

THE LOUDER THAN TIME TAPES



T A P E O N E

CHERRY BOMB

Christabel Borgersen

Welcome to Tape One

Thank you for taking a chance on Cherry Bomb.

The following pages contain the opening chapters of the first novel in The Louder Than Time Tapes.

Whether you're here because someone handed you a curious little business card, you discovered the project online, or you simply followed the music...

Welcome.

I hope you enjoy the journey.

Press Play.



Approximate listening time: 25 minutes

CHAPTER ONE

Love Like Lava.

It made no sense to Cherry for Neon Peak Streaming to call a show Love Like Lava. To what part of ‘lava’ were they referring? The heat? That it could move slow or fast? That it cooled on contact with water?

To her, it honestly sounded more like a baking show — and ‘lava’ was referring to some kind of molten chocolate center. Far more appealing than a group of kids, barely legal drinking age, falling in ‘love’ on a reality show.

Love was something that had been elusive to Cherry. Not because she’d not been shown it by her parents, even though they were a different culture to hers. But because she always felt like the square peg trying to squash into a round hole.

She tried for years to mold herself into what society felt a ‘dateable’ woman in her mid-twenties should be.

Career? Got that one covered. She’d been the right age when social media became part of daily life and had grown a semi-successful following across multiple platforms, becoming well known for her honest cosmetic reviews and DIY makeup hacks. From there, it had been a relatively easy transition into makeup artistry for television and movies.

She loved the prosthetic makeup — action sequences, horror tropes, sci-fi — that was her specialty. But they were few and far between. Neon Peak offered her a steady contract with a good wage, but it meant eighty percent of the time shows such as Love Like Lava were paying her bills.

Mental health? Okay, so it wasn’t great. A late ADHD diagnosis and finding her right medication cocktail did help, but she still had to fend off depressive spells — usually in winter, brought on by the lack of sunlight, even in California. But wasn’t her generation — the millennials — supposed to be open about that side of themselves?

Body? She’d tried everything to be acceptable, to the point she’d developed a mild eating disorder in her late teens, yet she was still considered ‘too big’ for designer labels.

Her height? Standing at almost six foot tall, there was nothing she could really do about that. It was down to genetics — not that she knew much about them, being adopted. She had even investigated having her legs shortened so she could be a more ‘acceptable’ height, but it was totally crazy, probably very painful, and stupidly expensive (and, for some reason, only performed in Norway?).

She was a size fourteen. Six foot tall. It was just who she was.

Face? She thought she was kind of pretty — in a subtle way — and her makeup skills could turn it up or down depending on her mood. Her eyeliner was always as sharp as a switchblade. Something she always received positive comments on.

And because she'd grown up in LA? Sure, she'd had some Botox. Had her lips filled. Who hadn't? Intelligence and personality? This is where she seemed to unravel.

She had a loud laugh. A giggle-snort. She laughed at things 'girls' weren't supposed to — stoner movies, dark comedy. She was sarcastic, loud, opinionated, independent, feminist.

Guys wanted influencers who looked like clones of each other: petite with blonde highlights, cute noses, small butts, quiet and reserved.

All the things Cherry was not.

Plus, she was clever. Some men seemed to hate that — not just the ones she considered dating, but the ones she encountered in her line of work too. They hated being matched in wit or conversation by a woman. This generation seemed to have gone totally backwards in that sense.

And then there was her hair. It was ginger.

She had dyed it every color under the sun, but this year apparently 'copper' was having a moment — so she went back to base and used a gloss that would enhance it. Still didn't help on the dating front.

Neither did the pale skin — more English rose than California native — that came with being a redhead. She'd tried to tan, but often would go red, then back to pale again.

And as for the tans in a bottle? Orange every time. Didn't matter how skilled she was as a makeup artist — she'd still look like she'd been dipped in carrot juice.

There had been a 'situationship' that ended after the pandemic, but nothing steady since.

Not that you could call a situationship 'steady.' More a minefield of where do I stand? nightmare that she was too stubborn to walk away from.

Her parents didn't help either. They were anxious to have her 'settle down' — but as she regularly liked to point out to them (and to reassure herself), her generation often didn't marry at all. Or if they did, it wasn't until later in life.

