robin each latched onto his torso.

"Are you girls trying to drown me?" he said and sank under the water again. He popped up after a moment and called to the group on the side. "None of you are going to save me from these giggling loons?" Veronica sat down on the side with her legs in the water and she looked at him fondly as he drifted closer to her.

"I'm reasonably confident in your ability to stay alive in this situation," she said with a smile. "And your son is going to start yelling in about two minutes if he doesn't get to eat." She looked up at Wallace who had come to stand next to her on the pool's edge. "What about you, little brother? Gonna get in and help Logan?" He snorted a laugh.

"I don't think so. If I get in, it would probably be to help the girls."

Robin and Lilly launched themselves for the wall where he stood, clamoring for him to get in so they could have a full-fledged splash war. Logan, left with only Reenie in his arms, laughed. "Sure not feeling the love from Uncle Wallace." He looked meaningfully at his brother-in-law. "Not too much longer, dude, and you're going to find yourself in a similar situation and you're going to look back at this moment and wish you'd been a little more helpful."
Wallace laughed. "Maybe, but I think Imma risk it." He hopped into the pool and the girls flung themselves on him.

"No fair," Logan said with a laugh, "three against two."

"Yeah, no fair," Reenie echoed.

"I guess if you're scared," Lilly taunted and Logan raised his eyebrows at Reenie.

"Are we gonna take that?" he asked and she shook her head vigorously, then they simultaneously began to send waves of water at the other three with open palms skating across the water's surface. Veronica jumped up from the side of the pool, laughing as she scurried back to her chair and the other combatants immediately threw themselves into a counter-attack.

The battle lasted about four minutes. At that point, Logan and Wallace declared a draw and scooted the girls out of the pool to start to dry off so they could all go in and get ready for the evening banquet. Reenie headed straight for the little playground next to the pool and the older girls followed her while Logan and Wallace both flopped down onto towels on the pool deck next to their wives' lounge chairs.

"All hail the conquering heroes," Jeannie said with a smirk.

Veronica looked up from the baby and rolled her eyes. "Conquering? They both gave up because three little girls were kicking their asses in a water fight." She snorted in derision and the drowsy baby startled. "Oh, Danny, I'm sorry, little buddy."

"Hand him over," Logan said, reaching for the baby, then balancing him on his forearm and massaging his back, trying to coax a burp out of him while Veronica put her swimming suit back in order and pulled away the towel she'd been using as a cover-up. Wallace laughed at the burp that rumbled out of the baby.

"You're pretty good at that," he said.

"He's had lots of practice," Veronica said. "You're going to get plenty of that soon yourself." She leaned over to Jeannie and pressed her hand against her bulging stomach, laughing as it pressed back against her. "I love that they do that."

"I could always get Reenie to do the same," Logan said with a pout as he laid Danny on his back on the towel, then stretched out next to him. He leaned over to blow a raspberry on the baby's belly, then hooked a finger around his ankle and raised the tiny foot to his face, alternating between kissing the baby's toes and making nonsensical faces at him while Danny laughed.

"I don't think there's any particular skill involved with these guys," Jeannie said emphatically. "They're so crowded in there. Anyone infringing on their limited space must be dealt with. Swiftly and harshly, if necessary." She rested her feet on Wallace's chest and settled back further into the lounge.

"Ah, that part they get that from their Aunt Veronica." Her words earned her a snort of laughter from Wallace. "But come on, there's only two of them in there," Veronica teased. "How crowded can it be?"

"Trust me, it's crowded," Jeannie said emphatically. "They've only left me about twenty minutes of bladder space and we've got more than two months to go still."

"Well, hopefully for you, they'll get out when it's time. As of this morning, poor Mac is overdue by a week." Jeannie shuddered and Veronica laughed, then continued, "We flew out here on her due date
and she was already cursing at Dick. At this point, I'd probably be afraid to let the girls around her."

"We went by before we left," Wallace said. "She was still cursing. He was walking around with his head down, trying not to make any noise to make her notice him." The other three laughed uproariously.

"I actually feel sorry for Dick right now and those are words I never expected to say," Veronica choked out and Logan and Wallace laughed even harder. "And for all the gripes I've had with him through the years, there is one bit of reality that the two of you need to understand. Dick is an unbelievable baby-whisperer. I'm pretty sure it's because they recognize someone at the own level of maturity—" laughter exploded again "—but why he has this skill isn't the issue. He can calm down a baby faster than anyone I know, even the burp master over here. The two of you are going to come to appreciate that, especially when you've got two infants at once."

"So we need to hope that she doesn't kill him before that baby gets out of her," Jeannie said with a playful grimace.

"Yes, that is exactly what you need to hope," Veronica said. "Now that Dick's purpose in life has finally been revealed, it would be a shame to lose out on those mad skills when you need them the most."