She often thought — had she been of Asian descent like her adoptive parents — they would have organized a 'set up' within the community. Some boy who had probably gone to an Ivy League school and was either a lawyer, or a doctor, or ran some promising tech start-up in Silicon Valley.

She could never decide if she was grateful or not that that hadn't happened.

She wasn't lonely. She loved having her own space. That was her neurodivergent brain speaking. Her own space — where she could sit in sweatpants, having not quite taken yesterday's makeup off, and eat leftovers while binge-watching old shows and movies.

No one to ask her what she was doing all the time.

Plus, not having anyone waiting at home meant that on nights like these? It didn't matter that it was gone midnight, and she was still on set. No one to go home to. No one blowing up her phone with 'where are you?' texts.

She was still on set because a contestant on Love Like Lava had cried off her makeup three times in the confessional booth (set to look like a volcano — because of course it was) over some gym bro from Miami. Neon Peak execs had been insistent that the female contestants look ‘natural’ — but the kind of natural that requires an hour to put on and a multitude of high-end products.

It wasn’t unusual for Cherry to be the last to leave. She brought her own kit, which needed cleaning up and packing away at the end of each day. Meaning the contestants were gone — back to a Motel Six probably. The rest of the crew? Gone home too. It was just her and the security guard, Jeff.

She liked Jeff. He seemed to get her sense of humor, and he always had a plentiful supply of snacks to tide Cherry over till she could grab something on her way home.

The production space used by Love Like Lava was like a huge, converted warehouse — meaning it only had two ways in and out. One at the front — kind of glamorous, with an expensive-looking desk where a polished receptionist sat most of the day. And a fire exit that led to an alleyway running between this building and several other production spaces.

The front door? After midnight? A nightmare. Everything was locked down with codes from a central hub on the Neon Peak lot. But the fire exit? Simple. All she needed was Jeff to close it behind her.

“Heading to the party?” asked Jeff as they walked toward the fire exit at the rear of the building.

“Party?” Cherry raised an eyebrow.

“Yup. Apparently Marcus closed a deal on the rights for that spy thriller — you know the one with the English guy? Not Bond, but basically is Bond at the same time?”

“Can’t say I’m familiar.” Cherry didn’t read a lot of fiction. A fictional world had to feel incredibly well structured, or she’d end up bored and trying to rewrite it in her head.

“But Marcus? Any excuse for a party.”

Marcus Cho was one of Neon Peak’s executives. A sharp negotiator, known for securing big-name exclusives — which is what tonight’s party was about. And why go out to celebrate when the company that employs you has a host of empty spaces and you have the funds to bring in private catering and bar service?

“Take it that means home?” Jeff asked. “Make sure you eat something before crashing out, please. I got a cereal bar in my pocket if you want.”

“Jeff, you’re too kind. I’ll grab something on the way home, I swear. You keep your snacks tonight.”

“Okay then.” Jeff pushed open the fire exit for her. She had her hands full — as always. Titanium water bottle, phone, makeup kit bag threatening to slide off her shoulder at any moment.

“Goodnight, Jeff.”

A wave of relief washed over her as she stepped into the alley and heard the door shut behind her.

It was always hot inside those buildings. Didn't matter how many aircon units they had or how many skylights opened — they still turned into saunas by the end of the day. The cool, early May night air let some of the tension leave her body.

She could hear the steady bass thumping from a building opposite, probably some European EDM artist that had been huge when Marcus was in whichever prestigious school his parents had wrangled him into. The party was obviously in full flow, she thought, as she navigated her way between studio buildings toward the parking lot.

Thankfully, Cherry had her own parking space, close to the center of the lot. She never had far to walk.

Dark alleys after midnight should be scary. But being tall and heavy, she'd never felt frightened by them. Plus, this was Neon Peak — security tighter than a peanut butter jar lid. Passes, biometric scans, and for Marcus' party? Probably some bizarre password or QR code to get in. At this time of night, only the odd security guard rolled through in Neon Peak-branded golf buggies.

She scrolled her phone — emails, banking — nothing that made noise. That's when she heard the footsteps. Heavy. Determined. Powerful stride.