"Speaking of mad skills, Supafly, when are you getting back to harassing the evildoers of Neptune again? The way Mom talks, it sounds like Keith and Weevil have been pretty swamped without you since you went out on leave before Danny was born."

Logan peeked up from the baby, curious to see how Veronica would respond. "It's kinda still under negotiation," she said, raising her eyebrows at him. "Dad gets a little more difficult about me coming back after each kid. I think we'll come to an understanding in the next month or two." She ran her foot along Logan's arm, digging her toes into his shoulder. He rocked his head up toward her and playfully bit her calf. "Hey you! None of that sort of thing in front of my impressionable little brother." She stood up and called for the girls. "Ladies, let's go. Time to get cleaned up for dinner." She turned back to Logan. "Wanna hand me the baby and I'll take him up with me."

"Nah, I've got him." He sat up and tucked the gurgling baby into the crook of his arm, then stood and gathered the towel, the baby's basket, and the bag of pool supplies the girls had brought downstairs with them. He heard Veronica stage whisper 'Personal sherpa' to Jeannie but ignored her as he looked over at the girls to see if they needed a reminder. Lilly and Robin were already waiting at the pool gate for the grown-ups but Reenie was still playing airplane on one of the swings, laying across the seat on her stomach with her arms outstretched as she pushed herself with her feet. "Sarah Irene Echolls! Get a move on, girlie girl."

"I'll collect her," Veronica said and headed for the swings. He watched her go with appreciation. After eleven years of marriage and three children, she was still more beautiful than any other woman he'd ever set eyes on.

"Put your tongue back in your mouth, you idiot," Wallace chided. "You're in mixed company."

"Like I haven't seen him panting after his wife in the last eleven years," Jeannie said, rolling her eyes and Wallace shook his head.

"I didn't mean you; I meant the girls."

"They've seen it more than I have; they live with him and his heart eyes every day," she said with a grin. "Just relax. It's sweet." She held out her hand. "Now help me get out of this chair. I don't think I
Logan let himself into the suite quietly, in case the baby was already asleep. All three girls had gone home with Papa Bob and Nana Carol in the back of the Model T fire truck to camp out in their backyard with Mady and Geny. They would be doing the same thing tomorrow night after the wedding and Jeannie and Wallace were going to take Danny for the night. Jeannie kept telling Wallace it would be good practice and the terrified look that crossed his face every time she said that made Logan laugh. Tonight, the baby remained with them. Veronica had said good night earlier and taken him upstairs to nurse and get ready for bed.

He turned off the lights in the front room and went into the bedroom, stopping to smile at the sight of Veronica on the bed, stretched out on her side, sound asleep, while Danny lay beside her, continuing to nurse. Logan went into the bathroom to brush his teeth and shower, and when he came back out, Danny was asleep too, rolled over onto his back, one arm still resting against Veronica but the other flung out, taking up as much room as his tiny body could manage. Logan shook his head with a smile and picked him up, burping him gently before laying him on his back in the porta-crib. When he came back to the bed, Veronica was awake, her nursing bra hooked back up, and a suggestive smile on her face as she watched him walking naked toward her.

"Woke up again, did you?" he said in a teasing voice as he slid into the bed beside her. "After I do all the work to put him to bed?"

"Oh really? It seems like I was somehow involved."

"Not really. When I got here, you were very asleep and your son had resorted to self-service." He pulled her up against him and kissed her hair. "Of course, you falling asleep reading to Robin at night is why she can already read at five so maybe you had a plan after all. Teaching the infant to forage for food?" He laughed softly and scooted down so they were eye to eye. "Was that the plan?" He kissed her on the nose.

"You are so hilarious," she said in a caustic voice. "Nursing relaxes me so sometimes I fall asleep. It's not like I've got anything to do once he's latched on. Then the little noises they make... and their little hands kneading me like a kitten...it always just knocks me out."

"Going to bed to nurse might be a factor also," he said, "but now I've got you where I want you so I'm not gonna complain."

"This is not complaining?" she asked with a laugh. "I'd hate to see actual complaints."

He laughed back at her. "And now you're saying you've never heard me complain? That's awesome." He pushed his arm under her and then rolled onto his back, bringing her with him to lie on top of him. "So, we're essentially kid-less, for four to six hours I'd guess, from how full Danny's belly looked, so what would you like to do, Mrs. Echolls?"

She grinned and opened her mouth to answer but he laid a finger across her lips. "And don't say sleep, you've already done that."

She pouted playfully at him. "Barely, and I thought we had a plan. The doctor cleared me to resume conjugal activities last week and we decided to try something new and wait for the wedding night."

"I hate it when you say conjugal. It gives me ankle monitor flashbacks." She ducked her head to contain her snort of laughter against his chest.