She was about to look up, offer a friendly hello — maybe a comment about working late — when she realized something: without the glow of her phone, she was cloaked in shadow. Whoever this was wouldn't have seen her yet.

Not wanting to startle anyone — especially not security or someone headed to Marcus' party — she did the first thing that came to mind: she ducked behind a huge dumpster and pressed herself flat against the cool brick wall. No one would see her. No one would feel threatened. For once, she blended into the background.

The footsteps grew louder. The pace quickened. Then they passed the dumpster.

Cherry recognized them.

Ty Vernon.

He worked for Vermillion — the rival streaming service. Old money. Prestige. Sleek. High production value. Small but critically acclaimed catalogue. Neon Peak was the rebellious tech-bro sibling. Loud. Edgy. Chaotic. Populist.

Cherry had been near Ty before. He was Vermillion's Acquisitions Director. He reminded her of a shark — all brilliant white teeth and predatory charm. She'd heard all the rumors. Backstage people always did.

He played dirty. Leaked projects. Sabotaged rivals. Swooped in at the last second with a bigger cheque. He could ruin a production with a grin and a few extra zeros.

She was glad she'd hidden. She didn't want nightmares tonight.

But what was he doing here? How had he even gotten onto the lot? Was there some truce she didn't know about?

Then, further up the alley, she heard a fire exit swing open.

"Yeah, I know. I'll be right back — don't fully close the door. I don't give a shit that it's a fire door."

Marcus Cho's voice. Unmistakable.

Cherry liked Marcus. From a distance. Always from a distance. And in small doses. He was like a car salesman. Slick. Polished. He had that ‘indie film festival’ aura — could hype the shit out of a vision. Always semi-casual, but every item was high-end. His shirts probably cost more than Cherry’s rent and had to be hand-washed in glacier meltwater by forest nymphs.

He was probably headed out for party favors. Marcus always brought the snow himself. Never sent an assistant or an intern. Which was ironic, considering everything else in his life was done by assistants and interns.

Cherry was still trying to compute how Ty Vernon got in here. Her brain hadn’t yet reached the part where the two men were about to meet.

The alley was silent.

Then — two sounds.

A low whistle.

And a sickening thud.

She knew that sound. Too well. Shoots with stunts made sure of that. The sound of a body hitting asphalt. No matter how good the fall? It always turned your stomach.

Her breathing grew fast and shallow. She clamped a hand over her mouth.

Footsteps again. Ty, heading back in her direction.

She stilled herself completely, like a prop statue behind the dumpster.

She could see the entrance to the alley, awash in floodlight. Ty stepped into it without breaking stride. No panic. No hesitation. Just that same smooth, powerful walk — until he vanished into the light.

She still didn’t move.

Frozen. Mind racing.

And then — she heard something else.

Wet, ragged breaths.

Not her own.

She crept out, slow and careful.

And there he was.

Marcus. On the asphalt. Laid out. Struggling to breathe.

The shadows and distant light showed a pool of black beneath him. Cherry hurried forward. Should she have run? But Ty was that way. To get help, she’d have to pass him.

Marcus saw her. Reached for her with a blood-soaked hand.

“Marcus...” she crouched beside him. She had basic first aid training. But this? This wasn’t fake. This wasn’t makeup. This was real.

He was dying. Fast.

“I’ll get Jeff — I’ll call 911—”

But Marcus grabbed her wrist.

“It’s going to be okay,” she whispered. “Just keep still, alright? You’ll be back to chasing interns and reality stars in no time.”

She tried a laugh. It came out cracked and desperate.

“It’s not as bad as it looks. I promise.”

He groaned.

Then went still.

His chest stopped moving.

His hand dropped hers.

“Oh God...”

She knew CPR, but with a wound like this? What was she supposed to do? Start compressions and pump whatever blood he had left onto the asphalt?

“Marcus?” came a voice from the fire door. “Hurry up, man!”

Cherry found her voice. “HELP! PLEASE! DOWN HERE!”

Footsteps thundered.

Her knees buckled.

Two men rushed toward her.

“Jesus fucking Christ — is he dead?” said the first. Cherry didn’t recognize the voice. She just kept staring at Marcus, waiting for him to sit up and shout ‘gotcha.’

“His chest ain’t moving,” said the second.