"Sorry," she teased, "what should I say instead? Go all the way? Hit a home run? Do it?"
"What's wrong with 'make sweet love'?"] She hid her face against him again and he was still afraid that the volume of her laugh would wake the baby. "You wound me, Mars."

"I'm so, so sorry," she choked out. "I would never want to do that." She continued to laugh against his chest, a pleasant rumbling feeling that warmed him through. "So, are we not waiting? I'm fine with that. I accepted a long time ago that you bring out the trollop in me."

"Oh really? Now that's interesting," he said, running his hands along her back, shoulders to legs. "But no, I still like that idea. Because, clearly, I am an overly romantic sap."

"Not overly," she said. "You're just the right amount of romantic sap. But if that's the case, what are we going to do besides sleep?"

"Have we been married so long that you don't remember that there's someplace to be besides home plate?" She laughed into his chest again.

"Are you kidding? Do you seriously think that any amount of time being married to you would make a girl forget about third?" She bent her arm to prop her head on her hand, staring at him with a smirk. "Have you lost your mind?"

"We agreed a long time ago that I would not use my advanced degree to diagnose either of our mental shortcomings." He flipped them over again, this time settling her beneath him. He kissed her neck, smiling against her skin as she gave a contented sigh and rocked her head back. He worked his way down between her breasts, to her belly, then stopped to tug off her panties, before settling himself between her raised knees. "Since you have such an extensive memory of third base, make sure you let me know if I forget anything."

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Friday, July 27, 2029 — 22 Years

"Mom sent me a text a while ago. She and Dad boarded the ship and they should be setting sail in an hour or two. She said to tell you guys thank you again for their anniversary trip." Mady sat down next to Veronica on the bench where she sat watching the Tilt-a-Whirl. Thirteen-year-old Reenie was riding in one car with Mady's five-year-old son, Charley, and her eight-year-old daughter, Lizzie, as well as Wallace and Jeannie's six-year-old daughter, Tamara. Eleven-year-old Danny was wedged into another car with his ten-year-old cousins, Hank and Steven Fennel, and Colby Casablancas, only a day shy of her eleventh birthday.

"Oh, we were so happy to do that. Fifty years? That's amazing. They needed a fabulous anniversary trip to honor that kind of commitment," Veronica said, smiling and waving back to Danny and his gang as they spun in front of her.

"Well, fabulous does describe this trip. A cruise to the Bahamas and then another week in a condo on the beach in Costa Rica? Sounds pretty amazing." The car with Lizzie, Charley, Tami, and Reenie spun past then and Veronica and Mady both waved this time.

"We went to Costa Rica a couple years ago. It really is beautiful." Veronica twisted toward Mady. "So, speaking of commitment..."

"Will you not? I told you before, I'm too busy to start dating again. I'm the Fire Chief now. I don't have time to look for a new husband and what does that say to my kids anyway? Sorry your dad's gone but I'm lonely?"

Veronica scoffed. "You're being deliberately difficult. There's nothing wrong with wanting to
resume that part of your life. And you know you don't have to look. Sam's right here. He's been
waiting for twenty years. Even after you and Kevin got married, he's still never been serious about
anyone else. He just resigned himself to being alone. And now you're finally back on the island and
sweetie, I know it's hard for you, but Charley doesn't even remember Kevin. Sam's been the closest
thing to a dad he can remember."

"It's not normal to break up with a guy, marry someone else and have kids, and then when your
husband dies, just pick up again with the old boyfriend."

"You're not just picking up again. It's been three years since Kevin died. Sam's been right there the
whole time, supporting you, being there for the kids, and he's never pushed you. Why are you
denying what you feel?"

"How do you know what I feel? Yes, Sam's been a good friend and yes, he's been great with the
kids and yes, I do still enjoy spending time with him and...crap." Mady stopped and glared at
Veronica. "Curse your pushiness."

Veronica laughed. "You should know after all these years to just take my advice without fighting
me. So, here's the plan. We're going to be at your folks' house tonight and your kids can join the
super-mega-camp-out with our troop. Then, you and Sam can go out to dinner with no need to rush
home. Or to send him home." She smirked at Mady's reddening cheeks.

"This is your anniversary weekend. Shouldn't we be the ones watching the kids?"

"We had our traditional night at the Inn after the wedding last night. And don't worry about us; the
kids are camping out and we'll be just fine in the house alone." She smiled smugly. "I have a very
resourceful husband. After twenty-two years and three children, we've learned a lot of tricks to
maintaining an extremely satisfying sex life in a full house. Tonight, the house won't even be full
since they'll all be outside." She waggled her eyebrows at Mady. "Do NOT worry about us."

Mady snorted and shook her head. "That really is one thing I've never worried about. You two still
behave like those nineteen year olds who couldn't keep their hands off each other at the carnival. It's
cute. And a little gross." They both burst into laughter.

"Our kids think so too. The gross part at least. But they don't complain anymore. The girls especially
have learned that the fastest way to get Logan to step up the parental PDA is to complain about it. So
now the worst we get is some under-the-breath grumbling and they walk away." They laughed
again, laughter that was cut short when a frazzled looking Logan suddenly appeared in front of them,
his hand grasping the arm of a very unhappy looking Robin. Sam, Dick, and Wallace stood behind
them with varying degrees of smirks on their faces.

"Dad, come on. Would you just relax? There was nothing going on."

"That's not how it looked to me, young lady," Logan growled and a guffaw burst from Dick. Logan
whipped around and although Veronica couldn't see his face, she suspected there might have been
some bared teeth involved because Dick held his hands up in front of him and pressed his lips
together like he was trying to keep quiet, but when Logan pivoted away again, Dick's shoulders
began to shake with suppressed laughter.

"Dick, the kids are all coming off the ride, why don't you guys take them over to the games?"
Veronica said and Mady stood up.

"Great idea," she said, walking up to the men and looping her arm through Sam's. "Let's see how
many stuffed animals this crew can win." She looked up at Sam. "I think I need you to win me a
bear.” He smiled delightedly at her and she led him over to where the kids were starting to get off the Tilt-a-whirl. Wallace nodded and pushed Dick in that direction as well.

"You idiot,” Veronica heard Wallace say to Dick as they walked away. "You're gonna have a sixteen-year-old daughter in five years. We'll see how you like it."

Robin tugged free of her father's grasp and dropped onto the bench next to Veronica. "Mom, he's overreacting. Nothing happened. We were riding the Ferris Wheel; that's all. Dad acts like I was having sex in public or something."

Veronica looked up at Logan whose eyes were squeezed shut as he took deep breaths. After a moment, he opened his eyes and moved to sit on the other side of Veronica. "Okay, I may have overreacted a little. But you weren't just riding the Ferris Wheel, you were kissing a boy on a Ferris Wheel."

"It was just a kiss. Our first kiss. And he's probably never gonna want to kiss me again since he knows now that my father's an overprotective maniac." Robin huffed in agitation. "Maybe sixteen year olds didn't kiss when you were young—" Veronica gave a bark of laughter "—but it's not a big deal now."

"Of course sixteen year olds kissed when we were young," Logan said in an irritated voice. "But you can't just go around kissing guys you just met."

"Just met? What are you talking about? I've known Michael for five years. We come here every summer, Dad. I'm pretty sure you know him too." Robin huffed again and leaned against Veronica, resting her cheek on top of Veronica's head as Veronica wrapped her arms around her daughter's shoulders. Their oldest had gotten Logan's height and darker hair but had Veronica's blue eyes. "Mom, can you tell him please?"

Veronica reached out to grasp Logan's hand. "Yeah, I'm pretty sure we know him too. And no one's telling you that you can't kiss anyone—" Logan scoffed and she squeezed his hand "—but we want you to make good choices and be careful."

"Mom, I know all that. It was one kiss. Maybe two. We weren't gonna do anything more. We're not gonna have sex—"

"You better believe you're not," Logan exploded and Veronica released his hand to wrap her arm around his shoulders, pulling him down to lean against her, his head resting on hers just like Robin's was, her hand cupped around the side of his head.

"Logan, please. Robin, good choices can mean being more conscious of where you are when you kiss someone. In the middle of the carnival when you know your dad and I are walking around might suggest that you're not thinking that clearly. It's not unreasonable to make assumptions about your other choices after that. But, overall, we do trust you and if you want to go back and find Michael and your other friends, you can. Just make sure you're thinking before you act. Okay?"

"Thank you, Mommy," Robin said, turning to Veronica to kiss her on the cheek. She jumped up and made it a few steps away before turning back to her parents. "I'm sorry, Dad. I'll make good decisions. I promise." Logan grunted and Robin stepped closer to kiss him on top of the head before whirling away again and disappearing.

Her other arm now free, Veronica reached for Logan's hand, lacing their fingers together as she patted his head gently. "You okay, Dad?"
"All these girls. They're gonna send me to an early grave. First, Lilly, now Robin. Reenie in a year or two. I don't think my heart can take this stress."

"Glad to see your melodramatic streak is alive and well. Lilly's never done anything that would warrant these ravings. She's graduated from college, she starts law school in a month; she's a grown-up, Logan. And Robin and Reenie are both fine. Good students, well behaved. You of all people should know that sixteen-year-olds do sometimes kiss."

Veronica kissed the top of his head and he sighed.

"I know exactly what sixteen-year-olds do, which is why I was so freaked out to see my sixteen-year-old kissing a boy on a Ferris Wheel. I know what boys want when they get stuck at the top with a pretty girl."