“Did you do this?” snapped the first.

“Why would she be sat next to the guy she just shot, dumbass?”

“I don’t know, Brad, maybe she shot him by accident. Is that what this is? Hey, lady — did you shoot him by accident?”

Cherry shook her head violently. “No. Not me. I— I...”

“I’ll call 911,” said the first guy, way too calm for a man standing over a dead executive. “YOU — go back to the party. Flush anything that’ll get us in trouble. And you, lady — what’s your name?”

“C-Cherry Akers. I work here. Makeup. I just left the... over there, and—”

“Brad, why are you still standing here? HAUL ASS. And do NOT tell anyone what happened out here. Got it?”

“And what do I say has happened?”

“You’re an actor, Brad. Fucking improvise.”

Cherry heard the second guy — Brad — bolt.

The other one crouched beside her.

“Cherry? I’m Michael. We’ve not met.”

He lowered his voice, steady and calm.

“Try to stay calm, okay? Don’t say anything until the cops arrive. Not about this. First time you tell it, it needs to be fresh. Sharp. You got me?”

Cherry nodded.

She didn’t trust her mouth anymore.

CHAPTER THREE

On the upper floor of the North Hollywood Police Station, Commissioner Robert “Bob” Lansing sat behind an expansive desk, the wall behind him lined with commendations from his long career in police work.

Now in his late fifties, his hair had faded from jet black to a dignified silver-grey. He gave a weary sigh, the sound heavy against the silence, and looked over the two detectives standing in front of him.

They were opposites in every way—both members of the LAPD Homicide Division.

Detective Vince Delaney was weather-beaten and worn from decades on the force. He still thrived on the street-level grit of the job.

Detective Evan Hardy, by contrast, was all fresh edges and restless ambition. He looked like a surfer kid playing dress-up in his father’s Sunday best.

Bob removed his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. He’d been at home when the call came through.

“She’s downstairs, yes?”

Both men nodded.

“And she hasn’t got her phone? No access to anything except what we’ve provided?”

“That’s right, sir,” said Evan, straightening his shoulders. “We’ve got her statement from the scene, but nothing beyond that.”

Vince leaned against the desk. “We’ve stumbled into a shitstorm, I’m guessing? Seeing as you’re here... sir.”

Bob pushed his chair back and rose to his feet. “You have no idea.”

He walked around to the front of the desk and perched on its edge, arms folded.

“Here’s what I know. Neon Peak wants this kept quiet. Them and Vermillion? Think Shakespearean—two houses, both alike in chaos. If what she says is true, you’ve got a Vermillion majority shareholder murdering one of Neon Peak’s senior people on Neon Peak property. That’s not just scandal, that’s stock-market suicide. It’ll dominate headlines for weeks. Investors, retirement funds, public trust—gone. “That woman downstairs? What she knows could blow holes in both companies. You go down there, you take her full statement, but you do not spook her. When you’re done, she’s not walking back to any kind of life she knew before tonight.”

“Witness Protection?” Evan asked, his voice almost too eager.

“You’re way too excited about that,” Vince muttered, rolling his eyes.

“I’ve never dealt with one before,” Evan admitted, practically bouncing on his toes.

Vince clapped him on the back. “Welcome to Paperwork City, kid. Population: us. Come on—let’s see if your California surfer-boy charm works on the lady downstairs.”

When the detectives left, Bob sat back down, staring at the folder on his desk. The photos showed Marcus Cho, sprawled lifeless in a dark alleyway. It wasn’t the most gruesome scene he’d ever seen—far from it—but the phone call he was about to make weighed heavier than any corpse.

He opened the top drawer and pulled out a small locked box. From his keyring—a jumble of unremarkable keys—he found the one that fit.

The latch clicked open.

Inside was a Chinese takeaway menu.

He laid it flat on the desk, picked up his phone, and with a heavy exhale, began to dial.

After three rings, a voice answered:

“Golden Dragon Noodle House. Delivery or collection?”

“Collection, please.”

“Go ahead.”

“Number thirteen—hot and sour soup. Number twenty-seven—crispy duck. Number thirty-four—egg foo young. A side of fried rice... and extra fortune cookies, please.”

“Got it. Your collection reference is Themis. Thank you for choosing Golden Dragon Noodle House.”