"Then it's a good thing you've got a smart daughter who has goals and knows that being a teen mom isn't a way to achieve them. Two smart daughters as a matter of fact. Now straighten up, Echolls." Veronica shrugged her shoulder to nudge Logan back upright. He sat up, and then pulled her into his lap.

"Sorry. You're right."

"I know. I'm always right. Now— " Veronica leaned against his chest, dropping her head to nestle in the crook of his neck before kissing his jaw then up behind his ear. "—after this whole incident, I'm guessing Robin will be staying off the Ferris Wheel for a while. Maybe wanna go see if we can get stuck at the top? You can show me what boys want at the top of a Ferris Wheel."

Thursday, July 26, 2035 — 28 Years

Veronica laughed and twisted her head as Logan kept trying to kiss her. With her mouth out of reach, he began to plant little kisses on her cheeks and then her neck. "Logan," she whispered, "you're making a spectacle."

He wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her tightly against him. "I told you after our first wedding that when we'd been married as long as Bob and Carol, I'd have you up here for half an hour. We've beat 'em by a year this time around. I'm just getting started, baby."

Her head dropped back as she laughed and he continued to nuzzle into her, kissing around her throat to reach the other side of her neck. "Oh, that's right," she said, before pushing her hands against his chest. "But I also remember telling you that I didn't want to waste that much time just standing up here in front of everyone when we could get back to our room instead."

"Oh yeah," Logan said like he'd just had a revelation. He kissed her neck once more, then cupped her face in his hands. "Do you have any idea how much I love you?"

"I think I might," she said with a smile. "It's somewhere near as much as I love you." He smiled back, resting his forehead against hers, then gave her a final kiss before straightening up and sliding his hands down to catch hers. They glanced around them then, finding Bob and Carol standing right next to them, grinning.

"Are you two finally done?" Bob asked and Carol swatted his arm.

"For now," Logan replied with a smirk. "We're just waiting on you to lead us out of here. That is your main job today, right?"

"I guess it is," Bob said, then reached out so he and Carol could embrace the younger couple.
"Congratulations, Mr. and Mrs. Echolls."

"Same to you, Mr. and Mrs. Cooper."

Veronica and Reenie refused to let the group leave before cake but after that, everyone planned to meet up for dinner on the screened-in porch at AJ's on the Creek. Logan opened the door to the porch and waved Veronica in, finding most of his friends and family had already arrived. Keith was out on the deck with Bob and Irv while they had cigars. Alicia, Carol, Jeannie, and Wallace were already seated at the table, talking, with Lilly, Robin, and Reenie standing behind them, leaning against the back of their chairs, to get in on the conversation. At the far end of the table, the 'Gang of Four', Danny, Colby, Hank, and Steven, were clustered together, joined by Lizzie, Tami, and Charley, demolishing a basket of bread and playing Crazy Eights.

"Hey, keep moving, you're holding up traffic," Dick said from behind Logan and Veronica. Logan turned to find Mac and Dick accompanied by Mady and Sam.

"Where have the two of you been?" Mac asked with a grin. "Or do I even need to ask?"

"What are you talking about?" Logan asked, holding the door open for the stragglers. Sam was holding a large bakery box. "We got here before you guys did."

" Barely, and we had to stop by the bakery and the cake wasn't done yet," Mady laughed. "So we've got an excuse to have taken forty-five minutes to make a ten minute drive. But personally, I don't actually want to know where you two were, or what you were doing." She looped her arm through Mac's and they headed for the table. "I'm pretty sure you don't actually want to know either."

"Yeah, you're right, but I always like to ask." Mac glanced back over her shoulder toward Veronica, then winked at Logan. "It's one of the few ways to get Veronica to blush."

"Are you blushing, Ronnie?" Dick taunted, scrunching down to look her right in the face. He straightened up and looked back at Sam with a leering grin. "I don't know why. I used to catch them going at it all the time. The first few years they were married, I probably saw Ronnie's boobs almost as many times as Ma—ow, ow, ow, hey!" He clutched his arm where Veronica had punched him and Logan laughed at Dick's continuing lack of self-preservation. "I'm just messing around."

"Mac? His Will's up to date, right?" Veronica called and Mac burst into laughter.

"Oh definitely. I make sure it stays current just for occasions such as this."

Dick pouted at Veronica and she glared at him, then turned away to follow Mac and Mady, giving him a careless wave of her hand. "When you least expect it, Casablancas."

"Are you never going to learn?" Sam said in an exasperated voice to Dick and that made Logan laugh harder than any other part of the amusing exchange.

"Dick, dude, if even Sam is counseling you against something, you really should have learned by now. Stop poking the bear." Logan clapped his hand on Dick's arm and turned to follow Veronica, chuckling and shaking his head.