The line went dead.

Bob sat for a moment, the silence pressing down on him. Then he carefully reversed his steps—folding the menu, locking it back inside the box, and sliding it into the drawer.

He rubbed both hands over his face and looked toward the ceiling.

“Lord help her,” he whispered.

X

Cherry had been sitting in the interrogation room for an amount of time impossible to measure. There were no windows—no sense of dawn, no way to tell if it was still the dead of night or hours later.

She’d tried everything to keep her anxiety at bay. Her brain had decided to protect itself by letting her hover somewhere outside her body, watching from above.

She’d started counting the tiny holes in the ceiling tiles, but the harsh fluorescent strip made her eyes water. There was nothing else to focus on—just a table, three nondescript black chairs, and the mirror that was obviously two-way. Still, she didn’t feel like she was being watched.

When she’d first arrived at the station—in the back of a squad car—she’d been ushered into another sterile white room and told to remove her clothes. Evidence, they’d said. She hadn’t argued. She could still feel Marcus’s blood on her—sticky, dark, almost tar-like. It had soaked into her sneakers, streaked her hands. It reminded her of the dyed corn syrup she used as a makeup artist, except this time it wasn’t fake.

They’d given her an LAPD sweatsuit, grey with the logo printed on the chest and leg, and a pair of slippers like the ones you’d get in an upmarket hotel. Her phone, wallet, everything she’d been carrying, even her jewelry—bagged, labelled, catalogued.

She made a dry, humorless sound. Even she was evidence now.

The door opened.

Two men stepped inside—one with the confident stride of someone who'd done this a thousand times, the other with the eager, untested energy of someone still trying to prove themselves.

"Miss Akers," said the older one, pulling out a chair. "I'm Detective Vince Delaney. This is my partner, Evan Hardy."

Evan gave a polite nod. "We're with LAPD Homicide."

Cherry tilted her head. "You look like a Point Break tribute act."

Evan smiled. "Yeah, we get that a lot."

"I still don't know what it means," muttered Vince.

"Firstly, Miss Akers—can I call you Cherry?" asked Evan, his tone soft but professional.

"Sure."

"Alright, Cherry. We've read your initial statement, and we're sorry for keeping you waiting so long. This may be the twenty-first century, but some things still move at a crawl. Can I get you a coffee? Soda?"

She shook her head.

"Okay. First things first—how are you doing?"

Cherry thought she saw Vince roll his eyes. "I'm... not sure. Marcus is—?"

"Deceased," Vince said flatly.

"Sorry about my partner," Evan jumped in. "He's not exactly top of the class in sensitivity training. But yes, Marcus Cho is dead. There's nothing you—or anyone—could've done. The shot was fatal. Even if he'd been in an ER, he wouldn't have made it."

"Why were you still on the Neon Peak lot, Cherry?" asked Vince.

"I was working late—or rather, I packed up late."

"And why not use the front entrance?"

"Neon Peak, like this place, locks down from a central system. After hours, doors are sealed remotely—no keys, no overrides. The guard just closes the fire door behind me. It was either take the alleyway or sleep in the studio."

"Alright," he said. "Take us through what happened next. As much detail as you can."

"I walked down the alley toward the parking lot. I wasn't paying attention—I was checking my phone. Banking apps, emails, social media. Then I heard a door open behind me—across the alley, from the studio building opposite the one I'd just left—and Marcus came out."

"You knew immediately it was Marcus Cho?" Vince pressed.

"You can't not know it's Marcus. He was—" she hesitated, her throat tightening— "larger than life."

"Why didn't you acknowledge him?"

"I was in the shadows. He couldn't see me. I didn't want to startle him."

"Bullshit," Vince snapped.

"Cherry," said Evan gently, "you're not in trouble. But we need honesty. Why didn't you at least say hello?"

"I figured he was leaving the party. The one still going on in the opposite building. It was obvious he was going to meet a... guy. If he'd seen me witnessing that? I'd be fired. Not promoted for leverage—just quietly fired. And despite everything that's happened, I love my job. So, I stayed hidden."

Evan nodded. "Alright. You were in the shadows. Marcus was behind you in the alley. Then what?"