"She's your bear. Can't you control her?"

Logan turned back with a grin. "She is my bear. And I like her like this."
Dinner was ordered and the room was buzzing with conversation when Logan stood and tapped his water glass to get everyone's attention. Veronica reached out to take his hand.

"Logan, babe, I'm pretty sure the kids can recite your speech by heart. You say the same thing every time we have a wedding." Across the table, Dick snickered. Logan leaned down and cradled her cheek in his hand, kissing her softly on the forehead.

"You knowing that I love you doesn't stop me from telling you over and over, does it?" She smiled up at him and shook her head. "So if I want to repeat myself at dinner once every five or six or eleven years, then I'm gonna." She pressed her own hand against his on her cheek and stretched up to kiss him.

"Okay," she said when they'd pulled apart at the hoots from Sam and Dick and the groans from the kids. "You can say whatever you want. I'll try not to mouth the words along with you."

"Har har," he said, "I do have other news to share so hold the snark for Dick." He dropped one more kiss on her lips and straightened up again.

"Okay, so, I just want to thank everyone for being with us again this week as I make sure that the love of my life is still willing to be legally bound to me. I've been told by my love—" he raised his eyebrows at Veronica "—that I bore you all with the same speech thanking all of you for being the best family anyone could ever have—" there was laughter through the room "—so I guess I'll skip that part and get straight to the new information that should take even her by surprise, and believe me, pulling a surprise on this woman is haaaarrd to do."

"She learned from the best," Keith called from the end of the table and Logan tipped a salute to him while the rest of the group laughed.

"That she did. But even the best sometimes miss some things." Logan pushed his chair out of the way and walked around the table, stopping behind Lilly's chair and resting his hands on her shoulders. She tilted her head back, smiling up at him, and he leaned down to kiss the top of her head.

"Now everyone was happy and maybe surprised to see our lovely Lilly this week. She couldn't be here last time we had a wedding because she was getting ready to start law school in New York and we've barely seen her since. School and then the hours of a new associate in a high-powered corporate law firm—it's a wonder we even still recognize her, she's been so absent from our lives for the last few years." He stopped and looked down at her. "You are Lilly Megan Kane, right? We did pick up the right girl at the airport?"

She ducked her head and laughed. "Yes, Uncle Logan, it's really me." She rested her hands on his on her shoulders.

"I knew that," he said, kissing her head again and then straightening up to look around the room, "because I've actually seen her since all of you have."

"She came out in January for my birthday," Robin said. "That's the last time she came home."

"Ah, but no it wasn't," Logan said, walking back toward his chair, grinning at Veronica, who was looking at him with her head tilted, obviously trying to figure him out. "Lilly came to Los Angeles in February, and none of you knew it."

"And you did?" Mac asked, looking between Logan and Veronica, frowning. "Why?"

"Because I'm the one who talked her into it." He dropped into his chair with his arm around
Lilly took the napkin off her lap and stood up. "Well, like Robin said, I managed to get home briefly for her birthday and I realized that it had been more than a year since I'd been able to do even that. And it was so great to see everyone and I realized just how lonely I was in New York. I was talking to Uncle Logan about that and how I'm really not enjoying practicing corporate law. I know some people who just love it, love the power and the money, but really, if I need a fix of that, I can go home to either of my grandparents. Enough of it to choke on there."

There was a moment of embarrassed laughter and Lilly shook her head. "Sorry. I love them but that lifestyle was never what made me happy. I'm not sure why I didn't realize it sooner." Lilly looked around the table, her gaze coming to rest on Logan. "Uncle Logan helped me understand that I needed to figure out what I want, and stop just going along with what I thought I was supposed to do."

Logan felt Veronica's head rest against his shoulder and he looked down to see her smiling at him. "Good job, Unca Logie," she whispered.

"So, the first thing I did was register to take the California bar." Excited voices exploded over Lilly's statement.

After a moment, Logan spoke up. "Settle down, people, she's not done yet."

Lilly looked around the room. "And then I studied like a crazy person for the next six weeks and I flew to L.A. at the end of February and took the exam. Uncle Logan came up to take me to dinner on the last day and he brought a couple of people with him."

"Well, neither of those people were his beloved wife," Veronica said in an irritated voice and Logan smirked at her and snuggled his face into her neck.

"And I missed you every second, baby," he murmured in her ear and she harrumphed.

"Anyway," Lilly continued, "Uncle Logan brought the attorneys from the legal department for his centers to talk to me about the kind of work they do. I've been doing corporate work and they do mostly family law so it's a big change of focus. Anyway, I was pretty interested in what they had to say but then I had to wait for my bar results. Which came earlier this month."

"And of course, you passed," Robin said, rolling her eyes. "Was there ever a question?"