"I heard footsteps. At first, I thought it was his guy."

"When you say 'guy,' you mean dealer, right?" Vince interjected.

“Yes—but this is Hollywood. They’re never called dealers. It’s always, ‘I’ve got a guy.’ The footsteps were heavy. Confident. I shrunk back, used a prop dumpster to hide. I wasn’t spying—I was protecting my career. Only it wasn’t his guy. It was Ty Vernon.”

Evan leaned forward. “And how did you know it was him? It was dark—you said that yourself. So how could you recognize him?”

Cherry chewed her bottom lip. “I saw his face when he stepped into the light. And he moves differently. Like he knows he’s top of the food chain. Apex predator. His eyes—always emotionless. Even when he smiles, it’s like watching a shark before it bites. Working for Neon Peak, it’s required to keep up with company news—and I follow the rival service, Vermillion, too. It never hurts to stay informed. Plus, there’s the gossip.”

“I bet you’re privy to a lot of that,” Vince said. “Did it strike you as odd that Ty was on the Neon Peak lot?”

“Yes, but stranger things happen in this town. I figured it was some backdoor—literally—deal.”

“Did he already have a weapon?” asked Evan.

“No. As he reached my spot, he slipped his hand inside his jacket—” she mimed the motion “—and pulled out a gun.”

“Do you remember how many shots were fired?”

“Just one. He didn’t even stop walking. No hesitation. No aim. Just fired and turned back the way he came. I didn’t move until I couldn’t hear his footsteps anymore.”

“He didn’t say anything? Nothing at all?” Evan asked.

Cherry’s voice dropped to a whisper. “Not a word.”

Evan leaned back in his chair.

“For my own—and forgive the phrase—morbid curiosity, do you have any idea why Ty Vernon killed Marcus Cho?”

“No.” Cherry’s tone was flat, matter of fact. Then, after a beat:

“There was bad blood, sure, but not enough to end someone’s life. If it had gotten to that point, I wasn’t in on that gossip.” She exhaled, almost a laugh. “Can I go home now?” Evan sighed and looked to his partner. Vince gave a subtle shrug—his version of you tell her.

“Cherry, I’m afraid... no,” Evan said gently. “You can’t go home. You’re not in trouble, and you’re not under arrest. But you were in the wrong place at the wrong time. You saw something you shouldn’t have.”

“You’re the only person who saw,” Vince added.

“That means,” Evan continued, “you’re going to need... protection.”

Cherry frowned. “So what, you’re gonna park a squad car outside my apartment?”

“No,” Evan said, choosing his words carefully. “We need to relocate you completely. Just for a while. Until we gather more evidence.”

Vince crossed his arms. “What he’s politely trying to say, Miss Akers, is that until trial? You’re looking at some kind of protective custody”

“But—” Cherry started, her voice thin.

“We don’t handle the what or the how,” Vince said, cutting her off but not unkindly.

“Someone else will be in shortly to take over. Like my partner said—wrong place, wrong time.”

“Half an hour earlier,” Cherry murmured, “and I’d have left through the front entrance. I wouldn’t have seen a thing.”

“And Marcus Cho would still be dead,” Evan replied softly. “No one would’ve witnessed a thing. Ty Vernon could’ve walked away without anyone ever knowing he was there. I know this is hard, Cherry. Upsetting. But you’re doing a brave, important thing—for Marcus.”

Cherry let out a short, bitter laugh. “I doubt he’d do the same for me.”

“That’s beside the point,” Vince said gruffly, pushing his chair back. He stood, patted Evan’s shoulder, and motioned toward the door.

Evan rose too, offering Cherry one last half-smile—gentle, apologetic. “I really am sorry, Cherry. I hope we meet again under better circumstances.”

The door closed behind them with a soft click.

Out in the corridor, as they made their way back toward their desks—and the inevitable mountain of paperwork this case would bring—they passed two unfamiliar men. Both wore suits, both carried themselves with quiet precision.

They didn’t look like cops.

“Who the hell are they?” Evan whispered.

Vince glanced over his shoulder. “Distinctive smell of OGA”

Evan kept his voice low “Which one?”

Turning back to his partner, Vince spoke plainly “One that is way above our paygrade”

END OF SIDE A

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