"Well, I thought there was," Lilly said with a self-deprecating smile, "but yes, I did pass. So, in September, I'm moving back to California and becoming part of the Port Sûr Centers' legal team."

The room exploded again with excitement. Robin leapt up to hug Lilly and the laughter rang through the room as they both jumped up and down with their arms around each other like they had since they were both little girls. Dick and Mac came around the table to hug Lilly also, once they were able to pry her away from Robin.

"Impressive secret keeping, Echolls," Veronica whispered in Logan's ear. "Keeping me in the dark since January? How did you manage to do that?"

"It wasn't easy," Logan responded, turning to press his lips against hers. "I've been going nuts wanting to talk to you about this. But I wanted to surprise you more."

"Well, you succeeded," she said in an admiring voice. "And you brought Lilly back to us, and you've gotten one step closer to establishing Port Sûr for the future. In another few years, Robin will
have her Masters' and she can take over for you, now with Lilly backing her up, and since Danny should be off at college most of the time by then, you and I can really start traveling like we did during the summers in college."

The sparkle in her eyes thrilled him and he kissed her again. "That's my plan," he said, just as an army of wait staff stepped out onto the porch with their dinners.

Veronica scraped up the last of the frosting on her plate and popped her fork in her mouth, savoring the chocolatey sweetness.

"Are you going to lick the plate next?" Irv asked playfully. Veronica elbowed him in the side. Mac and Jeannie, sitting directly across from her, laughed.

"Are you ever going to stop harassing me about dessert?"

"Probably not. It's one of my favorite things." Veronica rolled her eyes.

"Most people are satisfied with whiskers on kittens," Logan said as he dropped into the chair between Veronica and Mady. Wallace followed behind him, walking around to the other side of the table and sitting next to Jeannie.

"Always been more of a dog person myself," Irv said with a sniff. "So, all the children are off to watch fireworks?"

"You realize the oldest of those children is nearly thirty, right?" Veronica asked.

"Actually, darlin', when you put it that way, the oldest of the children is fifty-something," Irv said, tilting his head at Mady. "But that makes me look really old so I don't wanna talk about it."

Logan laughed as Sam pushed the door from the restaurant open, bearing a tray of drinks. Dick was right behind him with a second tray. Keith and Alicia came in from the deck, followed by Bob and Carol. Dick and Sam distributed drinks around the table and then sat down with their wives.

"So, does everyone have a glass?" Mady asked as she rose to her feet. "As the most ancient kid in this bunch, I think I need to be the one to make the toast this time." There was a clamor of noise as everyone found their glasses and then quiet as they waited for Mady's toast. She turned toward Bob and Carol, then lifted her glass, smiling as she glanced around the table.

"Okay, so, I'd like to propose a toast, to my parents, on the 56th anniversary of their marriage. I feel like I was blessed to get them for my mom and dad. They've been an amazing example of the kind of parent, and spouse, and honestly, just the kind of person, I want to be."

"Hear hear," Logan said, raising his glass with a smile and the rest of the table joined in. After everyone had taken their drinks and returned them to the table, Mady spoke again.

"And, on the 28th anniversary of their marriage, a toast to Logan and Veronica. I really didn't expect, when we interrupted them making out in the middle of the carnival—"

"Hang on. We were NOT making out," Veronica said indignantly and everyone else at the table burst into laughter.

"It was only a matter of time," Sam said, and Veronica ducked her head against Logan's shoulder, hiding her face.
"Anyway, as I was saying," Mady said, still laughing, "I never expected that I was meeting two people who were going to become part of my family. Or who would bring so many other people into my life who would become part of my family. Not just their kids but all of you. Even with the distance between here and California, it feels like everyone here is family. Just like Logan tells us after every wedding." She tipped her head toward him and he blew her a kiss. "All thanks to these two chuckleheads who couldn't keep their hands off each other long enough to eat a tube of cotton candy."

"This might be too much information," Keith said over the laughter.

"Sorry," Mady said but the grin on her face made it seem like she might not be that sorry. "So, again, a toast to Logan and Veronica, and to all of us, the mixed-up family that they built by making a crazy choice on the spur of the moment. Cheers." She lifted her glass and the room rang out with 'Cheers' and 'Saluds' from all around the table.

"And cheers to me," Dick called out, "for getting the whackjobs back together after someone who shall remain nameless—" Sam and Wallace both fake-coughed into their hands, muttering, 'Logan' like a practiced comedy duo before laughing at each other and high-fiving across Jeannie "—went nuts and tried to ruin the whole thing." Logan shook his head and tipped his glass toward Dick.

"Hey, love makes you do crazy things," he said, leaning over to rest his cheek on Veronica's head. She rolled her eyes and nodded.

"Yes, as you have proven on multiple occasions," she snarked at him.

"Whatever. I wouldn't change a single thing."

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**Sunday, July 29, 2040 — 33 Years**

"All right, I think that's everything." Veronica set her suitcase on its wheels next to the door. "What about you? Are you finally ready?"

"You know it takes time to look this good," Logan said, coming out of the bathroom with his toiletries bag. He dropped it into his suitcase and zipped it up, then spun back to her with jazz hands outstretched, eyebrows waggling. "So? How'd I do?"

She walked toward him, smiling as she wound her arms around his waist. "You look pretty good for a grandpa. Even with the fivehead, you've got a lot more hair than my dad did when Robin was born."

"I've got a lot more hair than your dad did when you were five," he retorted, wrapping his arms around her. "Probably more than he had when you were born. I don't actually know that; he's wearing a hat in any picture that I've ever seen of him when you were that little, er...young."

"Very funny. You know, you could probably get ready faster if you'd just go bald already." She raised her arm, reaching for his hair but he blocked her and frowned.

"I've got a lifetime contract."
"Yes, you do." She stretched up to catch his mouth with hers and his arms tightened around her as he deepened the kiss. He pulled her off her feet and took a step back toward the bed, making her laugh against his lips.

"Lifetime contract or not, everyone is waiting on us," Veronica said, wriggling back to the ground and taking a step back from him. "Robin and Nick were very specific that we needed to leave by 11:00 AM so we have enough time to stop to feed the baby a couple of times and still get to the airport on time. She was actually kinda threatening." She chuckled. "I trained her well."

"Yes, you did."

"Actually, we both did." She caught his hands in hers, smiling up at him. "We've got great kids. And now, we've got a great granddaughter. Well, not a great-granddaughter yet, thank God, but a really great granddaughter, argh—" she growled as he laughed "—you know what I mean."

"I do know what you mean." Logan tilted his head down to rest his forehead against hers. "It's been a charmed life, hasn't it?"

She raised her hands to cup his face, eyes locked on his. "It has been. It still is. Best thing I ever did, talking you into marrying me."

He laughed. "I agree. And before that, your coming back to me so much sooner than you could have. I'm so glad being out of my life forever only translated to a week or two. Who knows what could have happened to us if you actually had a normal concept of time."

"You told me a long time ago that I was never going to be normal. See how that worked out for you?" Veronica rose up on her toes and he met her partway, open mouths pressing together. Logan pulled her up into his arms again and spun them over to the dresser, depositing Veronica on top of it, then wrapping one arm around her torso and holding her with the other so his hand could cradle the back of her head. She clutched his shoulders and wrapped her legs around his hips to pull him tightly against her. She moaned at the feel of him pressing into her, then they both jumped at a pounding at the door.

"Knock it off in there," Robin's irritated voice yelled through the door. "It's time to go. Make out on your own time."

They burst into laughter, foreheads pressed together again. "Oops?" Logan said, looking down at Veronica with his eyes twinkling. She grinned at him, then pushed him back and dropped down from the dresser. She caught his hand and pulled him toward the door.

"Let's go before she breaks the door down." She grabbed her carry-on bag and Logan reached for the handles of their suitcases. With her hand on the doorknob, she turned back and smirked at him.

"We're just passengers anyway since Nick's the one who rented the car." She opened the door and he followed her into the hall. "We can make out all the way to the airport if we want." She looked up at him, raising an eyebrow and giving him a coy smile.

He leaned into her and kissed her neck, prompting her to tilt her head to give him better access even as they continued to walk to the elevator.

"You're probably aware of this by now, but I'm never saying no to that kind of offer," Logan said.

Chapter End Notes
And with 52 year old LoVe still ready to jump each other at a moment's notice, Dissolutioned comes to a close. It is so weird to finally be finished with this. I started posted the Sunday Sixes in 2015 so I’ve been living with this story for just under two years. I can tell you now that last year's Christmas story, 'Not a Creature was Stirring' is part of this reality, occurring in Christmas 2017. I've adjusted that story to change the title to 'Dissolutioned Moments' and 'Creature' is now chapter 1 in that work. I've got another one-shot that will post as chapter 2 in 'Dissolutioned Moments' next weekend called 'Robin in Wonderland'. It's not plot-heavy; it's just another snapshot, like the epilogue vignettes. Who knows -- maybe there'll be more in the future. There's lots of missing story between LoVe's anniversary vow renewal years.

Before I go, I just want to thank KMD0107 who has been an amazing beta all through this process. I could probably have done this without her but I think it would have been a lot less coherent. I really value the help and friendship she has shown me. Thanks too to Irislim who was with me at the beginning of this story and gave me a lot of encouragement. She's migrated to another fandom for now but hopefully she'll be back in the future. And finally, there have been a lot of readers who always read and commented and really cheered me on. I'm so grateful for all of that support and love. It really does make such a difference.

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